

Chapter Three

IN THE DARK



The phone rang, interrupting Poppy's tin whistle practice. Poppy frowned and took the whistle from her lips with an irritated pout, but Gyr felt secretly relieved – she was making an awful racket. He picked up the receiver.

'Hi Gyr. Are you coming dancing?' It was Luke's mother, Janet.

'I don't think so,' said Gyr. 'The car's in the garage. It needs new bushes. The mechanic's had to order them. It won't be back till tomorrow.'

'I'll give you a lift if you like. Ask Claire,' Janet said.

'Mum,' Gyr roared into the kitchen, 'it's Janet on the phone. She wants to know if we'd like a lift to dancing.'

Mum came into the room drying her hands on a tea-towel. 'I'll talk to her,' she said.

'Dancing, dancing, I want to go dancing,' Poppy sang at Mum's elbow, piping a few shrill notes into her whistle. 'Dancing, dancing, I want to go prancing. Can we go, Mum, please?'

Gyr rolled his eyes. '*Prancing?*' he said sarcastically.

Poppy stuck out her tongue at him.

Gyr waited to hear what his mother would say. He wanted to know too. There were Irish dancing classes every Wednesday night in the pub in the village. Gyr never danced, though some of the boys in his class did. It was Poppy who did the dancing, Gyr just ate sweets and hung around the pool table watching the older boys expertly shoot balls.

‘Hi Janet, Gyr’s right,’ Mum said into the telephone, ‘it needs new bushes. I don’t know what they are. Ask Gyr, he knows about these things. Something to do with the engine. It’s not too serious though. It just means we’re stranded.’

Gyr stepped backwards, taking Poppy’s tin whistle from her hands. It was light, like a baton. He twirled it in the air, watching how the metal caught the light.

‘Give it back!’ Poppy demanded.

‘I was going to ask you if you could collect the kids tomorrow and bring them to school for me,’ Mum was saying. ‘I hadn’t even thought about dancing, to be honest.’

‘I want to go dancing!’ Poppy wailed, trying to take the phone from Mum.

‘Come on Claire, I can do that as well,’ Janet said.

‘Only if you’re sure. I don’t want to ask too much from you. If you’re sure, we’d love it. Poppy really wants to go,’ Mum said as Gyr tossed the tin whistle up into the air. He dropped it and the room echoed with metal crashing on the wooden floor. Mum sighed, ‘And I could do with getting out as well,’ she said.

At six o’clock Janet’s three children swarmed into the yard. Gyr and Luke ran out to the haybarn to play on the swing. Soon Poppy and the others were there too and there was such chaos of screaming voices, excitement and people needing their turn that they were late leaving. They were made later

still because Janet had such difficulty turning her long car around in the small yard. Gyr and Luke sniggered as the car went back and forth, inches at a time. Mum threw them a warning look.

‘I’d better not drive this yoke in here again,’ Janet laughed as they finally made their way out into the Gate Field. Luke and Gyr hopped out and carefully shut the two gates on the cows.

‘Thanks so much, Janet,’ said Mum. ‘You’ve saved my life.’

‘Well, I’d say I might have saved you a wetting at any rate,’ said Janet, looking up at the large black clouds that were fast gathering. ‘It looks like we’re in for a bad night.’

Once inside the pub, Poppy ran off with the girls from her class. Gyr hung around his mother waiting for money for sweets.

‘Here you are,’ she said, handing him a few coins. ‘I’d rather you and Luke played in here. I hate it when you go out the back and watch the lads play snooker.’

‘It’s pool, not snooker, there’s a difference,’ Gyr grunted.

‘Whatever,’ Mum sighed. ‘They all swear too much.’

‘They don’t,’ Gyr retorted.

‘They do. You listen. Count how many times they say the f-word in one sentence. I tell you, if I catch you doing that there’ll be no more dancing for you, that’s for sure!’

‘I don’t dance anyway.’

‘You know what I mean, Gyr,’ Mum said, but Gyr had already walked away.

Later, Janet drove them back up the mountain. It was pitch dark and had started to rain, but when they got to the first gate

into the field Mum said, 'We'll get out here, Janet. Don't want you getting stuck in the yard again. You'd never get out in the dark.'

'You're right. Out you get then. I'll be here in the morning, nine o'clock. It's very wet, Claire, are you sure you'll be all right?'

'We'll be fine,' Mum said, pulling Poppy and Gyr from the car. The doors slammed. Janet turned the car easily on the corner by Old Mahoney's. They stood in the rain watching the red tail lights disappear down the road.

'I'm cold,' Poppy whimpered.

'Me too,' Gyr coughed.

'I told you to bring your coats,' Mum said.

'No, you didn't,' Poppy said, so factually that Mum believed her.

'Maybe I didn't. I've said it so many times recently and you never listen. I guess I've given up. Perhaps this is a lesson for us all.'

They walked up the drive through the field, their feet slipping on the loose pebbles, the rain stinging their faces. The night was so black they couldn't see their feet on the gravel. From the inky field the cows' heavy breath sounded ominous and disturbing.

'We should have brought a torch,' Gyr said, angry that the night was so overwhelming. In London the constant street lamps had always painted the sky orange and you never had the unnerving experience of not being able to see a yard in front of your face. He didn't think he'd ever get used to the velvet blindness of a moonless country night.

It seemed to take ages to walk through the field, and by the time they reached the second gate Poppy was snivelling.

‘My toes are shmeezing, freezing,’ she whimpered.

At last they rounded the corner of the haybarn and came into the yard, stumbling towards the front door.

‘Oh no!’ Mum exclaimed.

Gyr and Poppy both jumped. ‘What? What is it?’

‘I’ve forgotten the key. I never thought about it when I left the house. Janet was kind of in charge of everything.’

Poppy began to cry.

‘Come on, Poppy, there’s nothing to weep about, the spare key is in the shed.’

‘I’m getting wet,’ Poppy sobbed.

‘Next time we’ll all wear coats, won’t we?’ Mum said grabbing Poppy by the hand and hauling her over to the shed. Gyr followed mutely. It was just as dark in the yard as it had been in the Gate Field, but inside the shed was even scarier, it was black as a mine deep in the earth. Mum crept in cautiously, using the wall as a guide.

‘Where’s the key?’ Gyr asked.

‘There’s a little shelf on the back wall. Somewhere over here ... I think this is it ... Yes ... Yes ... I’ve found it ... oh no!’

‘What, what is it?’ Poppy squeaked.

‘It’s not here,’ Mum said in exasperation.

‘I thought you said you’d found it,’ Gyr almost shouted.

‘I found the shelf, but the key’s not here. There was a biscuit tin, the key was in the tin. It probably fell down. I guess the cat knocked it.’ Mum began to scrabble around on the floor. Something banged loudly outside in the yard.

‘What was that?’ Poppy cried.

‘Just the wind,’ Mum said, but her voice sounded scared. ‘I’ve found the tin,’ she went on, ‘but I can’t see anything else.’

Poppy began to cry again.

‘We should never have let Janet drop us at the gate. She probably had a torch in the car,’ Gyr said grumpily.

‘I’m cold,’ Poppy said.

‘OK, OK Poppy, everything’s OK. There’s no need to be scared and there’s no need to be cold. We’ll find the key and be inside in just a moment.’

Gyr thought his mother’s voice had never sounded so unconvincing.

She scabbled around on the floor again. Gyr could hear her hands in the straw. He remembered weeks ago Mum had said rats lived in the shed.

‘Ow,’ Mum cried out.

‘What is it?’ Gyr breathed, hardly daring to ask.

‘I scraped my hand on the wall. This is no good. We need a torch. Come on, we’ll go down to Old Mahoney.’

Mum held Poppy’s hand and led them out of the shed. Gyr stumbled and tripped on a box. The contents spilled out with a great clatter as if it were a drawer of cutlery.

‘Hold my hand,’ Mum said and Gyr reached out for it through the cloying darkness. When he finally found her warm fingers it was like a ship reaching harbour. He held on tight.

They walked back down through the field. The cows stirred restlessly, following them with what seemed like threatening intent.

‘Nothing to be afraid of,’ Mum said brightly, but Gyr knew she was terrified. He knew she was thinking what if Old Mahoney were out, what if he had no torch, what if they had to walk to Janet’s house, four miles away down tiny, unlit lanes. They might meet anyone, or anything.

Poppy’s whining had become one long note of sorrow.

‘Come on, Poppy, cheer up. Think how many words rhyme with key,’ Mum suggested.

‘Key, me, can’t see, want tea ... soaking wet, shouldn’t be, get home, shall we?’ she whispered, her voice dissolving into the rain.

They could see nothing in the field. Their feet found the gravel path more by the accident of stumbling off the grass and onto it rather than anything else. Gyr looked up and could just make out his mother’s ghostly pale face. Far away on the smoky horizon he could see the tiny lights of the village. It looked cosy and sensible down there, it looked safe. Poppy’s face was hidden from Gyr by their mother’s body. She had stopped moaning and stopped rhyming, which meant she was too frightened to even speak.

