
A Long Lonely Road

Katie Flynn

Chapter One

1938

'Petal! What the devil are you doing? Oh, if our mam saw you now, she'd give you such a wallop! Come on out of it this minute, d'you hear me?'

Four-year-old Petal twisted round to look up into her elder sister's face. She tried to move and when this proved impossible, she gave Daisy a sweet smile but remained where she was, crouched on the dirty paving stones with one arm thrust as far as she could get it between the iron bars of the drainage grating. 'I'm stuck,' she said. 'Me cherry wob bounced out of the downpipe and went straight into the drain. I could see it so I put me hand in to gerrit back, only - only it were further off than I thought an' now I can't pull me arm out, though I've tried ever so hard, honest to God I have.'

Daisy gazed despairingly down at her small sister. Petal had soft fair curls, big blue eyes and an enchanting smile, yet she was always in trouble. Often she got away with it because grown-ups could not believe that such an angelic-looking child could be as naughty as Petal was. They thought it far likelier that Daisy, who had straight brown hair and a thin, intelligent face, would be the one who thought up all the mischief. But now Petal's enormous blue eyes were beginning to brim with tears; it was clear that in her imagination she was never going to escape and would be in the most awful trouble.

Daisy sighed, and had crouched on the paving stones to examine her sister's plight more closely when a shadow loomed over her and a voice spoke in her ear.

'What's the little tyke done this time, then? Gawd, Daisy, when I thinks how your mam sends you out each mornin', clean as a whistle an' fine as fivepence, then how your kid ends up the way she does . . . well, it's downright strange, that's wharrit is.'

Daisy turned round and eyed the speaker indignantly. It was Nicky Bostock, who lived two doors away at No. 11, Bernard Terrace, and how he dared criticise anyone else for being dirty she could not imagine, for Nicky was filthy, from the top of his dusty head to the soles of his bare and blackened feet. Daisy knew he was not altogether to blame for this because he was what her mother called 'a passed-down child'. This apparently meant that his own parents had disappeared long ago and he had lived, for as long as he could remember, with a foster mother and father, neither of whom was related to him by blood. In fact, Mam said she thought Nicky coped very well, maintaining as much independence as possible and steering clear of the Ryans whenever Mr Ryan was drunk, or Mrs Ryan wanted a scapegoat.

Right now, however, Nicky was grinning down at her and Daisy felt she should support her small sister. 'It isn't her fault this time,' she said defensively. 'She must have fallen over and her arm's got jammed down the bleedin' drain. Anyway, what business is it of yours, Nicky nosy Bostock?'

Nicky grinned, clearly not at all insulted. 'Fell over!' he said derisively. 'Who d'you think you're kiddin', Daisy McAllister? I seen her playin' cherry wobs wi' young Jacky; she were fishin' out one what went down the drain, that's what she were doin', dirty little bugger.'

Daisy's eyes widened. She sometimes swore herself when in company with her peers, but the word 'bugger' was strictly forbidden to her and Petal, though they heard it often enough on their father's lips. She was about to reply indignantly that he should mind what he said and stop cussing, when Petal piped up.

'I isn't a dirty little bugger,' she said tearfully, if untruthfully. 'Oh, Daisy, do stop arguing and help me! I'm stuck, I tell you!'

'Let me have a look,' Nicky said gruffly, kneeling down next to Daisy. The child had rolled up the sleeve of her ragged cardigan to well above the elbow and had jammed her arm in so hard that two purplish marks showed where the bars had caught it. But surely, if her hand had gone in, then it should have come out, Daisy thought confusedly. She was still trying to work out what best to do when Nicky spoke. 'Aw, Gawd, trust a bleedin' girl,' he said, leaning over and seizing Petal's arm, none too gently. 'She put her hand in to fetch out the cherry wob flat like, but now she's gorrit in her fist. So, a' course, she can't gerrit out again.' He shook Petal's arm impatiently. 'Lerrit go, you little thickhead, or you're there for life, I'm tellin' you.'

Petal gave a wail of protest, so Daisy said reassuringly: 'Nicky's right, Petal. If you flatten your hand out, it'll come out easy peasy. After all, it's only a cherry wob, when all's said and done.'

'It ain't, it's three,' Petal wailed, her fist still obstinately closed. 'I found two others in the mud when I were diggin' for mine, an' if I flatten me hand out I'll lose 'em all. It took me ages to reach them an' I got ever so mucky. I can't leggo of them now.'

'Then you're there for life, kiddo,' Daisy said grimly. She knew better than to try to reason with Petal; threats might work, diplomacy never would. 'Well, I'm off home, it's dinner time. Are you coming, Nick?'

Petal's face grew pink and she tugged fruitlessly, then turned to her sister once more, a smile curving those angelic lips. 'Oh, Daisy, I've had an idea, a real good 'un! We can do it if you'll help me and it won't take more'n a few seconds. If I open me hand, you can put two fingers through the bars - they'll fit easy - an' take the cherry wobs off of me. I can't do it meself 'cos me other hand's proppin' me up. Oh come on, Daisy, be me pal.'

Daisy could not help smiling to herself. When it came to getting what she wanted, Petal could outsmart most. She was about to agree to have a go when Nick intervened. 'You're that sticky wi' mud, I reckon that the cherry wobs will come up with you if you goes through the bars slow an' careful, like,' he said. 'As soon as your palm's clear of the grating, I'll pick 'em off.'

The manoeuvre was completed successfully and Petal stood up, rubbing her cramped knees and grinning happily as Nick handed over the precious cherry wobs. Her face was dirt- and tear-streaked but her smile was so sunny that both the older children found themselves smiling in return. 'Thanks, Nicky,' Petal said gratefully. She turned to her sister. 'Is it really dinner time, Daisy, only I'm starving.'

'Me, too,' Nicky said. 'I'd best go in an' see if I can talk old Ma Ryan into givin' me some bread an' a cut o' cheese.' As the girls headed for their door, he strolled alongside them, suddenly remarking: 'You doin' anythin' after dinner, Daisy? Fancy a stroll down to the river? Or we could go to the gardens?'

Daisy looked doubtful. She had suspected for some time that Nicky rather liked her; he tended to hang about in her vicinity, and often walked home from school with her, though he seldom attended himself. The trouble was, he was generally known to be what her mam called 'a bit on the sharp side'. Daisy knew he stole, nicking fruit off the stalls, rooting through the bins at the back of Taylor's bakery shop in Stitt Street for stale buns, or broken sausage rolls. She knew he had to do this – food was always short in the Ryan household – but knew, also, that adults did not condone such behaviour and would blame her equally if he stole whilst in her company. So she said that she and Petal were going out with their mam and gave Petal a glare when the younger girl opened her mouth to argue. She looked a trifle apprehensively at Nicky because she did not want to hurt his feelings – he had rescued her little sister after all – but he appeared to have taken the remark at its face value. 'Okay,' he said cheerfully. 'I'll mebbe walk you home from school on Monday, then,' and with a casual wave of one hand, he was gone.

Daisy turned to Petal as they went down the jigger, heading for their back door. 'Honest to God, Petal, the scrapes you get in!' she said. 'And where was your pal Jacky, anyway? If he were a real pal, he'd have helped you to get out, not just run off.'

'He were losin' . . . well, until my cherry stone went down the drain, he were,' Petal said sunnily. 'He ran off with all the cherry wobs except the one down the grating, so I'm going to kill him after I've had me dinner.'

Daisy laughed. 'If Mam hasn't killed you first,' she observed. 'She sent you out clean, if not tidy, and Nicky was right, now you look a real little scruff bag.' She bent over her sister to straighten her stained and spattered cardigan, then reeled back, a hand flying to her nose. 'Petal, you stink! You smell worse'n the privy on a summer's day. It's a good job our dad ain't due back in port till tomorrow or he'd have had your hide – and mine, and Mam's as well – if he got one whiff.'

'I can't help it, Daisy. Drains is smelly things an' I were stuck in that one for hours and hours,' Petal said. 'Anyway, it weren't my idea to try to get the cherry wob back, it were horrible Jacky's. He tried with a stick but that weren't no good, so he said since I had the skinniest arms and it were my stone, I'd better have a go meself. It were him rolled up me cardy sleeve,' she added, with a touch of resentment, 'and when I first put my hand through the grid and the pong came up, he said I were a ninny and bet me two liquorice sticks that I'd never reach it. He dared me, Daisy, and no one can refuse a dare, can they?'

‘No, I suppose you had to have a try, though I wouldn’t have,’ Daisy said. ‘It’s too bad of Jacky to put a dare on a kid of four – why, he’s seven, isn’t he?’

‘Six or seven,’ Petal admitted. ‘But it’s no use saying I’m only four, because if I do that he won’t let me play with his gang, an’ I like boys’ games better’n girls’, so I do.’

‘Oh, come on, Petal,’ Daisy said reproachfully. ‘You and Fanny play at shop and tea parties and all sorts when she’s around. I bet you were only playing with Jacky because Mrs Hanson had taken Fanny to do the messages.’

‘Ye-es, Fanny weren’t there. But I do like playing with Jacky’s gang,’ Petal said obstinately. ‘And he owes me two liquorice sticks because I got the cherry wob back, didn’t I, Daisy? So it’s ya boo and sucks to him, isn’t it?’

Daisy laughed; she couldn’t help it. Jacky was a right little bruiser but Petal wasn’t afraid of him, not she. ‘All right, have it your own way,’ she said, as she opened the back door. ‘But I wouldn’t be too keen to tackle Jacky meself.’

‘Yes, but Jacky says his teacher telled them that boys were never to hit girls, so that’s all right.’ She turned large blue eyes up to her sister’s face. ‘Only if boys shouldn’t hit girls, then why is it all right for dads to hit mams?’ she enquired, as they entered the kitchen. Daisy felt her face warm as the blood rushed to her cheeks and she looked guiltily across to her mother frying potatoes in a large blackened pan on the stove, but Rose McAllister did not appear to have heard. She turned as the two children entered, and Daisy thought how pretty her mother was with her dark hair tied back from her face with a piece of twine, her cheeks flushed from the heat of cooking and her big, dark eyes with their curling lashes seeming to smile at them both. My mam’s always smart, though her clothes are old, Daisy thought with pride. Why, even with the big calico apron wrapped round her, you can see how small her waist is and how clean and neat she is.

‘Oh, Mam, Petal’s got herself mucky. I’ll give her hands and face a bit of a wipe at the sink, but her cardy’s covered in mud; can I take her upstairs to find a clean one?’

Daisy did not want to tell her mother that her little sister stank like a midden but soon realised it would not be necessary. Rose glanced down at Petal and gasped as the smell hit her. 'Cripes, Petal, whatever have you been doing? If that pong is coming from your woolly, you'd best dump it in the sink and I'll deal with it later,' she said, as Daisy picked up the dishcloth and began vigorously rubbing at her sister's face and hands. 'I'd ask what you've been up to only I bet I'd rather not know.' She watched as the filthy cardigan was dropped into the sink and said, as her children trotted past her, heading for the stairs, 'Don't be long now, these spuds are almost ready; I give you two minutes at the outside.'

'Awright, Mam, we'll be back before the cat can lick her ear,' Daisy said cheerfully, shepherding her little sister out of the room. 'We love fried spuds, don't us, Petal?'

Rose turned the fried potatoes gently in the pan, smiling to herself at her daughter's ingenuous remark. Not that it was ingenuous really; it was a fair enough question. Why was it that boys were taught not to hit girls, yet when they became adults a great many men thought nothing of battering their wives or giving their kids a good hiding for the most trivial offence?

Steve McAllister was a case in point. He was a stoker aboard the SS Millie May, a coaster plying between the small ports of South America, so his times at home in Liverpool were blessedly infrequent. When he came ashore drunk, Rose could understand his truculence, even his violence, but the truth was, like his father before him, he was a man of vicious and capricious temper. After nine years of marriage, she knew how suddenly he could change from a relatively good mood to a foul one, and until a couple of years previously she had feared and dreaded his homecomings.

Not any more, though. On that winter's day, two years ago, she had been frying liver and onions on the stove when the back door crashed open. Steve had lurched into the room, eyes bloodshot, and had stood swaying in the doorway for a moment. 'Wharra you cookin'?' he had demanded, his voice slurred from the drink. 'Whassin that bleedin' fry pan?'

'It's liver and onions,' Rose had replied levelly, though with a wild and thumping heart. 'It's your favourite dinner, Steve.'

He had scowled and taken a couple of shambling steps towards her. 'Not today, it ain't,' he had said thickly. 'Today, I fancy fish 'n' chips an' a bottle o' porter. Put that bleedin' pan down an' go an' buy some, quick.'

'I've no money,' Rose had said truthfully. 'An' I'm not going anywhere. You'll have to make do with liver and onions.'

He had taken two more steps towards her and Rose had known what was coming. Once, she would have let go the pan and tried to run round the table, slipping out of the door before he had turned back towards it, but now, suddenly, she was filled with defiance. She took the big iron pan in both hands and swung it in a wide arc. Liver, onions and hot fat flew across the short distance which separated them, splattering Steve's face and hands. For a moment he stopped short, then, with a howl of rage, he grabbed for the frying pan, clearly meaning to turn her weapon upon herself. But the pan was almost red hot from the heat of the fire, and for a sickening moment Steve was unable to let go of it, though his roars of pain and rage reverberated around the small room, which was filled with the smell of sizzling Steve.

Rose had given a short, harsh laugh. 'I warned you,' she had said, in the most threatening tone she could produce. 'I've had enough of it, Steve. The kids are in bed, thank God, but I'll not let you touch me again in one of your moods, so be warned.'

But he hadn't been listening. The moment he had torn himself free of the pan, he had rushed across the kitchen to bend over the pail of water under the sink and plunge both hands in it, whilst uttering a stream of abuse and sobbing with the pain of his burns.

Rose had eyed his rear thoughtfully, still swinging the frying pan. One good whack on that tempting, trouser-clad target, and Steve would end up with his head in the pail of water as well as his hands. But she had felt that such a move might be carrying the war one step too far and, still holding the frying pan, had begun to clear up the liver and onions.

Presently, Steve had stood up. She had glanced across at him. His face had been red and blubbered and tears were running down his cheeks. He had glared at her but to her secret astonishment – and great delight – she had read something very like

respect in his glance. Oh, there had been hatred there and a desire for revenge, but it had been clear that her action had surprised him. She had thought he would think twice before attacking her again.

And so it had proved. She had made a point of letting him see that she would no longer allow herself to be a victim, that she would hit back with any weapon to hand if he threatened her again. Of course, there had been other times when he had hit out at her and she had had no chance to defend herself, but she always made sure that afterwards he suffered in some way, and gradually he had learned to keep his distance.

Sometimes, she thought back down the long years to their courtship and wondered how on earth she had been so blind. She told herself that a girl of seventeen, kept too close by strict and elderly parents, had had no idea what marriage and a family involved. But the truth was partly that she had been swept off her feet by the handsome, swaggering young seaman, who had brought her presents from faraway places and taken her dancing and to the theatre and the cinema – three things of which her parents disapproved – and partly that to go out with Steve had shown her parents that she was no longer a child who could be told what she might and might not do.

So they had married in the teeth of deep parental opposition, though her parents had not withheld their consent, and moved into the little house in Bernard Terrace. Her parents had kept a small shop on Stanley Road, but after her marriage they had sold up and moved out to Great Sutton, on the Wirral, where a newspaper and tobacconist's shop, with a flat above it, had provided them with a decent living. As her own marriage degenerated, Rose had been less and less anxious to take Steve to visit her parents because her pride could not let her admit how right they had been. However, she had taken the girls to see their grandparents as often as she could, and both her mother and her father had adored the little girls, softening towards them in a way they had never done towards Rose. Sadly, when Petal had been two and Daisy six, first her father, then her mother, had succumbed to influenza, which they had neglected in order to keep the shop open. They had sent for Rose, asking her to take over the shop for a few days, but it had been too late.

Rose had always had to save hard and plan well ahead for her visits to Great Sutton, but when they came to an end she found she missed both the trips away from the city and her parents. Mrs Darlington had been well past forty when Rose was born, and now that she was a mother herself Rose realised how difficult it must have been for the couple to find themselves parents at such an advanced age. Both only children, they had not understood Rose's need for the companionship of young

people like herself, or her yearnings for independence from the narrow and rigid lives they led. And truth to tell, having grandchildren had mellowed them beyond belief.

Now, Rose turned the potatoes in the pan and glanced, anxiously, towards the kitchen door. The Millie May came into port tomorrow so she and the children would make do with fried potatoes for their dinner today. She would save the liver and onions for the following day, as she always did. Petal had asked her, when Steve was last in port, why they always had liver and onions on her daddy's first day home and Rose had smiled grimly at Steve, over the child's blonde head, and said sweetly that it was Daddy's favourite dish. Steve had glanced quickly away, refusing to meet her eyes, but Petal had been quite satisfied with the answer, especially as she was fond of liver and onions herself.

Rose fished out the tin plates and began to serve the potatoes, just as the kitchen door burst open and the children ran into the room. Petal was wearing a fawn-coloured cardigan which had once been Daisy's, and looked considerably better than when she had entered the kitchen earlier. When Petal was born, Rose had breathed a sigh of relief because she would not have to buy much in the way of clothing, though Steve had been bitterly disappointed, or so he had claimed. Now, Rose thought that Daisy was a motherly little soul and took as much pride in Petal's appearance as she would have done had she been the child's mother. She had brushed out Petal's soft curls and straightened the child's long grey stockings. She had even rubbed most of the mud off Petal's worn black plimsolls, and done her best to brush the child's short grey skirt. Rose wished she could have afforded decent boots for the children to play out in at this time of year, but it took her all her ingenuity to have them properly shod for school. Petal had started in the infants' class the previous September so now, Rose thought ruefully, she had two decent sets of clothes to keep clean. It was not that Steve was ungenerous; because of his long absences, the shipping company who owned the Millie May paid her an allotment every month, but it was not really sufficient for all the expenses of home and family. Rose had to work, but since the majority of women living in the terrace were in the same position, she thought nothing of it. The only real problem was that work was so hard to find and so poorly paid. 'Haven't you heard about the Depression?' employers would say, grimly, when offering one a tiny wage for work that would mean many hours of slavery each week. 'You're lucky I'm offering you work at all, so if you ain't content with the money I pay, you'd best go elsewhere.'

Only there wasn't an elsewhere, Rose thought now. She put the crockery on the table and went to the cupboard to fetch the sauce bottle. Doling a meagre amount on to each plate, she smiled approvingly as Petal ran to fetch the cutlery and Daisy filled a jug of water at the sink. Then she took her own place, poured water into their enamel mugs, and picked up her knife and fork.

'I do love fried potatoes,' Petal said earnestly, carefully dipping a piece into the puddle of sauce. 'But it ain't as good as liver and onions . . . I wonder what Daddy will have brung us back?'

Rose sighed. Steve was so unreliable, that was the trouble. Christmas was not far off, but even so, you could never tell. He might come home laden with presents for his small daughters – he never brought Rose anything – or he might come in empty-handed, then hand the girls half a crown apiece. Or, of course, he might come in roaring drunk, having spent his wages at some dockside pub or other, and try to persuade her to fork out her hard-earned money so that he could start another pub crawl as soon as possible.

Sometimes, when he was drunk, he would tell the girls in a self-pitying voice that he had brought them a grosh of presents – beautifully dressed dolls, a parrot in a cage, even a puppy – but that these objects had been stolen from him as he left the ship. With tears in his eyes, he would explain that, because of his loss, he had taken 'a l'il drink or two' to cheer him up, which was why he now felt so ill that he would have to go straight upstairs and lie down.

Rose could never tell whether there was any truth in these stories because there were occasions when Steve did bring the girls presents. Of course, she knew they had not been stolen, thinking it likelier that he had simply put them down somewhere, or even shed them on his passage home. What she did know, for sure, was that the gifts would not reappear and that Steve would spend the rest of his time ashore drinking with his mates, only returning to Bernard Terrace for food or a night's sleep.

Still, there were worse fates than Steve, Rose told herself, eating her fried potatoes and wishing she had been able to afford a bit of meat or fish to go with them. Charlie Briggs, young Jacky's father, was a docker and usually out of work. When he was in work he drank and when he wasn't he stole, either from his wife or from his old mother, who lived three streets away. Poor Nellie Briggs had to put up with his constant presence, often sporting black eyes or a limp, for her husband was even more violent than Steve. The kids avoided him whenever they could, but it wasn't always possible and they, too, were often marked.

'Mammy? It isn't long to Christmas, is it? Will Daddy bring us presents, d'you think?'

'I don't know, queen; if he can, he will, I suppose,' Rose said, coming abruptly back to earth. 'But isn't it Santa Claus who brings presents at Christmastime? Remember the poem Daisy's been telling you?'

Petal nodded eagerly. 'Oh yes, I 'member.' She closed her eyes and rocked herself gently backwards and forwards. "'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house, Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse . . .'