

Elephant and blackbird

Jukebox was lost. He had reached the end of a cul-de-sac and was standing underneath a large chestnut tree. The rain was coming down harder than ever. He didn't know what to do. He wasn't going back to the circus, that much he knew.

Three children approached from the top of the cul-de-sac. A boy and two girls. They came right up to him. They touched his trunk. They tried to put their arms around his legs. His legs were too thick. He could have squashed them in a moment, but somehow they knew he wouldn't. They trusted him. It was a good sign. In the circus, none of the workers had trusted him. For good reason, too.

The girls were mirror images of each other.

'It's definitely Jukebox,' Amy said.

'Who's Jukebox?' Rory asked.

'He's the elephant in the circus,' Ava said. 'He's escaped – haven't you, Jukebox?' and she rubbed his leg affectionately.

Jukebox stared at the girls. He had no idea what they were doing here, out in the pouring rain, talking about him.

'Come along,' Amy said, and she took hold of his trunk and led him out from beneath the tree and up the cul-de-sac. 'We're taking you to the farm.'

The farm belonged to their Uncle Peadar and Auntie Margaret and was on the far side of the mountains. They went there most weekends with their parents, and they spent every July and most of August there, too.

'We are?' said Rory.

‘We have to. If we don’t, he’ll be caught and brought back to the circus. They’ll put him in stronger chains so he’ll never be able to escape again.’

‘They might even punish him for trying to escape,’ Ava added.

Jukebox was listening carefully. He liked the twins’ plan. He especially liked the idea that the farm was at the far side of the mountains. But he also knew time was not on his side. The circus had probably discovered by now that he’d escaped.

He bent his front legs and wrapped his huge trunk around Amy and placed her on his back. She wriggled and giggled but only because she was excited, not because she was scared. He did the same with Ava and with Rory. Then he stood upright, walked to the top of the cul-de-sac and waited for instructions.

An hour later, and after a bumpy ride across the mountains, they arrived at the farm. The storm had eased and the torrential rain had turned into normal, run-of-the-mill rain. The moon was hidden by the dense clouds and the night was pitch dark.

The cows, sensing something unusual, began to moo. The mooing set off the sheep, and the hens, and the pigs, and of course the two sheepdogs. It wasn’t long before lights went on, first upstairs, then downstairs, and finally the outside light that lit up the yard.

Peadar McCabe opened the back door of the farmhouse and stood in his pyjamas and looked at an elephant standing in the yard. The twins were sitting on the elephant’s back, with the boy who lived next door. He scratched his head a few times, then stepped back inside and called up the stairs to his wife.

‘Margaret, the twins are outside. Will I ask them in or what? They’ve got Rory with them ... and an elephant.’