

ANGELS AND MEN

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FOR PETE

Michaelmas Term

CHAPTER 1

The City is a galleon sailing on the river. Listen to the wind thrumming in the trees and singing round the chimney-pots. High on the crow's nest of the cathedral hear the ping-ping-ping of rope against flagpole. This is where the angels pass by. These are the angel paths, the windy walkways. They are clothed with polished air and their faces are the faces of statues, bright as sunlight off water. No one sees them.

Down below on the streets people are walking to and fro, going about their business. They come in and out of the doors of the houses and colleges, through archways, across cobbles, down the steps and the steep pathways that lead to the river. Sometimes they look back up at the cathedral and castle against the sky, wondering.

Aunt Jessie could see angels; but then, she was mad. Ran mad in the Welsh revival in 1904. She lies now in a quiet graveyard. Her tombstone says: *Nearer my God to thee.*

A few years ago, when Aunt Jessie would have been ninety-something if she had lived, her great-niece, Mara Johns, stepped out through the door of one of the colleges and looked up at the sky. High above in the cathedral tower the clock chimed midday. The notes trembled in the air, and a pigeon rose clapping into the blue October sky before wheeling away behind a rooftop. Mara paused, her face bleached white in the brightness, pale against her dark hair and clothes.

Ah, this is a day for walking on air and climbing the wind, not for studying. With this thought she was about to run down the steps and off along the street where leaves scratched past on the wind, but the door behind her opened. She turned and saw a priest standing there. Damn. The Principal. He came down the steps towards her, smiling.

'Mara. Settling in all right?' She nodded. Too late to escape. He began to walk down the street with her. Her mind bobbed impatiently against the sky, a balloon tethered to the ground by his string of urbane small talk. Her work was going well, he trusted; and had

she located the libraries, made contact with her tutor, met up with her fellow postgrads? Yes, yes, yes, no. The wind tugged at her skirt. Come on, come on. She saw her chance as they approached the archway which led into the cathedral close. They drew level with it and she stopped. The Principal paused too.

‘Off to the cathedral?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Good.’ Well, bugger off, then. But he hovered, frowning slightly. ‘You’re not Morgan Johns’ daughter, are you?’ She scowled.

‘Yes.’

‘Aha.’ That would explain it, said his expression. ‘I’ve just been reading his article on women’s ordination. Excellent piece. Fine scholar, your father.’ He paused, but she made no comment. ‘He’ll have his enemies, no doubt. Still in parish ministry?’

‘Yes.’ Yes, yes. Her mind raced off, following the flight of a seagull as it circled high overhead. She scarcely heard his next sentence. Something about a sherry reception. ‘Yes. Thanks. Goodbye.’ He raised his hand graciously as though bestowing a priestly blessing and she turned and ran through the archway.

She came out into the sunlit cathedral close. Her heart rose. There was nothing but the wind rushing in the trees and wires. The whole City was alive with it, a vast harp played by an unseen hand. People turned to glance at her as she passed. She watched them, seeing them wonder: Is that the newest fashion, those long dark skirts and black hat? Or is she just a bit odd? She broke into a run again, rounding the corner that led to the cloisters. The sun cast short arches across the floor as she slipped through: dark, light, dark, light, until she reached the great door.

I’ll never go to church again. It was her own voice speaking in her memory on the day she had broken with the sect. She felt her face harden, her pale eyes glinting, and saw her father turning away and saying nothing at all. If I had been any poxy parishioner of his he would have argued with me, or asked me why. He was just giving her room, of course. Letting her make her own choices. But it always left her feeling as if she could have been dead to him. It was over three years ago, but she still felt the coldness of it.

Some people passed out through the door. Suddenly she stepped forward. Why must everything be done with reference to her father? She squeezed past a woman in the doorway and entered. This year is for myself, not for him. She was in the cathedral.

It swallowed everything, all noise and hurry, muffling the footfalls and voices. The sounds rose to the great vaulted ceiling and vanished. The stones of the floor were worn by countless forgotten feet, the centuries of the faithful. She listened for a whisper of them in the huge cave of the cathedral as it echoed with its tide of visitors.

Then she began to walk towards the chancel. It felt like visiting the house where you grew up. Everywhere there were touches of recognition: I remember that smell, that colour, that ray of light. A tall clergyman inclined his head at her as she entered the chancel. She shot him a look: *Leave me alone*. He read the message and blinked. She walked on. This was where the choir sat service by service in their carved wooden stalls. Behind them the organ pipes rose up, decorated bright with red and gold. At that moment someone began to play. The notes climbed higher and higher, lingering and merging until the whole chancel was one mounting sound. The playing stopped as suddenly as it had begun, but the chords echoed on for a moment like the sound of the sea in a shell. Then the silence ebbed back.

By now she had reached the communion rails and was standing looking at the altar. How empty it was, as though God had been called temporarily away. Was that the faint smell of wine lingering? The sun came blazing through a south window, and she walked into it away from the roped-off altar.

At last her eyes wandered back down the chancel. A young man was kneeling in one of the choir stalls in a shaft of sunlight. She had not noticed him earlier. His hands were grasping the pew in front, and his dark head was bowed, resting on them. She looked away in embarrassment, as though she had caught sight of some intimate act; but then her eyes strayed back again, and suddenly he raised his head, fixing dark eyes on the source of light. For a moment he was still, burning in the sun like an icon, then he sat back into the shadow.

She turned and slipped away, making for the door as swiftly as she could, leaving the cathedral and heading for the college. She could feel her heart pounding again. Had she ever seen him before?

The bells called out once more across the City. Mara disappeared into a building. *Jesus College*, said the stone above the door. The windows stared. Behind some of them students were walking back and forth unpacking books and clothes. Halfway up the building Mara appeared briefly at another window as she climbed the stairs. Across the street, other windows stared back from one of the houses

on the cathedral close. A large geranium stood in a quiet room. At another window the Canon rinsed a teacup at his sink. A pigeon swept past, then up, up, and over the rooftop where it glided along the backs of the college buildings that looked down over the river far below.

Mara was back in her room on the top floor, her dark head bent over a book. The pages were blank, and in her left hand she held a pencil. She was drawing. On the page tiny figures began to form. Some were like mythical beasts or parts of architectural plans, others like old alchemical drawings. It could almost have been writing, secret hieroglyphs, a record of her thoughts in a language of her own.

An apple tree. The fruit nestled in the wreaths of leaves like jewels in an ornate setting. I could see an apple tree out of my bedroom at the vicarage at home. The wasps ate the fruit that fell. This was one of the garden's secret horrors – the perfect skin gleaming on the lawn, but when you rolled it over it was gnawed out and empty, like the head of a doll with empty eye-sockets hiding in the grass.

The tree stood complete on the page. It looked like a woodcut from a seventeenth-century pamphlet. A pamphlet called something like 'The Fruit of the Tree of LIFE: Or The Way Back through the *Flaming Sword*, being a Reply to So-and-so his Book . . .' Too much reading. I need to be with people. She began drawing a branch of a tree with a bird roosting there. She needed people; not for company, but to define herself against, as markers for the boundaries of her personality.

She flipped back through the pages, reminded of the first time she had used this as a method of sorting her thoughts out.

'Why don't you draw me something?' the psychiatrist had asked. Maybe he'd been worn out by this silent obstinate fourteen-year-old. 'Draw me a picture of your father.' But she wasn't going to be caught out that easily. To foil him she scribbled a little stick man. 'Draw your mother.' Another stick man. She drew him her sister, her teacher, a nurse, a farmer, a stranger. A row of little identical stick men. There was a long silence. She folded her arms smugly.

'Look at what you've done,' he said. She looked. Suddenly the significance leapt out. All the same. Blank. Interchangeable. A stranger meant as much to her as her mother. Her hand holding the pencil had started to tremble.

Surely I've changed a little since then? She sat frowning for a moment, then closed the book and walked across to the open

window. Down on the terrace below small groups of people were standing. They looked awkward. New students just arrived, some still accompanied by their parents. It was like an airport. Just go. Wave them off and go. Don't stand around drinking tea from the college cups delaying your children's departure. Wave them through passport control and on to the plane and off, up through the clouds to a new world.

She looked down on them, seeing the tops of their heads. Voices were murmuring, but no words reached her. In her mind she floated down until she was hovering above the talking groups. Back and forth go the questions in a kind of desperate, verbal gavotte, grouping, moving on, regrouping. I remember it from Cambridge. How terrible to be an undergraduate. A fresher. This time I'll stay out of the way until it is all over. All alone like a princess in an iron tower. Unless I make a new beginning here, take a risk and try to make some friends for a change?

Almost at once there was a knock at the door, as though someone were coming to test this tentative thought. Mara went to open it. A breathless girl stood there holding out an invitation card.

'Hi! Welcome to Jesus College. My name's Sue and I'm from the Christian Union.' Mara felt herself tense. 'We're having a tea party, and I wondered if you'd like to come?'

'I'm not interested.'

The girl flushed, but managed to hold out a different card to Mara. 'Well, maybe I can leave you this? It's a programme of this term's events.'

'I said I'm not interested.'

The girl gave a little bubbly laugh. Mara could see tears starting in her eyes. Take it. Just take the card, for God's sake. You can always throw it away. But she couldn't bring herself to accept it.

'Well, sorry to have bothered you.'

The girl's footsteps scurried off down the stairs. Mara shut the door. Her scalp was prickling at her unnecessary harshness. But I can't help it. If it had been any other group – the Students' Union, the Boat Club, even the sodding Tolkien Society . . . Why am I still so hysterical about it all?

She crossed back to her desk and sat with her head in her hands. Gradually she admitted that the girl's earnest manner had reminded her of her twin sister. She could picture that same look on Hester's face as she had begged her to go to those praise meetings. Miracles,

healings, baptism in the Holy Spirit. Please, Mara. Just try it. Eventually she went, sneering at first, then suddenly and violently convinced. She saw a vision. For two months she had walked on air, a handmaid of the Lord. But somehow it had not lasted. Lies. All lies. Over three years ago.

Mara went back to the window again. She could freeze off the self-assured without a pang, but people like Sue were different. She hated herself for snubbing them. There were two of the same type living in the room next door, quiet studious young women in their Finals year who had smiled nervously at her and said 'Hello' before darting back into their room again. Field mice. Suddenly a thought struck her, and her lips twisted a little. What if she had been put on the same corridor because someone saw her in that light? The studious mousy postgraduate next to the serious mousy Finals students. A little murine blue-stocking enclave, books and cocoa and early nights.

There was a loud and naughty laugh from the lawn below. She looked down and saw a tall, red-haired girl with a small crowd around her. Beside her was a shorter girl with brown curly hair and a wide-eyed pretty-pretty look, like an Edwardian china doll. The tall red-head said something, and the other laughed. Now the red-head laughed again. It was the sort of laugh that drew others in, and soon even those not close enough to hear what was being said were smiling. Put them in the hyena section. They don't belong up here. But then Mara felt a pang, like the little match-girl outside in the cold watching Christmas through the windows. What would it be like to have those two as friends?

Look, they must have been called in. She watched as the last students and their parents disappeared beneath her into the college. Someone closed the French windows and the murmuring voices were hushed. The wind worried on through the trees. She found herself thinking about the curly-haired girl. A china doll, smiling and showing its pearly little teeth. A row of china dolls, she thought suddenly. Then she knew. The girl was the oldest daughter of the vicar of a parish near her father's. She probably even went to the same school as I did. What will she know about me? What will she have heard? This year will not be the blank volume I have designed for myself. There is already a preface. She stood up and closed the window, and walked back to her desk. As the light gradually faded she was still there, reading and making notes with close concentration. The

cathedral clock chimed the passing hours, three, four, five, six. All around the roofs and chimney-pots the wind rushed free.

At about eight she sat back and told herself to do what she had been avoiding. Go and ask for that book. She had looked for a particular volume in the college library only to discover that it had been taken out by one of the tutors in Coverdale Hall, the City's Anglican theological college. Mara had realized to her dismay shortly after arriving that Coverdale was not only next door to Jesus, but it was actually part of the same foundation. Was there no escaping the long arm and limp wrist of Anglicanism? Her door swung shut behind her.

I hate going to meet people, she thought as she ran down the stairs. Even the simplest utterance seems to take on a peculiar ring. The more I try to be normal the more dangerous I feel, like Morgan le Fay interrupting a sherry party. She passed through several corridors, moving, she supposed, roughly parallel to the street outside. This must once have been a series of different houses. She thought of the previous occupants – what if they had looked up from their papers in the breakfast room one morning and seen into the future? Dozens of strangely dressed young people appearing suddenly through one wall, hurrying past, and vanishing through another. Up another set of stairs she went, peering at doors until she found one which said 'Rev. Dr James Mowbray'.

'Do try to be nice, darling,' pleaded her mother's voice in her mind. Mara knocked. Someone called her in, and she entered the flat. It was like the study of some eighteenth-century intellectual. Her glance took in green walls with framed prints, faded rugs, rank on rank of books, and an old brown globe. A man stood under a light like a portrait of himself, an old seafarer, maps and charts about him. Outside the wind was a restless sea. He greeted her inquiringly. On the sofa facing her was a young man. A flash of recognition – the man in the cathedral.

'How can I help you?' Dr Mowbray asked. The young man burned on the edge of her vision.

'Do you have *Seven Reasons why God Used Dwight L. Moody*?' A pause.

'Not off hand.' She saw he was laughing at her. A snarling look came across her face.

'It's a book.' All the time the young man was lounging on the sofa. She could see the insolence of his posture without looking

at him, and his presence somehow made it impossible for her to be *nice*.

‘Yes. I’m sorry. I have the book. And you, I take it, would like to borrow it. Let me see – you’re one of the new postgrads, aren’t you? Women and sectarianism?’ She inclined her head.

‘Well,’ he began when she said nothing. The word teetered. He sprang on to a secure phrase: ‘And how are you settling in?’

‘All right.’ Another silence yawned like a mineshaft. He looked around as if wondering where the next piece of solid ground might be. Why did he remind her of an old sea captain?

‘And your name is?’

‘Mara Johns.’

‘Mara,’ he confirmed. ‘I’m James Mowbray, and this is . . .’ He stopped in the act of turning to the young man on the sofa. She could see a sentence forming in his mind as clearly as if he had a cartoon thought-bubble drifting out of his head. *You must be Morgan Johns’ daughter*, it said. Her expression became very nasty indeed.

‘You must be’ – and, catching sight of the expression, he changed tack – ‘a person in your own right.’ A rare smile flashed across her face. It vanished just as suddenly.

‘I’m Morgan Johns’ daughter,’ she said.

He laughed. ‘Yes, I’m afraid I realized that. How is your father these days? A bit of a lone voice crying in the wilderness, I’d have thought. High churchmen in *favour* of women’s ordination are a rare breed. I’ve just read his latest article.’ He paused, perhaps to see if she had any comment to make, then leapt on to another solid-looking idea: ‘He and I were at theological college together, you know.’

She made no reply. The conversation disintegrated beneath him, and they stood in silence. She could see he wanted a cosy chat about the Johns family and she dared not encourage him.

‘Well, well, well,’ he said at length. ‘We have met before, actually, only you won’t remember it. You would have been about seven. It was in Lyme Regis.’

Suddenly she remembered and spoke involuntarily. ‘Do you have a boat?’

He smiled. ‘I used to have a very small yacht. No longer, sadly. Yes. You were wild about the sea.’

She could hear the ropes slapping on the masts all around, each giving a different note, as though they were bells not boats rocking

and cockling on the waves. Her face softened at the memory. I was going to run away to sea.

'You grilled me on the names of the sails on square-rigged vessels,' Dr Mowbray continued. 'I was a sad disappointment to you.' She hardened herself and there was another silence.

They stood for a while. Then, having clearly just asked himself 'Where were we?' Dr Mowbray said, 'I'm so sorry. This is John Whitaker. Training for the ministry here at Coverdale Hall.'

Mara turned at last to look at him. He made no effort to stand, merely gave a slight ironic salute and smiled at her. She stared briefly, then looked back at Dr Mowbray. Good God. Not my mental picture of an ordinand.

'If ever you're locked out of your car, John's your man. I'll get that book for you.' Dr Mowbray walked towards a shelf and began to run his finger along the spines.

What's this? thought Mara. An ordinand with a shady past? She couldn't prevent herself sneaking another glance at the young man. He was ready for her, and winked. She looked away again, flushing angrily.

'Do you have enthusiasm?' asked Dr Mowbray.

Enthusiasm? 'In my way.'

'The book – oh, ah yes. Very good. *Touché*.' He handed her a volume. *Enthusiasm*, she read on the spine. Ah. She bit on a smile. This was going to be one of the problems with having read English and not theology. She had done as much frantic reading as she could over the summer, cantering briskly through centuries of church history, slowing to a trot over rocky doctrinal countryside, collapsing at last in despair in the vast trackless wastes of German liberal protestantism. Despite all this, parcels of unexploded ignorance lay concealed on all sides. Even the most innocent-seeming question – Who is so-and-so? – could go off in your face. You might be asking the equivalent of 'Who is Shakespeare, exactly?' Or, on the other hand, the unknown theologian might be an obscure Restoration dramatist, as it were, that nobody could expect you to know about. Dr Mowbray continued to hand her books. Out of the corner of her eye she thought she could see the young man grinning. Maybe he had seen through her. Or maybe he was amused at the number of books she was now holding. This thought seemed to strike Dr Mowbray.

'Well, I'm sure that will keep you going for a few days.' He smiled. 'Would you like some coffee?'

'No thanks.' She began to make a move towards the door.

'Sure? Well, give my regards to your father when you next speak to him.'

When they serve ice-cream in hell. She gave a nod. Why wouldn't he let her go? He was like the person who keeps raising points of information when other people want the meeting to finish.

'And to your mother, of course.'

Another nod. Yes yes yes.

He walked with her towards the door. 'Does your father still have his legendary violent temper, I wonder?'

Her hand was on the handle, but this brought her back sharply. 'No,' she said in astonishment.

'Really?' He seemed surprised himself. 'He had the worst temper I've ever come across.' The words 'present company excepted' seemed to hang in the air unspoken. Mara's glance darted involuntarily towards the man on the sofa again. He was lighting a cigarette, and appeared to be paying no attention.

'I'm afraid Morgan-baiting was something of a college sport,' went on Dr Mowbray. 'To see how quickly he could be made to explode. He was always so passionate about everything.'

Mara stood as still as a stone. Why was I never told this before? Why have I always been made to feel like a changeling? In her mind she heard the adult voices: Why can't you be nice like Hester? ... What a face! ... Dear me, what a naughty temper. I don't know where she gets it from.

'I've never heard him raise his voice.'

'Well, people change,' said Dr Mowbray. His tone had a summing-up quality.

'Thanks for these.' She made a gesture with the pile of books.

'You're welcome. If there's anything else ...' She had the door open. 'It's been good to meet you, Mara.' She could leave. But no – one small item of any other business to finish. He dropped his voice, and began to say, 'I was sorry to hear about your –'

'*Thank you.*' She snuffed out his sentence.

Instantly the young man's attention was on her. This was what she had been dreading. Dr Mowbray eyed her cautiously.

'Goodbye,' she said before he could try again. She left the two of them with a surprised silence twanging in the air.

Forget it. Forget it, she told herself as she made her way down the stairs. She went out of the back of the building and began to walk

along the terraces and through the gardens that ran behind the college. The sky above the rooftops was a deep dark blue, and a cathedral tower was just visible beyond the chimneys, ghostly in the floodlights. She hugged the books in her thin arms. Something like glee seized her. She could drop the books and, raising her arms, be lifted on the steady wind, treading higher and higher until she looked down on the City twinkling beneath her. Tree shadows danced on the walls. She heard the water running over the weir deep in the river, over and on and out to the distant sea. Some of the college windows were lit up, bright as pictures on a black wall. As she walked, the sound of music came from various rooms.

She entered the hallway and passed through a group of students as they exclaimed and talked. I might be a ghost, she thought. What a strange twilight realm we postgraduates inhabit. Pale figures haunting the libraries long outside term-time. She began climbing the stairs leaving their voices behind. This hall must have been majestic once. The frou-frou of long-gone petticoats rustled in her mind. Maybe she would meet her fellow ghosts one day on these steps. A Victorian maid, the one who polished these banisters a hundred years ago. We would stare at one another, wondering who was haunting whom. Mara stood feeling in her pocket for her keys, balancing the pile of books with her chin. There was a sudden noise as someone came out of the next room. She looked up to see an entirely different manifestation confronting her: a dark young man with a look of languid contempt on his face.

'Jesus Christ. Another bloody woman.'

She straightened up slowly and stared into a pair of cold grey eyes. No need to be *nice* here. One of her fellow postgrads? He looked about twenty-four or -five.

'I came back thinking I was on an all-male corridor, and what do I find? It's overrun with *girls*, bugging up my morning routine and clogging the bathrooms with their toiletries and tampons.'

She continued to stare at him, fixing her eyes with offensive blankness on the bridge of his nose.

'Let's try and understand one another, shall we?' he continued. '*That*' – pointing at a door – 'is the bathroom I intend to use. You *girls* can use the other one.'

She raised an eyebrow and let her gaze travel down to his feet, then back up to his face. He was around six feet tall, about her own height. He looked tailored and expensive from black hair to black brogues.

she located the libraries, made contact with her tutor, met up with her fellow postgrads? Yes, yes, yes, no. The wind tugged at her skirt. Come on, come on. She saw her chance as they approached the archway which led into the cathedral close. They drew level with it and she stopped. The Principal paused too.

‘Off to the cathedral?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Good.’ Well, bugger off, then. But he hovered, frowning slightly. ‘You’re not Morgan Johns’ daughter, are you?’ She scowled.

‘Yes.’

‘Aha.’ That would explain it, said his expression. ‘I’ve just been reading his article on women’s ordination. Excellent piece. Fine scholar, your father.’ He paused, but she made no comment. ‘He’ll have his enemies, no doubt. Still in parish ministry?’

‘Yes.’ Yes, yes. Her mind raced off, following the flight of a seagull as it circled high overhead. She scarcely heard his next sentence. Something about a sherry reception. ‘Yes. Thanks. Goodbye.’ He raised his hand graciously as though bestowing a priestly blessing and she turned and ran through the archway.

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