



Midnight

CHARLOTTE BARRY

Prologue

The pony was standing at the back of her dark, gloomy stable. She hadn't seen light for days. Her ribs stuck out and her legs looked like they could buckle any second. Her head started to get lower and lower. *Just hold on a bit more*, she thought to herself. *Things will change...*

1

We live on a dairy farm in Co. Laois. I was herding our cows out of the pasture. It was milking time. My older brother Cian and Dad were in the parlour waiting. We have a herd of 150 Friesian cross cows. People say Jerseys are the best but the bull calves have no meat on them. We agree with quality milk and quality beef. It's only fair to the beef farmers that we sell them the best.

As I walked in the door the smell of rashers filled my nostrils. I kicked off my boots and sauntered into the kitchen. "Morning Beth." "Morning Mam. Something smells good!" "Rashers and eggs. Where are your father and brother?" The back door opened at that moment and in walked Dad, my older brother Cian and our two dogs, Nell the Border collie and Whiskey the Golden Retriever. Grabbing an apple I said "I'm going down to the yard now. See you later."

I strolled down the lane towards Carrig Stables with Nell and Whiskey. They always liked to come and play with the yard owners, two spaniels Pip and Bailey. Pip & Bailey are owned by Sally & her husband, Michael Lalor. They also have a son named James and twin daughters named Haley and Kaley who are my best friends. Of course I don't own a pony of my own. Mam and Dad say it's too expensive but I've told them over and over that I'll buy the pony, I'll pay for it to be shod, for vet bills and for food. If I couldn't keep it on the farm then I would ask Sally if the pony could board there like Abigail, Lexi, Cassie and Amys do but they still say no.

2

Today was a Saturday so Kaley said I can ride her pony, Misty a 13.2hh dun Welsh Section B gelding while she rides her other pony Jessie a 14hh grey Connemara mare. Our summer holidays were starting tomorrow so I will be allowed to ride Misty every day. I'm not trying to brag but I am pretty good at riding especially at show jumping. According to Sally I could make the top if I had my own pony.

When I got to the yard it was only six o'clock so it surprised me that everyone was there rushing around. I saw Kaley plaiting Jessie and I made a beeline for her. "What's going on? Why are you plaiting Jessie?" "Sorry Beth I forgot to tell you yesterday but the Ballivor Show in Meath is on today. We're all going. The lorry is packed and ready. Dad has to drive Jessie and Vages up because they're our ponies and Mam will drive the lorry. All we have to do is load the ponies." "Who's going?" I say. "I'm bringing Jessie, Abigail is bringing Rocky, Lexi is bringing Benny and Diamond, Haley's bringing Vages, Cassie is bringing Buddy and Amy is bringing Freckles. We only just have enough seats so I'm afraid you can't come. Sorry Beth. I hope you understand" I looked away so she couldn't see the tears. I was hurt. *Why can't I just have a pony* I thought? With that they loaded the ponies and drove off.

3

I slumped down on the warm, dry concrete. The dogs came over to investigate. "Oh Nell, why can't I have a pony?" Nell put her head on my lap and whined. I just sat there running her black, velvet ears through my fingers. My phone beeped. It was a text from mam. She asked when would I be home and I replied in a few hours. I got up off the ground. Nell jumped up in surprise. "Whiskey time to go!" As we left the gates of Carrig Stables, the dogs instinct was to go left back up to our farm I had to call them back. "Let's go this way today girls!"

Most of the fields on either side of me were golden-yellow from baling but the odd one here and there were still a luxurious colour of green. Sheep and cattle dotted the fields and old farm buildings were never far from the livestock. Next thing I know Nell and Whiskey ran off! Whiskey was always wandering wherever her nose took her but Nell NEVER leaves my side.

4

"Nell, Whiskey. Here girls." I could hear them barking somewhere up in one of the fields. Following the noise I ran up the steep hill that led to a little shed. "Nell, Whiskey?" I was panting from the effort of climbing the hill. The dogs came around from the side of the shed. "Nell, Whiskey where have you"—I was cut short by a sound like someone stamping their feet? Coming from the shed? I could hear the throaty growls coming from the dogs behind. Cautiously I slid the rusty, iron bolt on the creaky, rotten door open. Quietly I crept into the shed, a dog flanking me on either side. To my surprise there were four stables! Though only one of them was completely locked up? I slid the bolt on the stable door and what I saw astounded me! I saw a pony?

5

The pony looked awfully fragile. Her ribs stuck out under her coat and her legs looked like they could buckle any second. Her head hung low. She barely acknowledged me as I reached out to stroke her neck. She looked terrified but she didn't have the energy to move away. "It's ok girl. I won't hurt you." I whisper to her. I reached out to stroke her again. This time she flinched but didn't move away. Even though she was skinny and dirty she had once been a seriously good pony. Her coat was as soft as velvet when I touched it. We stood there in silence for a few minutes. Girl and pony in peace and harmony. Suddenly she fell to her knees and quite possibly her death!

I took out my phone and dialled 999. "Which emergency service do you require?" A deep, friendly, mans voice asked. Taking a deep breath I said "Garda and um I think a fire engine. There's a pony and I think she's dying!" "I'm sorry but this is the emergency services not animal rescue. If you want to save the pony then ring a vet." With that he hung up!

6

I was dialling again. When he finally picked up I was so relieved to hear his voice. "Dad. Oh dad it's so good to hear your voice. "Beth! What's going on? Where are you?" There's a pony up in Keegans Forge and she's not well and we need to save her! Oh Dad please help me!" "Relax Beth. If you can

run back down to Carrig and grab a halter and I'll hitch up the cattle trailer to the Land Rover. I'll meet you down there in about ten minutes." "Thank you dad. Thank you."

I sprinted back to the yard as fast as my long legs could carry me. The dogs were hot on my heels. When I got there all was quiet and the few ponies that were there were in their stables munching on hay or out in the fields lazily flicking flies away with their tails. When I reached the tack room I shook the handle but it wouldn't budge? It was locked!

7

Oh no I thought. *Couldn't have happened at a worse time.* Thankfully I remembered that the spare key was kept under a flower pot around the corner of the stable block. Once I had let myself in I scanned the wall for a halter the right size. The pony was at least 14.2 hh but had a neat, dainty head. Still though just be on the safe side I brought a tattered navy cob sized halter.

Dad met me in the Land Rover as I was running out of the yard. "Hop in Beth. Do they have a spare blanket thingy we could borrow to keep her warm?" "They're called rugs Dad but yes they do. I'll run in and grab one." The rugs were stacked in a pile in the far corner. I picked up a small, burgundy outdoor rug. It was probably too small so I rummaged a bit till I found an ice blue stable rug which would have definitely fitted a 15.2 hh horse. The rug was quite bulky so it was kind of hard to run with it. When I finally reached the Land Rover Dad had Nell and Whiskey loaded into the back. I was exhausted from running with the rug. As I threw the rug over my shoulder he asked me "Will that fit her?" "Yep." Dad put the Land Rover into first gear and we drove off down the road.

8

The little shed where the pony was meant to be was eerily quiet. She was lying down and she looked exhausted. "Beth," Dad said gently. "You know even if we get her out of here there's still a big chance she won't make it." "She will Dad. She's strong." As we moved closer she got distressed but was too weak to stand up. "Easy girl. We won't hurt you." She calmed a small bit when she heard my voice. I then gently slipped the halter over her head. "Come on darling, get up." With a groan she tried to get her front legs up but her energy was spent. However her spirit was still fighting. "Dad can you take the lead rope with me. I'm not strong enough to do it on my own?" "Sure, just count me in." So with me at her head and dad at the end of the lead rope I counted down. "Three, two, one pull dad!" "I'm trying Beth. You know she's not light." This time though she got her two front legs up and was using all her will power to get to her four feet. "Come on girl. A little more." With one last groan the grey pony got to her feet. "Yes! Good girl, Midnight." "Is that what you're going to call her Beth?" "Yep." "Well then, let's get Midnight loaded." He said with a smile.

9

As soon as Midnight was out of the stable she was skittish. "Easy Midnight," I cooed. "She was probably stuck in that shed for a while." Dad said. "Will you hold her a minute while I put the rug on dad?" "Sure." He replied. As I moved around Midnight she stood calmly. The ice blue of the rug

stood out beautifully against her pale grey coat. In fact her coat was almost silver. Midnight was under weight and all her muscle was lost. She was still gorgeous though.

Midnight was very nervous about going into the trailer. Dad had a blanket of straw but even that couldn't convince her. The trailer was dark and gloomy so I guess it was pretty scary for a horse that had just come out of total darkness. "Come on Midnight, good girl" Still she would not budge. After what seemed like an eternity Midnight finally put one tentative hoof on the ramp. She hesitated a bit but she then put another hoof on the ramp and then another. When Midnight was fully in exhaustion took over and she lay down. "We'll be home soon girl. I promise"

10

On the way home I convinced Dad to let me ride in the trailer with Midnight. She was very nervous and wanted to stand but she was too exhausted. "It's OK girl. Relax." Dad rang our vet, David Strong and he said he would meet us at home.

When we arrived at the farm Mam and Cian had one of the calving pens set up for us. Midnight refused to come out of the trailer. It wasn't her fault that she had been exhausted. When we finally got her to stand up she fretted coming off the trailer. "Can we put her in the paddock beside the house until the vet arrives dad?" "You don't want to put her in there because it's right under your window Beth?" "Maybe" I said with a smile. "Well if you agree not to go outside to check on her in the middle of the night then I don't see why she can't stay in there." Thank you dad. Not just for letting Midnight stay in the paddock but for coming down and helping me save her." It's alright Beth. We all know I have a soft spot for animals.

After a few minutes of waiting the vet arrived. Midnight was lying down in the paddock. "Well Beth I see you finally got yourself a pony then." "Hi David. Her name's Midnight and she's not technically mine." Well that doesn't matter at the moment as long as she lives." As it turned out Midnight was dehydrated and very underfed. "I'll put her on a drip and prescribe her some medication. I'm sure your dad won't mind going into town with you later."

"Come on Beth let's go into town and get this pony of yours something to eat before the feed store closes for lunch." "Can I buy Midnight a halter?" "If you can find one that suits her then I don't see why not." "I'll just grab my money."

11

When we got back I went straight to check on Midnight. As I came into her view she nickered to me but was too exhausted to get up. I was overjoyed with admiration for her. After being abused by humans she knew that I had saved her, that I was one of the few good people in this world who could be trusted. "Hiya girl" I called out. When I got over to her she kept nuzzling at my pockets. I pulled out a packet of Polo mints "OK you can have one." She snuffled it up happily. After she was finished I produced a beautiful, ice blue halter and a matching lead rope. I took off the navy one that I borrowed which was a bit too big so I bought a pony size. It fitted perfectly and it looked perfect as well. Just like the stable rug which I took off when we let her into the paddock it set off her beautiful,

pale silver coat. "You look so pretty, Midnight" Dad and I also bought beet pulp, alfalfa cubes, the medication that David prescribed and a few supplements to get Midnight to gain weight.

12

After a couple of weeks midnight had improved massively. When I went back one day after dinner with Midnights feed I knew that I had rescued a winner. Even though I knew it was stupid I decided to get on Midnight bareback. She was happy enough to have me on her back and she followed my every aid. I personally thought she was a much better ride than any ponies down in Carrig. She did more than just listen to my every aid, she perfected it all. All of a sudden my phone rang. Poor Midnight was not expecting it. She went at a blind gallop towards the paddock fence which stood at about 1.5 metres high. I assumed she would stop but I was very wrong. Midnight cleared the fence with centimetres to spare. I just about managed to stay on. But instead of being afraid or upset I was delighted. Midnight was only a small 14hh pony and had nearly no energy yet when it came to it she cleared a fence that most 5 star Grand Prix horses would knock! That was the moment I knew I had a winner standing beside me.

13

I ran inside to get Midnights halter. I was still buzzing from riding her. As I led Midnight back into her paddock I checked my mobile to see who had phoned me and help me find out how talented my pony was. It was Kaley. As I bolted the gate shut I decided to phone her back. It dialled once, twice, three times. That was when I heard tyres on the drive. Kaley got out of the passenger seat. Beth where have you been? Why didn't you ring me?" Sally and Haley got out also "Hi Kaley, Sally, Haley How did you get on in Ballivor?" I came second in my class and Haley came fourth in her class. In the class that came I second in, Lexi won with Benny and in her other class with Diamond she came third. Cassie got a sixth and Amy came fifth. Abigail won her class also. Now tell me about this pony?" "How did you find out?" "Cian told James." "Her name is Midnight and she's perfect. Why don't you come and meet her. "Sally hi." It was mam coming out into the yard and dad was following her. "Hi Eimear, hi John." Replied Sally. "Did Beth drag you up here to see her pony?" chuckled Dad "I'm overdue a visit anyway John." Mam and Dad came with us to visit Midnight. I was so proud of her. As usual she nickered to me when I rounded the corner. "Wow Beth she must really like you." Kaley said. "She's so pretty" Haley breathed. "She's lost a lot of muscle but I'd say she's a fine animal. Probably a Connemara." Admired Sally "She has beautiful paces and boy can she jump." I said proudly as I went into explaining how my phone rang and she jumped out of her paddock. My mother was as white as a ghost and Dad just looked at me as if to say "WOW!" "Let's go inside now" suggested Mam.

14

By the time I went to bed it was two o'clock. "If you want a lie in in the morning Beth Cian and I can manage the milking." "No thanks Dad I'll be all right." "See you in the morning

then." "Night Dad." *Well I won't see him till morning* I think to myself *but I will see a very special pony.*

When I went outside Nell and Whiskey were hot on my heels. "Quiet girls." I whisper to them. I was also able to convince Midnight that she could only nicker softly to me so mam and dad didn't hear her. As usual she snuffled my pockets for Polos. Midnight took the mint from my hand and crunched on it. While she was eating I swung myself up on to her back. Midnight stood calmly until I was ready. I barely moved my leg and she was moving at a swift walk. "I love you Midnight."

15

When I woke up it was half five. As I opened the curtains I saw Midnight looking up at me. She whinnied loudly to me as if saying "Where is my breakfast?" "Morning Midnight." Yes I'll give you your breakfast now." I rooted in the wardrobe until I found what I was looking for. My ice blue, polo shirt and since it looked to be a warm day I decided to wear my navy shorts. As I was making up Midnights food I put a slice of bread in the toaster. Midnight was getting beet pulp and a scoop of alfalfa cubes and an apple to top it all off. My toast popped up at that point. I put some real butter on and strawberry jam. I met dad and the dogs coming in the door. "Morning dad." "Morning Beth. Are you feeding that pony of yours?" "Sure am." "I won't hold you up then."

Nell and Whiskey followed me out to the paddock. "Morning Midnight." I said cheerfully. She snuffled down her breakfast, then I gave her a Polo mint. "Beth will you come up to the cow sheds for a minute please." It was dad shouting across the yard. "Sure." As I trudged across the yard Midnight whinnied after me, willing me to come back. "I'll be back in a minute girl." When I got up to the sheds dad was in one of the small huts rummaging around. "Have you lost something dad?" I questioned. "Aha here they are." In dads arms were a saddle and bridle!

16

I must have had a confused look on my face because dad laughed at me. "This might come to you as a surprise but my cousin, Laura Fitzpatrick had a pony. They had no land so my dad let her keep her pony which was a gold colour with a white mane and tail who she named Biscuit. I phoned her yesterday afternoon to tell her and she said that if I could find her tack you could have it." I was stunned. I thought I was the only horsey one in the family. "Thanks dad." I stammered.

Mam said she was going into town later that day. "Can I come with you mam?" she looked at me with a curious expression. "What does Midnight need now?" "How do you know I don't want to come and help?" I said defensively. "Oh come on Beth. I know you don't want to help with the shopping but I can take you to the feed store. I'm sure they'll have what you want." "Thanks mam." "We won't be going until about half eight though."

As was predicted by mam, the feed store had saddle soap and oil. I bought them and we were on our way out when something caught my eye. It was the most beautiful ice blue numnah and fly veil that I had ever seen. The only problem was it was thirty euros and I only brought twenty, less in fact because some of it was already spent on the saddle soap and oil. Mam must have seen me looking because what she said really surprised me. "That pony of yours wouldn't be complete without something to wear. Your birthday is coming up next week so if you want your father and I can get you the set and matching clothes for you."

17

The tack had probably been in the shed for a long time. It was grubby and had big white patches on it. It would still look perfect with the ice blue gear.

When I was finally finished scrubbing, oiling and patting myself on the back the tack looked brand new. As I emerged from the shed, tack in my arms the dogs went into a frenzy of barking. It was Haley and Kaley hacking up the drive on Jessie and Vages. "Hi Beth." Smiled Haley "Hi Haley hi Kaley. How are Jessie and Vages?" "Not too bad." Replied Kaley. "How's Midnight doing?" "She's good." Then remembering the tack in my arms "guess what? I now officially have my own tack." "That's great Beth. Beth." Kaley hesitated "Go on ask her." It was Haley to talk. "We want to know where you got Midnight from." Um up at Keegans forge. Why?" "There's a rumour going around town that the feed store owner, Adrian Byrne had a young, grey filly up there and she was stolen!"

"This is outrageous." dad was really thick when I told him. "We all saw how terrified that horse was when she arrived." "She was so weak she could barely stand." "He abused her and that's final. I'll go down tomorrow and try resolving this."

18

I wanted to go with dad but he insisted I stayed at home. Adrian Byrne didn't want to resolve anything. In fact he was dead set on having *me* arrested for trespassing and theft! Dad didn't take this well. "If you think I will stand by and let you threaten to have my daughter arrested you're messing with the wrong people. You abused that pony and if anyone has to be locked up it *will* be you! Do I make myself clear?" At this point dad turned his back on Adrian and walked back to the Land Rover. "It'll cost ya." Adrian said with a crocodile smile. "Excuse me." Dad retorted. "It will cost you to keep the filly. You can have her passport and all that but you will have to buy her." "Bring the book out to my house on Saturday, early."

As it was a sunny day I texted Kaley to see if she wanted to come up.

R U BUSY?

CAN I BORROW A NUMNAH?

I'M GOING TO TRY RIDING MIDNIGHT.

She replied,

I'LL B UP AT 2.

At half one I went out to groom midnight. She stood perfectly still. I decided to put her bridle on while I waited for kaley. I had a simple snaffle bit and she took it politely in her mouth. I did up the nose band and the throat lash. All the while she stood still. When kaley arrived it was a minute past two. With her she had a brown saddle shaped numnah. "Do you think it will fit her?" I asked. "It should." She replied. Kaley was right. It fitted perfectly. Midnight was calm the entire time.

"Are you ready to get on?" "I just need my helmet. Will you hold her a sec?" Midnight was an absolute dream to ride. Her manners were immaculate. Kaley was astounded by her elegance and grace. "Good girl midnight."

I rode her every second day that week. The third day I rode her we went hacking with Haley and Kaley. They were amazed by her excellence. The next day was Saturday which was my birthday. I planned to spend it all with midnight.

19

As it was my birthday I was aloud a lie in. when I woke it was seven o'clock which for me was a long lie in. When I went down stairs the smell of rashers filled my nostrils. *Just like the Day I met Midnight.* I thought to myself. Mam was the only one in the kitchen. "Morning mam." "Morning Beth. How about some breakfast?"

As I dug into my bacon and eggs I asked mam where Dad and Cian were. "They had to tend to a sick cow." mam said but as she was turning around I caught the slightest bit of a smile playing on her face. Next thing I heard the dogs barking at someone. "Who's that?" I ask. "Probably the vet."

After about ten minutes or so four men walked through the back door. Three of them I knew who were Dad, Cian and David our vet. The fourth however I wasn't sure of. He looked familiar but I couldn't put my finger on it. "Congratulations Beth." It was David. "What do you mean?" "Have your parents not told you? Sorry I thought you knew. Let them explain." With that he left. "What does he mean?" "Happy Birthday Beth." They said in unison. "Huh." "Here have this." It was the other man I wasn't sure of. All of a sudden I knew who it was. Adrian Byrne! He was giving me a horses passport. The name of the animal was Spēar Scammalach which is Irish for cloudy sky. "Why are you giving me this?" "It's the book for your filly out there. Your father bought her." "Is this true Dad." "Yep" what about the sick cow?" "That was what we told you we needed to check her microchip number. "She ran when she saw me." It was Adrian. "Can't blame her. I nearly killed her sure. It's good to see she's doing well. I'll be off now." "If you're wondering Beth she's a birthday present. Now go outside and feed *your* pony.

I finally owned my own pony.

Two years later

I am in the RDS at the moment Midnight and I, came first in our class. The jumps were set at 1.2 metres and we cleared them with over half a metre to spare. A few people have offered to buy Midnight but I turned them all down. We were selected for the international squad. We will be leaving next week for Belgium. We changed the name in Midnights book to Meān Oiche which means Midnight.

