

CHAPTER 1

The Black Dogs

Katie knew she was dreaming. She even forced her eyes open for a moment. The grey light of an early summer morning filtered in at the window, but still the black dogs were after her. This was an old dream, a dream from her past. Why wouldn't the dogs leave her alone? Her eyes closed and the dream swirled around her like a fog.

She stood ankle-deep in mud; a cold wind plucked at her frock. In the distance the sky flickered, and the grumble of great guns told her where 'some poor souls were getting a pasting'. She knew the dogs were there, moving silently through the trenches, stepping over dead men. She wanted the guns to stop. She might hear the dogs coming then, their panting perhaps, or the sucking noise of their paws in the mud.

At her feet a wounded soldier sat leaning against her knees. One hand had been shot away and the stump was crudely bandaged. The black dogs didn't want him for that, oh no, not for a mere wound. They wanted him for Katie's secret. They had guessed it – but they didn't know for sure. She could hear them taunting her.

'Give up your secret, Katie,' they howled. 'We know he's your father, we know about his hand too, but what about his mind, Katie? Go on! Admit it – he's mad, Katie – mad as a hatter.' A deep shudder passed through her. 'Shame can turn people mad you know ... go on, Katie, ask him why he ran away ...'

‘No,’ she whispered, forcing the sound out. Then loudly, ‘NO!’

As if at her command the grumble of guns died away. The dogs disappeared. Light burst from the clouds to the east and fell on swathe after swathe of brilliant red poppies. She bent and helped her father to his feet and they walked home together through the poppies with the sun behind them.

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When Katie woke, the grey of early morning had, as if by magic, given way to bright sunlight. It glanced across the lace curtains which stirred in the air at the window. For a moment she was tense. Why was she here? What about school? Then, with a tingle of relief, she remembered she was on holiday. Father had taken them out of school two days early as a protest at the leaks in the roof. On Friday, school would break up anyway for the longest summer holidays ever. Three whole months while the teachers went back to class themselves to learn Irish.

She lay on her back in bed and stretched out comfortably towards its four corners. A delicious feeling of peace and contentment swept over her. She smiled, thinking of her teacher. Poor Miss Kennedy – she had looked so worried. Not a word of Irish and she was going to have to teach it! She thought about her own future too. Father said that now the fighting was over she could go to the Sisters of Mercy Secondary School in Nenagh. It was only seven miles and she could cycle that easily. In winter she could board with her cousin Dolores. It would be fun to stay in a real town, and Dolores knew everyone. ‘Secondary school!’ she said to herself with satisfaction.

The homely sounds of the farmyard came up to her from below, along with the occasional clatter from the kitchen and the voice of her mother. Katie strained to hear who she was

talking to. She could not distinguish any words, but the pitch of the voice was familiar. It was her elder brother Seamus. Her mother and Seamus were always talking; they would discuss politics, the war with the English, which was now over, thank God, and other things that Katie had put out of her mind since her father had come back from the war – the Great War, that is, that was fought in the trenches in France. Seamus was two years older than she and, at seventeen, should be helping run the farm, but it was her thirteen-year-old brother Marty who was the real farmer.

Seamus was always up to something. She must find out what he and Mother were scheming about now. She heard his voice rise angrily for a moment. Ever since Mr Collins had come back from London having signed a treaty with the English that Mr DeValera did not like, Mother and Seamus had sided with Mr DeValera, while Father held fast to Mr Collins. Perhaps, if she were going to secondary school, she should learn something about politics?

She could hear Marty now, talking to the cows, slapping their backsides as he drove them down from the byre. They could only milk three cows at a time in the byre, so they were brought in in two lots. Six cows is a good number; you're well off with six cows to milk. She closed her eyes and imagined Peter milking, cap down over his forehead, his head pressed against the cow's flank. Peter was the cowman, and the everything-else-man for that matter. The jets of milk would make a lively ping-ping in the pail to begin with, then as the pail filled, the sound would become rich and frothy.

Nailed boots scraped in the yard. That was Father – she could tell from the slight limp he still had from the war. The steel hook, which replaced the hand he had lost, clinked on the milk churn as he handled it out of the byre. With the comforting

sun glancing through the curtains, Katie let her mind drift back to that dreadful time four years ago when Father had come back from the war. She was only eleven then.

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She had gone with her mother to meet Father at the station in Nenagh. They all stepped back as the huge steam-engine hissed past, the driver leaning from the cab, the fire from the fire-box gleaming red on his face. It was winter, and clouds of steam blew up from between the carriages. Doors swung open and passengers climbed down, but there was no sign of Father. She turned to look up at Mother, who was standing on tiptoe searching for him in the crowd. Then Katie turned back, the steam parted, and there he was, standing in the throng of passengers and cases. He was wearing a cumbersome great-coat and his left arm was in a sling, the cuff pinned back over where his hand had been. She had been told about the hand; she was a big girl and was ready for it.

‘Father!’ Katie called, hurtling down the platform. She grabbed him about the waist and looked up at his face. But Father just stood there. He did not even look down. Amid the bustle and clatter and smell of hot steam she hugged him, gazing up, while he stared out over her head.

Mother came and kissed him, but he looked over her shoulder too towards something neither of them could see. When they compared notes later they told each other he had smiled, but that was just because it was what they wanted to believe. Then, like a blind man, he allowed them to lead him away.

For a whole year he did not speak, but ate his meals and then walked stiffly back to his place beside the range. Doing her homework with Marty at the kitchen table, while her mother mended or darned, Katie would look up from the pool of light

cast by the lamp and try to penetrate the blackness around him. Were those sunken, staring eyes looking at her? She would try not to think of them, but then she would imagine their glint in the darkness, pulling her towards him. She could not think of him as her father, not yet, but time and again her eyes rose and she found herself straining to see him in the dark corner of the room.

One day, pretending to be cold, she abandoned her place at the kitchen table and moved the little table, which was usually pushed back against the wall, over near where he sat.

‘It’s closer to the range,’ she said, by way of explanation. She brought in a spare oil lamp and put it on the table beside her where it cast a safe glow of yellow light over the table and her work. She could see his hand out of the corner of her eye, but the dreadful staring face was hidden.

‘Hurray!’ said Marty. ‘The mutter-machine has gone.’

‘I don’t mutter!’ she protested.

‘Here’s me with both fingers in my ears till they meet in the middle, and she says she doesn’t mutter.’

‘They meet in the middle because there’s nothing in between!’ Katie answered.

‘Now, children!’ Mother intervened.

This place near her father became Katie’s favourite position in the evenings. She read slowly in those days, pronouncing the words carefully; she liked words, almost as much as she hated numbers. She would rush at numbers, meeting them head-on, until in the end, they seemed to scatter over the slate she was working on like frightened chickens. And she *did* mutter. She would forget about Father a lot of the time now.

‘Twelve hens at one shilling and sixpence each?’ she read one evening. Then, calculating, ‘So, twelve sixes are seventy-two, now divide by twelve, that’s ... Oh! Lord help me,

it's six again, but are these hens or shillings?' Tears of frustration trickled down her face. It was her third try at the sum. Suddenly, out of the darkness, her father's hand moved.

Very slowly, it came towards her, advancing into her pool of light. She watched, terrified but fascinated. Something momentous was happening. She wanted Mother to see, but her tongue seemed stuck to the top of her mouth. She could neither speak nor move. The hand touched her arm and she tried not to flinch. It was not cold, as she had imagined, but warm. It rested on her arm as lightly as her mother's silk scarf. She stared at it. Gradually her own right hand came over and rested for a moment on his. A sob rose from deep inside her. Her mother looked over. 'What's the matter, child?' But the hand had gone.

'It's these blessed sums,' lied Katie.

'Now, don't you swear! Leave the old sums till morning. It's time for bed.'

That was how it had started. From then on, as Katie worked, she recited her homework aloud for Father. No-one else noticed, but then, no-one listened to Katie's mutterings anyway. After a while she started telling him little bits about the day amongst her mutterings: about the funny things Marty had done, or which cow was calving. He still did not speak but gradually his face lost its dead look. Mother saw it first.

'Katie,' she said, 'I think you have a way with your father. Your mutterings seem to be doing him good. I can see him listening.'

Easter brought spring-cleaning and whitewashing. Even Father was evicted from the kitchen while the whitewash was applied. He and Katie sat among the primroses on a bank above the house.

'Beautiful,' he said.

That was all. His first word and Katie didn't even notice.

'I love primroses,' she said, then caught her breath. 'Father, you spoke!' Stopping only to give him a kiss, she rushed down to tell the others.

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Katie lay back in bed smiling at the memory of that moment when Father had spoken. They had all congregated in the kitchen, Father looking pleased but dazed, and there among the buckets of whitewash they had an impromptu party of tea and soda bread; there was nothing else as it was Lent, but the tea went to their heads like wine. Katie was praised and hugged as if it was she, not Father, who had talked.

She was twelve that May. Come summer, it seemed obvious to everyone that Father was on the mend, and Katie felt that it was all her own work.

'Leave the washing now, child,' her mother would say. 'Take your father up by the slate quarries, he needs a breath of fresh air.' The sun shone and everyone seemed happy.

But quite suddenly, for Katie, it all changed.

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Together Katie and Father explored the slate quarries and trod the roads and lanes for miles around. He followed where she led. He seldom spoke and her chatter seemed to wash over him. If she left him and went to pick flowers or ran ahead to hunt the devils from her legs because his slow walk could be tiresome, he would just stand where she had left him, often with a half-smile on his face. She would come back to him then and slip her hand into his, always her left hand into his right. His smile would widen like a blind man's when his keeper returns.

'Beautiful,' he would say, and the little squeeze he gave her hand would leave her wondering if it was the view, or the

sunshine, or perhaps even she who was beautiful.

It happened first in early summer. The new-mown hay lay in silver ribbons in the fields. A piece of twisted metal, broken off from a mower, was thrown beside the road. Suddenly Father stopped and gripped Katie's arm. She looked up, surprised. To her horror she saw that his face had gone rigid and chords stood out on his neck. He was staring at the piece of metal, apparently addressing it.

'A hundred and sixty-four men you killed last night,' he said, low and menacingly. Then he shouted, 'Answer me, damn you!' Katie cried out as her father's fingers closed on her arm like steel. 'Who made you to kill and maim? These were *my* men, my body, my legs, my heart, torn apart by you!' This was more than he had ever said since coming home. There were flecks of foam at the corners of his mouth. Katie looked desperately up and down the road, torn between wanting help and hoping no-one would see. He turned to her, eyes piercing, demanding attention.

'You want to know why I ran?' he demanded. 'I'll tell you.' She wanted to cover her ears and scream. Even now she had to shut her mind to what he told her then because he talked of the unspeakable things of war – the stench of bodies, dying friends, and running – running. Eventually he stopped, exhausted. The madman's grip on her arm loosened. She gazed at him in horror, ready to run, but a puzzled half-quizzical smile came over his face.

'That's funny,' he said, his speech suddenly set free and his voice normal now. 'That bit of metal reminded me of the war.' He shook his head. 'Not for your ears, my child,' and gave her the gentlest squeeze with his good arm. They walked on. A stoat peered from a wall, and he pointed it out to her.

'Look at it's sharp little face, Katie,' he said.

But Katie's world was shaken. The ground which had seemed so firm under her feet only moments ago now seemed wobbly and uncertain, like a quaking bog.

'That bit of metal, Father ...?' she ventured tentatively.

'What?'

Katie was only inches away from him and looking up into his face, but she could swear that he had already forgotten about it.

'God love you, child. Just some old memories. Haven't you cured me of all that?'

She turned away and looked up the road. Two black dogs were trotting purposefully towards them. A shiver went down her spine though she had never been afraid of dogs.

'There's two fellows up to no good,' said Father. At the sound of his voice the dogs stopped, stared, and then turned away over the bank and vanished out of sight into the fields beyond. What had they heard? Katie wondered foolishly, peering in the direction they had gone.

To begin with, the attacks of madness or whatever it was were frequent, and always came when they were alone and far from home. Katie started having nightmares then, and the black dogs came into her dreams trying to hear what Father said. Her nightmares were not just about the horrors of war; there were dreams too in which men in white coats came to take her father away. Terrified that she would lose him, Katie told no-one, not even her mother. Was Father a madman? No one must know – ever! Gradually Father's attacks became less and less frequent; he even lost the habit of throwing back his head to ease the tightening muscles in his neck. There seemed to be no point in telling Mother then – he was better, and it was Katie who had cured him.

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From her bed Katie listened to the whistling below in the yard and smiled. What on earth had got her dreaming of the black dogs again? Happily, that time was long over now. It was time to think of herself and of the summer ahead.