

# The Rescue

*Dublin, Ireland, Winter 1940*

‘Ben, did’ya hear? The canal’s frozen over.’

Ben Byrne looked up from his bowl of porridge. Beside him his brother, Sean, was wolfing down slices of fried bread as fast as Granny could tip them, sizzling, out of the heavy frying pan and on to his plate.

‘It’s great gas,’ Sean went on. ‘Everyone’s sliding on the ice, even kicking a football around on it.’ Between mouthfuls he said to Ben, ‘You could go down after school and have a game with Smiler and the others.’

Sean, three years Ben’s senior, strong and thickset with a loud voice, spoke in the condescending tone he’d acquired since he and some of his pals had become official messengers helping with Air Raid Protection in the Emergency. They whizzed around Dublin on their bikes, sporting ARP armbands and gas masks slung in a box over the handlebars, collecting buckets and hoses for fire practice. There’d been no attacks or fires so far, but that didn’t seem to weaken their enthusiasm or sense of importance.

‘Don’t you be playing games on the ice, Ben,’ Granny put in quickly. ‘It’s treacherous. We’ve enough trouble in

the family as it is.’ She turned to Sean. ‘You should know better, a big lad of fifteen, working and all—’

But Sean, muttering ‘late for work’, grabbed his packet of jam sandwiches, hauled his bike outside and dashed off to his new delivery job at the White Heather laundry.

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Early that morning fresh snow had fallen and when Ben stepped into the white street he was aware of a strange, muffled hush.

But later, coming home from school, his hands so stiff with cold that he could barely grip the strap around his school books, the snow in Synge Street had been stirred into a grey, lumpy mush by people and horses and the few cars that were still around these days.

Ben peeled off from the other boys, who were calling to the sweet shop on the corner of St Kevin’s Road to get sticks of liquorice or maybe even a hard-to-find KitKat bar. But though Sean was working now, Ben knew his Mam’s sickness was costing the family, and he didn’t even have a penny, let alone twopence for a KitKat.

The canal lay at the end of Martin Street in Portobello, where the Byrne family – Mam and Dad, Granny, Sean and Ben – had moved a year earlier from a teeming tenement in New Street where the boys had grown up.

Ben still hadn’t got used to the green peace of the

canal bank. The grass, in summer soft and lush, was now stiff and frosty, scraping Ben's bare knees as he squatted down. Instead of the procession of low barges carrying turf sliding slowly past, there was now a sheet of greyish-white ice, shining in the distance like a mass of tiny diamonds. There was no sign of a football game, but further down children were sliding, falling and shrieking on their new icy playground.

Idly, Ben was wondering where all the ducks went when their watery home froze, when there was a sudden movement beside him. A man appeared, flung a bulging sack into the canal, and made off.

The ice cracked and the sack sank into the murky water. Ben jumped to his feet as it surfaced again. It moved strangely, with high-pitched squeaks issuing from it.

Seconds later a girl came from nowhere, running like a deer towards Ben, her eyes on the sack. It was now almost submerged in the dark circle that had opened up in the ice.

Reaching the edge of the bank the girl squatted down and began to unlace her boots. 'Quick,' she said urgently to Ben, 'there's something alive in that sack.'

'It isn't safe,' he told her, uncertain what to do. 'We should get help.'

'There's no time,' she snapped.

Granny's words that morning flashed across Ben's

mind. Surely it wasn't worth taking a risk on the ice? But he turned and saw the girl's face clearly – a mop of dark curly hair and angry, blazing eyes commanding him to help. He picked up a fallen branch from the bank.

'I'll slide over and try to fish it out,' he said, with a bravado he didn't really feel. 'You hang on to me in case the ice gives way.' He took off his glasses and put them in his pocket.

Gingerly, he lay face down on the ice, which was as rigid as iron yet fragile as eggshells beneath him. The cold burned his skin as he inched towards the sack, now almost completely underwater and hardly moving. Cautiously sliding closer, he reached out with the stick, trying unsuccessfully to lever the bundle up out of the jagged hole.

Fear stopped him short. Even if he reached the sack, how was he going to get it – and himself – back to the bank?

There was a touch on his leg. Turning his head, his face stinging from ice-burn, he realised the girl had tied something to his ankle.

'It's all right,' she called. 'I'll pull you back. Be careful not to crack the ice.'

Encouraged, he slid a little further along. Using the stick and all his strength, he managed to raise the sodden sack out of the water.

Exhausted, he lay spread-eagled, his numb fingers clutching a corner of the sack, now ominously still and silent.

There were a few tugs on his ankle as the girl attempted unsuccessfully to pull him in. Raising his head he looked back. Without his glasses everything was a blur. He was a prisoner, almost unable to move, his strength waning.

After what seemed like an age he felt another, stronger tug, and found himself slowly and painfully gliding back to the bank. Then, still grasping the sack, he was back on the grass. With an effort he rolled over and saw the heavy winter sky leaning down over him.

Shakily he sat up and put on his glasses, his face and body chilled yet burning, and his legs sore and scratched. He and the passer-by who'd helped pull him in watched as the girl opened the sack and scooped out three puppies. They all inspected the tiny, pathetic creatures – two chocolate brown splotched with white, wriggling, the third stiff and silent.

'Looks like *he's* a goner,' said the man who had helped.

Gazing down at the little creatures with anger and pity, the girl muttered, 'How could anyone do such a wicked thing?'

'They probably couldn't afford to feed them. Times are

hard,' said the man. 'Stay off that ice, now.' And he went away.

'It's so cruel.' She clutched the puppies to her, and to his embarrassment Ben saw a tear trickle down her cheek.

'At least we saved two,' he muttered awkwardly.

'I must get them to my uncle's to feed them,' she said. 'He lives near here.' And without a word of thanks or farewell, she hastened off, the puppies in her arms.

Ben was left sore, uncomfortable and puzzled. Unusually, he had done something that required courage – mostly thanks to that girl. And now she'd just gone.

Back at home, he didn't dare tell his dad about the incident. He told Granny he'd slipped, wincing as she dabbed his sore legs with lint soaked in brown iodine.

But in the weeks ahead he often replayed the scene in his mind, wondering if he'd ever find out the fate of the puppies, or who that furious, headstrong girl was.