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*The Girl from the
Docklands Cafe*

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12 Fitzroy Mews
London W1T 6DW
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2018.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2342-3

Typeset in 11/16 pt Sabon by
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication
has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced
from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Chapter One

Southampton, 1912

Jessie McGonigall was a hard woman, everybody said so. She did indeed have attitude; you only had to see her walk down the street to notice her with her vibrant red hair, her tall stature and the way she strode out with such confidence – her long skirt swishing, her shawl draped around her shoulders. *Don't mess with me* was the message she gave out without speaking a word!

Her neighbours were careful not to cross her and those who had been foolish enough to do so soon realised that they'd made a serious mistake. Her red hair and Irish heritage was a force to be reckoned with in any altercation, but if she was your friend, she would walk through fire and water to defend you.

Young Daisy Brown would attest to that. She had arrived to take up residence with Bill, her young husband, in one of the council-owned two-up two-down terraced houses earlier that year and had been treated badly by a certain small band of women that Jessie referred to as the 'Coven of Witches'. There were three of them who spent much of their time causing trouble through their spiteful gossip.

They had ganged up against poor Daisy making her life a misery, commenting about her old clothes and the torn but clean net curtains at her window, until one day when Jessie happened upon them where they had cornered Daisy and were berating her. Jessie, infuriated by their cruelty and seeing the girl in tears, interceded.

‘Well, I can see that you bitches have found another victim! Haven’t you anything better to do? You, Emily Coates, would be better spending your time cleaning that shithole of a house. You can smell the filth just walking past the door, and a good wash down yourself wouldn’t come amiss! And you, Iris Jones, you would be a nicer person if you kept off the gin. Your morning hangovers make you bad-tempered and you have to take it out on somebody. And as for you, Betty Barnes, what the hell you’re doing mixing with these two old biddies when you have a mind of your own, I’ll never understand! Well, let me tell you all’ – she cast a scathing look at them – ‘Daisy here is my friend. You insult her, you insult me. Do I make myself clear?’

No one dared to answer.

‘Good!’ She took Daisy by the arm and walked her away to her own house, opened the door and ushered the girl into the living room.

‘Sit down, love, and I’ll make us a nice cup of tea.’ She took a clean handkerchief from her pocket and gave it to her. ‘Here, dry your eyes. Those bitches aren’t worth the salt in your tears.’

Leaving the girl to recover, Jessie filled the pot of tea when the water had boiled, placed two cups and saucers on the table and, sitting down, poured the tea, added the milk and pushed the sugar bowl over to her visitor.

‘Help yourself.’

Once Daisy seemed settled, Jessie began talking to her, asking her how she came to move to Southampton.

‘Me and Bill, my husband, moved down from the north thinking jobs would be better here,’ she said. ‘He’s now working in the docks if he’s lucky enough to be chosen at the call-on every day, but we don’t have money for new clothes and curtains – well not yet. I try to keep the place clean and feed my hubby when he’s earning – after all, he needs a good meal, working hard as he does when he gets work.’

‘I know what hardship is,’ Jessie told her, ‘and so do those old bitches, but they wallow in it. I can see you’re a cut above them. I’ve a spare pair of nets you can have.’ As Daisy made to argue, she stopped her. ‘Look, love, I don’t use them, so you might as well and I’ve a couple of dresses we could alter. I’m taller than you, but we could shorten them. Are you any good with a needle?’

Daisy beamed. ‘As a matter of fact, I am. I did work as a seamstress before I married.’

‘Perfect!’

Looking across the table at her saviour, Daisy asked, ‘Why are you doing this for me? You don’t know me from Adam.’

Jessie smiled. ‘Because I was young and just-married once and I had to count every penny, and . . . I wanted to teach those wicked bitches a lesson. They make my blood boil standing there, spewing out their filth instead of doing something useful with their lives.’

With a chuckle, Daisy said, ‘You don’t half have a temper on you when you go!’

Jessie burst out laughing. ‘I’ve got red hair, so I’ve got to live up to it.’

When the girl had left, Jessie poured herself another cup of tea. Times were hard in the docks. The call-on every morning at seven-thirty and again at twelve forty-five was where the dockers who were not in permanent jobs lined up, praying to be chosen to work for as many or as few hours that were required. It was like a cattle market where men would call out to be chosen, pushing others out of the way to be noticed. There was no dignity here, just a desperate need to be one of the lucky ones. Her husband was fortunate to be a stevedore with a permanent position.

Jessie thought back to her hard times. She'd come over from Ireland as a child with her parents, Siobhan and Brin O'Hanneran, but her beloved father had died of consumption when Jessie was nineteen. Her mother, distraught with grief, had returned to Ireland to live with her parents, but Jessie had insisted on staying on alone. She'd rented a room and made her living, cleaning to begin with. It had been lonely during those first months and she'd just made enough money to pay for her room and scrape by on bread and dripping, with the occasional stew made from scrag-end and vegetables, but that had changed when she ended up as a cook at a working man's cafe from seven in the morning until three in the afternoon. It had been hard work, but she'd enjoyed it. She'd been confident enough by then to keep the male customers at bay and had earned their respect. Then one day, Conor McGonigall had walked in and her life changed.

Jessie walked out of the kitchen carrying three plates of steaming stew and dumplings and, with a smile, placed them in front of her waiting customers.

‘That smells good, Jessie love,’ said one.

‘And so it should be. Didn’t I make it meself?’

At that moment the cafe door opened and a tall, good-looking stranger walked in, glanced quickly around, saw an empty table and sat down.

Jessie walked over to him. ‘There’s beef stew with dumplings or shepherd’s pie,’ she said. ‘What can I get you?’

The man looked up at her, his green eyes twinkling. ‘That’s it, nothing else?’

‘This is a workman’s cafe, sunshine. We serve simple food and a simple menu, but the food is good. You want a fancy menu, go to a fancy restaurant!’

He started laughing. ‘I came for a meal, darlin’, not a fight. I’ll have the stew, please.’

She walked back to the kitchen, smiling softly. It was nice to see a new face, especially one that was so easy on the eye, but she bet the new man could be a challenge if he so desired. Well she was very able to handle that. She’d been working in the cafe long enough. Her regulars now knew she was no pushover and took no nonsense from anyone, but she was an excellent cook and popular, and so the business thrived. Her boss realised what an asset she was and made sure she was happy working for him by paying her a decent wage for these times.

Jessie filled the plate with stew, potatoes and cabbage, took it into the dining room and placed it before her new customer.

He picked up the plate, sniffed it and, as he put it down, said, ‘Smells appetising.’

‘That’s because it is. There’s sponge pudding and custard after, if you’ve the notion.’

‘We’ll see,’ he said as he picked up his knife and fork.

Jessie watched him from the kitchen door between serving and was delighted when she saw how he tucked into her food with obvious enjoyment. When he’d finished she went over to the table, removed the now empty plate.

‘Pudding?’ she enquired.

‘Why not?’ he said and grinned broadly. ‘I’d like some tea too, please.’

She took a mug of tea and placed it on the table together with a small bowl of sugar and a plate with the pudding and walked away.

Her boss was at the till a while later when the stranger came to pay. She heard his voice as he handed over the money.

‘Sure, and that’s the best meal I’ve had in a long time. Who cooked it?’

‘Jessie, the young lady who served you,’ he was told.

‘Really?’ the man sounded surprised. ‘I may come back tomorrow.’

‘You’ll not find a better meal elsewhere,’ said her employer. He popped his head round the kitchen door when the stranger had left. ‘Another satisfied customer, Jessie!’

She was pleased with herself and wondered if the man would return the next day.

The new customer did indeed return the following day and sat at a table, waiting. When Jessie walked over, he looked up at her and grinned.

‘Beef stew or shepherd’s pie?’

She looked affronted. ‘Certainly not! Today we have

chicken and ham pie or sausage and mash with treacle tart to follow.'

He looked at her with amusement. 'A veritable feast for the gods. I'll have the pie to start and tart to follow.'

'Would you like a mug of tea now or later?'

'With the tart will be fine, thank you. You have a good memory.'

'Hardly,' she said sharply, 'after all, it was only yesterday you were here.' She heard him chuckling as she walked back to the kitchen.

When later she served up the treacle tart and tea, the man smiled.

'Thanks, that pie was lovely, and I believe you're the lady that cooked it, is that right?'

'It is.'

'Ah, but your husband is a lucky man.'

'I've no husband,' she replied. 'I've yet to find a man who suits me.'

Trying to suppress a smile, he asked, 'And what kind of man might that be, may I ask?'

'You may not!' she retorted with a toss of her head, as she walked away.

The young man became a regular customer during the following weeks. Jessie learnt that his name was Conor and that he, too, was Irish. They exchanged a light, teasing banter every day, which she enjoyed, and she began to wait to see him walk through the door. Although he flirted with her, that was as far as it went. Jessie began to wonder why, because most new customers who were young never failed, eventually, to ask her out. She always refused, but Conor hadn't done so.

Although the majority of the regular customers worked in the docks, occasionally a passer-by, smelling the appetising aroma, would stop by for a meal. On this particular day a man came in and walked unsteadily to a seat and sat waiting. He reeked of alcohol and loudly demanded a menu.

Jessie walked over to him. ‘There’s no need to shout,’ she said sharply.

He looked up at her and glared.

‘Don’t you use that tone of voice with me, missy.’

The usual chatter stopped and the dining room became silent.

Jessie stood defiantly as she said, ‘If you wish me to serve you, you’ll speak to me with a civil tongue.’

‘I’ll speak to you the way I want to, now what’s on the menu, girl?’

She took a step back. ‘We have nothing in here for you, so I’ll ask you to take your business elsewhere . . . now!’

He sneered at her. ‘No slip of a girl is going to tell *me* what to do. I’m staying until I’ve eaten.’

Conor stood up and walked over to the table. Gently putting Jessie aside, he faced the belligerent man.

‘You’ve been asked to leave, so I suggest you do so quietly and without any trouble or I’ll be forced to put you outside meself.’

The drunk staggered to his feet and lifted a fist to strike Conor, who quickly hit him in the stomach and, as the man doubled over in pain, he caught him another blow on the jaw, sending the man flying. Within seconds, two of the dockers came rushing over and, between the three of them, they picked the man up and firmly removed him into the street.

Conor stood over him. 'Go and sober up before you get into real trouble and end up in the cells.'

The man glared at the small group and, muttering angrily under his breath, staggered away.

'Thank you, gentlemen,' Jessie said as they returned, and to Conor she said, 'That was kind of you. I'm grateful.'

'Ah, for sure, I couldn't have him upset my favourite girl now, could I?' He winked at her and sat down.

Jessie walked back into the kitchen with a bounce in her step. His favourite girl, was she? But when she left at three o'clock she was surprised to see Conor leaning against the wall, smoking a cigarette.

'What the devil are you doing here?'

'I thought I'd make sure that sot didn't come back at closing time to trouble you. With that type you never know.'

'But aren't you supposed to be at work?'

'I took a couple of hours off. Now, can I walk you home?'

That had been the beginning of their courtship, and they married a year later and moved into their council house. Conor was earning enough as a stevedore, but thinking of earlier times when the dockers were on strike, the future was uncertain so they were mindful of this and Jessie continued to work. Their marriage was, at times, volatile, but they loved one another deeply. Their one regret was that they'd never had children. It just hadn't happened and now they accepted the fact that it probably never would.

Today was their third wedding anniversary and they were going to celebrate by going to the Dolphin Hotel for dinner, and then to the local pub for a few drinks. To

this end, Jessie had a bath, ironed her best dress and laid out Conor's one good suit. After all, The Dolphin was considered a smart hotel. Just before he was due home, she dragged in the tin bath and filled it with hot water she'd boiled ready for her husband, knowing he'd be covered in dirt after a long day, moving cargo onto the ships that had docked, as well as his other duties.

He walked in the front door, carrying a bunch of flowers and, taking her into his arms, kissed her thoroughly.

'Happy anniversary, darlin'! These are for my girl.' He handed over the flowers.

'Oh, they're lovely, but you shouldn't have.'

He looked at her and burst out laughing. 'Now, you know if I hadn't you'd have flown off the handle thinking I'd forgotten!'

'Ah, there, you know me too well.' She, too, laughed. 'Your bath is ready and your shirt and suit are on the bed with some nice clean underwear.'

He caught her arm and pulled her to him. With a voice full of passion, he asked, 'Are you going to help bath me, then?'

She pushed him away, her eyes bright with amusement. 'Now then, you well know if I did, we'd never get to The Dolphin! I'll wash your back, but you keep your hands to yourself.'

He started to remove his clothing until he was down to his underwear. He leant forward and, holding her chin, gently said, 'Then I'll have to wait until later, unless when you see me all tarted up, you're not able to keep your hands off me!'

'Away with you!' She laughed, as she walked to the kitchen.

* * *

They made their way through The Ditches and walked to the Dolphin Hotel, which years before had been an old coaching inn. In the dining room, the waiter led them to a table and left them to read the menu. Jessie read it with interest. It was indeed more sophisticated than the simple fare she cooked for a living. They looked at the hors d'oeuvres, but decided to have oxtail soup to start with, followed by sirloin steak with a selection of vegetables and chips.

Conor turned up his nose at the fish on the menu.

‘Sure, a man needs something more solid on his stomach after a hard day’s toil,’ he declared. ‘Fish leaves me feeling hungry!’

To the waiter’s chagrin, Conor ordered beer to drink, but Jessie asked for a glass of red wine. As the waiter walked away she frowned at Conor.

‘What?’ he demanded at her look of censure.

‘Beer with your meal? Honestly!’

‘It’s what I like and what I want! I hate the taste of wine, you know that. You’ll not change me, Jessie. Surely you’ve learnt that much in three years?’

With a wry smile, she answered. ‘Oh, don’t I know it! I had just hoped that for one night you might behave like a true gent.’

‘Is it drinking wine I don’t like just to impress that makes me a gent? I don’t think so, darlin’. Treating you like a lady makes me a gentleman and not a navy.’

‘Oh, you and your silver tongue!’

His eyes twinkled as he said, ‘That’s what made you fall in love with me. Now don’t deny it.’

‘Not at all! The fact you were a good kisser was what won me over.’

‘Ah well, I knew behind that independent exterior beat the heart of a wanton woman!’

‘Conor! Someone might hear you. Will you behave.’

‘Then leave me to drink my beer in peace, woman.’

As they ate, Jessie told him about her meeting young Daisy and how she and her husband had been struggling, and wondered if Conor could help her husband get a permanent job.

‘I imagine he’s doing alright at the moment, what with the sailing of the *Titanic* soon. We’re working all the hours God sends to get her loaded, but when she sails, if he’s still having a problem, I’ll have a word. The foreman who chooses the workers owes me a few favours.’

After their meal, they walked down to The Dolphin tap bar for a drink. The pianist was playing and the mood was light, everyone singing along together, and they stayed until closing time. Walking home, arms entwined, they were still singing.