

## CHAPTER 1

### *Hunger*



THE AIR FELT COLD and damp as Eily stirred in her bed and tried to pull a bit more of the blanket up to her shoulders. Her little sister Peggy moved against her. Peggy was snoring again. She always did when she had a cold.

The fire was nearly out. The hot ash made a soft glow in the gloom of the cottage.

Mother was crooning quietly to the baby. Bridget's eyes were closed and her soft face looked paler than ever as she lay wrapped in Mother's shawl, her little fist clinging to a piece of the long chestnut-coloured hair.

Bridget was ill – they all knew it. Underneath the wrapped shawl her body was too thin, her skin white and either too hot or too cold to the touch. Mother held her all day and all night as if trying to

will some of her strength into the little one so loved.

Eily could feel tears at the back of her eyes. Sometimes she thought that maybe this was all a dream and soon she would wake up and laugh at it, but the hunger pain in her tummy and the sadness in her heart were enough to know that it was real. She closed her eyes and remembered.

It was hard to believe that it was only a little over a year ago, and they sitting in the old school room, when Tim O'Kelly had run in to get his brother John and told them all to 'Make a run home quick to help with lifting the spuds as a pestilence had fallen on the place and they were rotting in the ground.'

They all waited for the master to get his stick and shout at Tim: Away out of it, you fool, to disturb the learning, but were surprised when he shut his book and told them to make haste and 'Mind, no dawdling,' and 'Away home to give a hand.' They all ran so fast that their breath caught in their throats, half afraid of what they would find at home.

Eily remembered. Father was sitting on the stone wall, his head in his hands. Mother was kneeling in the field, her hands and apron covered in mud as

she pulled the potatoes from the ground, and all around the air heavy with a smell – that smell, rotting, horrible, up your nose, in your mouth. The smell of badness and disease.

Across the valley the men cursed and the women prayed to God to save them. Field after field of potatoes had died and rotted in the ground. The crop, their food-crop was gone. All the children stared – eyes large and frightened, for even they knew that now the hunger would come.

Eily snuggled up against Peggy's back and soon felt warmer. She was drowsy and finally drifted back to sleep.

'Eily! Eily! Are you getting up?' whispered Peggy.

The girls began to stretch and after a while they threw off the blankets. Eily went over to the fire and put a sod of turf on the embers. The basket was nearly empty. That was a job for Michael.

Both girls went outside. The early morning sun was shining. The grass was damp with dew. They didn't delay as it was chilly in their shifts. Back in the cottage, Mother was still asleep and little Bridget dozed against her.

'Is there something to eat?'

'Oh, Michael, easy known you're up,' jeered Eily.

'Go on, Eily, look, have a look,' he pleaded.

'Away outside with you and wash that grime off your face and we'll see then.'

The sunlight peered in through the open cottage door. The place is dusty and dirty, thought Eily.

The baby coughed and woke. Eily took her and sat in the fireside chair as Mother busied herself. There were three greyish leftover spuds. Mother sliced them and poured out a drink of skimmed milk from the large jug. It was little enough. No one spoke. They ate in silence, each with their own thoughts.

Michael began to talk ... to ask for ... but changed his mind. Time had taught him a lesson.

The first few times he had asked for more, his father or mother had lifted the wooden spoon and brought it down on the palm of his hand. Later, his pleas had been met by a sadness in his father's eyes and his mother bursting into tears. This he could not take on top of the pinches and squeezing of his two sisters. Things were better left unsaid.

By midday the situation had improved. There was heat in the sun and a warm breeze blowing.

Michael went up the road to his friend Pat and together they would walk the mile to the bog to see if they could get a fill for the basket.

Bridget's breathing was rattly, but she slept. Mother, encouraged, took the shifts and a few dirty clothes to wash and then spread them outside to dry. She shook the blankets and laid them across the stone wall.

Peggy's long brown hair was unplaited. It hung lank and greasy. Mother bent her over as she poured water from the bucket on the hair and scrubbed at her scalp. The cries from Peggy were nothing to what followed when Mother produced the fine comb and began to pull it through the length and tangles, peering each time to see if any lice or nits were in it. Eily laughed, knowing that since she had had her turn only two weeks before, she would escape today.

Later, Mother despatched the two of them up the lane to Mary Kate Conway for a bit of goose grease – if she had it – to rub on Bridget's chest. Mary Kate had a gift for healing and always helped those who were sick or in trouble.

Her cottage was surrounded by a thick hedge in order to provide a bit of privacy for those who needed to visit her.

The old lady was sitting on a stool outside in the sunshine.

‘Well, if it isn’t the two best little girls in the world,’ joked Mary Kate. ‘What can I do for you, pets?’

‘Mother needs some goose grease for the baby,’ pleaded Eily.

‘The poor, poor child,’ murmured Mary Kate. ‘What a time to come into the world.’ She got up from her stool and beckoned to the girls to follow her. Peggy lagged behind, clutching at Eily’s dress. She had heard stories about the old lady and was a bit afraid of her.

The cottage was dark and smelly. Mary Kate hobbled over to the old wooden dresser. It was filled with jars and bottles. She mumbled to herself as she lifted down different jars and opened the lids to peep at the contents. Finally, sniffing what she wanted, she handed it down to Eily.

‘Mind you tell your mother I want my jar back when she is finished.’

‘Will it make Bridget better?’ Eily was amazed at the bravery of little seven-year-old Peggy’s question.

Mary Kate frowned. ‘I don’t know, pet. There is so much sickness at the moment – strange sickness

– I do my best.’

With that, Mary Kate began to head back out towards the sunlight. Just outside the door she put her hand into the pocket of her apron and produced an apple. A dirty old apple. She gave it a polish. The girls tried not to look, but with a flourish she handed it to Peggy.

Peggy’s eyes were round and wide. Eily blinked.

‘Many thanks ... we couldn’t take it from you ... thank you, but it wouldn’t be fair,’ Eily began.

‘As green and hard as the hobs of hell,’ laughed Mary Kate, throwing back her head to display her toothless gums. ‘Shure, I can’t eat it.’

The girls smiled and Peggy carried the apple like a precious jewel safely home to be shared by all.

That night they had the yellow meal cooked with some melted lard and a few wild spring onions Mother had found to hide the flavour. The apple was quartered and savoured, though there was no denying its crisp hardness and sharp taste.

‘It is two weeks since your father went to work on the roads, and still no word from him,’ began Mother. Eily knew her mother was worried, between Bridget’s illness and the sack of the old yellow meal in the corner getting smaller and smaller by the day.

‘I don’t know what we’ll all come to or how we’ll manage,’ Mother continued, shaking her head. ‘There is even talk of the big house being closed up and the master and his family moving back to England for good.’

Michael, sensing the near despair in her voice, piped up: ‘I’ve got some good news. Listen, Ma, just listen.’

Sometimes it was hard to believe that he was only a boy of nine, with his thick black curly hair like his father and the soft kind blue eyes of his mother. He hated to see her sad.

‘Pat and I were up on the bog – we went a bit further than usual and we found a part that isn’t all cut away yet. Pat’s father is going up there tomorrow with him and will cut it and lay it and he says if this wind and drying continues we can have some for our place once we collect it and carry it ourselves. Isn’t that grand?’

Mother smiled. ‘Dan Collins is a good man, there’s no doubt.’

She settled herself into the chair and relaxed a bit. Eily knelt down near her and Peggy sat in her lap.

‘Tell us about when you were a girl – go on, please,’ they all begged.

‘Are ye not all fed up with my old stories,’ she chided.

‘Never,’ assured Michael.

‘Well, then,’ she began. ‘Mary Ellen, that was my mother and your grandmother, what Eily’s called after, lived with her two sisters Nano and Lena ...’

There was nothing like a story before bedtime.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Under the Hawthorn Tree*



THE BREEZE CONTINUED. It was great drying weather. Dan Collins had sent a message to say he would take them to the bog that morning. Peggy kept hopping from one foot to the other with excitement. Since the hunger and sickness had come, the children spent most of their time hanging around the cottage. Mother wanted them near her. From their door the O'Driscolls could see the curling smoke from each cottage chimney that made up their small homeland of Duneen. It was a beautiful place. There were plenty of good neighbours, but nowadays there was very little visiting. Each family tried to hide its shame at having so little. Anyway, not many had the energy or the heart for singing, dancing and storytelling any more.

But today was different – Eily, Michael and

Peggy were going to the bog. They waved goodbye to Mother, who looked tense and pale. Baby Bridget was still very sick. She slept most of the time and cried only when Mother put her down.

They each carried a basket for the turf. Also there was a can of cool water and some potato skins and a crust of dry bread to keep the hunger at bay.

Pat and his father were waiting for them. Dan Collins was a big man, with curly blond hair, and his eyes seemed to twinkle when he was in a good mood. He spent most of his time outdoors and always seemed to know where wild berries or mushrooms grew. Moses, his old donkey, stood with the empty creels tied to his back.

‘You bold young straps, holding us up on such a fine day,’ joked Dan as he put the empty baskets on top of the donkey. ‘Run on ahead and Moses and I will follow in our own good time.’ The donkey was old and slow and would not be rushed.

The children had plenty of time to play and codact as they gathered the dry turf into neat piles. Peggy busied herself picking wild cowslips for Mother.

At last Dan arrived and they began to load the baskets with as much as they could carry, which wasn’t too much. Old Moses was able for only a

half-load nowadays.

In no time they were all hot and thirsty. They sat down and gulped the cool water and ate what they had. Dan had a sup of tea and a potato cake, and then he helped them all in turn to carry their baskets as Pat guided and steadied Moses.

The journey home was long and exhausting. The fields seemed stonier and their arms and shoulders and backs ached. They had to stop and rest often. A few times, Peggy sat down on the ground and said she couldn't walk any further, and began to sob. Dan Collins joked her and told her that if old Moses with his bad leg could do it surely a young pony like herself could manage it.

It took an age before they reached the Collins's cottage. There they said farewell. The children found the last half mile almost endless. Michael's hands were bleeding as he tried to keep a grip on the heaviest basket. It was dusk by the time they reached home.

The big basket would sit by the fire, but the rest was emptied at the side of the cottage. It made only a small pile. They couldn't help but remember the large pile you could stand on, almost the height of the cottage, that their father would normally gather when times were good.

They pushed in the door. Mother was dozing with Bridget in the chair near the fire. She looked tired and they could tell she had been crying.

Quiet as mice, they reheated some leftover oatmeal and water. They were all tired out, and glad to fall into bed. With arms and shoulders aching, they scarcely had time to notice the normal rumbling hunger pains that came before sleep.

At some time during the night they became aware of their mother's sobs and of Bridget coughing and trying to breathe. Michael came and lay down in the bed beside the girls. They held hands and prayed – every prayer they had ever learned.

'God help us, please help us, God,' they whispered.

No one slept. It was the early hours of the morning before the coughing stopped. Then there was a sudden silence. Mother was kissing the baby's face and each little finger one by one.

'God let the sun come up soon and let this terrible night end,' the children begged.

Suddenly they became aware of their mother's silence. They got up and went over to her. Large tears slid down her cheeks.

'She's gone. My own little darling is gone.'

Peggy started to cry. 'I want Bridget back,' she

wailed. 'I want her.'

'It's all right, pet,' assured Mother. 'She was too weak to stay in this hard world any longer. Look at her. Isn't she a grand little girl, now she's at rest.'

The baby lay still, as if she were just dozing. Mother told them to kiss her, and one by one they kissed the soft cheek and forehead of Bridget, the little sister they hardly knew.

Mother seemed strangely calm and made them go back to bed. 'At first light, Michael, you must run to Dan Collins and ask him to get Father Doyle. I'll just sit and mind my darling girl for a little while yet.'

Later, Michael set off, his face pale and his eyes red-rimmed. The chill of the early morning made him shiver as he pulled his light jacket around him.

Mother had heated some water and with a cloth she gently washed Bridget, and brushed and brushed the soft blond curls. Eily pulled the old wooden chest from under Mother and Father's bed. As instructed, she opened it. There wasn't that much in it, so she soon found the lace christening robe which her great-grandmother had made. The lace was yellow and old. It was only ten months since Bridget had worn the robe before, but her little body was so thin and wasted it still fitted her.

Dressed in it she looked like a little pale angel, though Eily couldn't help but remember a porcelain French doll she had seen in a shop window in the town once. It stood stiff in a white lace dress with a starched petticoat and long curling real hair. How she had wanted to hold and have that doll. Now she felt the same longing, but much worse. She ached to hold Bridget and never let her go.

Michael came home. They all had a sup of milk and tidied themselves and the cottage as best they could. Dan Collins would get the priest. Father Doyle was a nice man – he and Father were very friendly and sometimes he would drop in for a chat and a bit of company. Father used to say that being a priest was grand, but it was a lonely life.

Mid-morning they were all surprised when Dan Collins and his wife Kitty arrived. Kitty ran straight to Mother and kissed her. Their eyes were full of tears and unspoken words.

'Margaret, we are so sorry. Poor little Bridget,' whispered Kitty.

Dan Collins cleared his throat and shifted uneasily. 'There is more bad news, God spare us. Father Doyle is gone down with the sickness himself and will not be able to bury the wee lassie. Already in the village a few have died of the sickness – Seamus

Fadden, the coffin maker, being one – so there are no proper funerals ... ' He stopped.

Mother let out a high wailing cry. 'What will become of us, what are we to do?' The air hung heavy.

'We'll bury her decently in her own place,' said Dan.

The three children stared at Mother, waiting for her reply. She nodded her head silently.

'Under the hawthorn tree in the back field,' she whispered. 'The children always played there and its blossom will shelter her now.'

Dan motioned to Michael and they left the cottage and disappeared up to the field carrying a spade.

'We've no coffin,' said Mother hoarsely.

Kitty looked around the cottage and begged Eily to help her. Eily cleared her throat. 'What about using grandmother's wooden chest?'

Kitty and Eily pulled it out from under the old bed and lifted it onto the blanket. Mother walked over and nodded silently. Kitty began to take out the family treasures and lay them to one side.

Kitty and Mother started to get everything ready. Eily and Peggy, sensing they were not wanted, ran outside and pulled bluebells and wild

flowers. They sucked in deep breaths of air to try and calm their hearts.

Dan came back down the field and went inside. In a few minutes the three adults emerged, Kitty holding Mother's arm and Dan carrying the carved wooden chest.

A light breeze blew and the blossom bowed and waved in welcome. There was a clear blue sky. A family of bluetits sat on the branch of the tree, helping to keep vigil.

Dan and Kitty led them in the prayers and they all remembered the words of Jesus, 'Suffer the little children to come unto me'. They prayed too that they would 'meet again in Paradise'.

Eily and Michael gently placed the flowers beside the chest. Peggy clung to Mother as huge sobs racked her body. Mother stroked her hair. They all sang a favourite hymn of Father Doyle's, then Kitty led them back to the house. She had brought some tea and made a mug for the adults. She made Mother sit down near the fire as she warmed some leftover potato cakes.

For the next few days, Mother stayed in her shift with the shawl wrapped around her, and barely bothered to do anything. Eily and Michael fetched the water, swept out the cottage and searched for

food. They wished that Father would come back.  
Eily was scared. How long would it last?