

CHAPTER 1

THE START OF IT ALL

“MAY THE DEVIL FUCK YOU!” CIARAN EXPLODED WITH THE VENOM OF A RATTLED RATTLESNAKE.

The seriously second-hand Nuffield tractor of Patie-Jack had tried to pass Ciaran O’Shea’s van on the narrow Coomasaharn Lake high road. The well-used and dirty sod harrow on the back of his tractor rattled, bounced, and unavoidably wobbled from left to right as it squeezed past Ciaran’s Austin Cambridge, brand new as it was, but the *boreen* was just too narrow. The rusty harrow caught the van’s side, ripping a tidy gash from the door almost to its taillights. Hence Ciaran’s outburst!

“Oh feckit, did I catch you, then?” asked Patie-Jack. “Sure, you must just take it down to Johnny by the village and have him fix it for you; tell him to put it on my account!”

“By God, then, I will!” replied Ciaran.

Inexplicably, the opening salvo from Ciaran softened to a calm and pleasant tone as he engaged in weather and village-business reporting and discussion with his van-wrecker. It was as if no contact was ever made between the rusty harrow of Patie and the shiny new Austin of Ciaran.

As they parted, Patie on up the High Road and Ciaran down towards the scenic village of Glenbeigh, Ciaran chuckled to his passenger, "You know, I couldn't be bothered to take it near Johnny to fix, sure, it's only a small scratch anyway!"

The two men had just enjoyed a good fifteen-minute natter about the weather (it was raining again, as usual), the upcoming cattle fair over at Killorglin, and the *craic* that was likely to accompany it. The conversation was probably worth more to each of them than any material loss or gain. You see, Irish people are easy to please—a pint, a chat, and there you have it, a life fulfilled.

"What were you doing all the way up at Coomasaharn Lake?" Ciaran enquired from young Rickie Lehane, "You'll catch your death of a cold caught out in the rain like that!"

It is doubtful whether Ciaran would ever understand the magical appeal this dark and forlorn part of County Kerry had for a foreigner like Rickie. You see, this young Lehane lad was a Corkonian, and Kerry-men like Ciaran consider anyone who comes from counties outside of their native Kerry to be foreign. With intelligence and guile beyond his years, the teenage Rickie lied that he had lost a bet with his buddies at a poker game over at Beachview House the previous night and he was delivering on his end of the bargain. A wager lost and now delivered.

They returned without further incident to the village of Glenbeigh in its idyllic setting, nestled against the ancient purple sandstone mountains of west Kerry. This tiny collection of homes, shops and accommodation facilities was one of the tourist gems along the route of the Ring of Kerry.

Thanking Ciaran for the lift, Rickie retired to his room in the hotel house adjacent to the church. He scrubbed up and readied himself for the evening shift at the famous Towers Hotel bar.

ROOTS

Rickie was never afraid of hard work; he was born into a large, twelve-sibling family who lived from hand to mouth. He was the youngest, not the strongest, but any lack of brawn was generously compensated for by an eternal fountain of enthusiasm. A truly gregarious nature and a willingness to serve others made him a dead cert for the tourism and hospitality industry to which he gravitated when he finished his secondary education at Cork City's North Monastery.

The pig farm that his father Ted ran to supplement the family income from his daytime job was where Rickie spent most of his weekend time and holiday periods. The physical exertions and trying conditions—foul weather, the acrid stink of wet, filthy pig sties together with the work that couldn't be postponed, such as sows farrowing in the middle of the night, in the middle of a storm, in the middle of winter, in the middle of a school term and on a school night to boot—hardened him. He was ready for the big bad world that he would tackle later in life; and tackle it alone, as it would turn out.

Ted was always grateful that he had Rickie's input around the yard. His other sons (all six) were grudge helpers, and Ted hated to beg. But Rickie was just a fall-in-place soulmate. More than a son, he was a friend.

Together they would often walk the greyhounds that Ted bred in the hope of producing a winner one day at the local dog track and retiring rich. Rickie also liked these outings; always raining, of course. But to get out in the clean

air, away from the stinking pigsties and the coal-blackened kitchen where he had to do his schoolwork, was a true blessing. And, of course, Rickie loved the hounds. He asked Ted if maybe one day he could get real hounds, Irish wolfhounds. He would call them Bran and Sceolan after the Irish folklore story about the mythological hounds of Fionn mac Cumhaill that had magical powers, as did Fionn, who had eaten the Salmon of Knowledge during his youth. Fionn and his son Oisín, both great warriors, served the kings of Ireland with their mystical gifts.

Days passed, weeks slid into years, and with schooling behind him, Rickie chose a career in the hospitality realm.

The village of Glenbeigh was special, being part of Ireland's excellent and most popular holiday destination—a hugely popular tourist route on the Ring of Kerry. Glenbeigh was quaint, and nestled amongst a scattering of small mountains and within a stone's throw of one of Ireland's most beautiful and longest sandy beaches (a very long stone's throw, mind, but a stone's throw nonetheless). Come long weekends and summer holidays and during school breaks, the quiet life of the Kerry village became flooded with tourists and local party animals.

Innocent it was not. Lots of intoxication and very loose arrangements inside and outside of wedlock were commonplace, often aided and abetted by copious imbibing of public house beverages. Ted knew this; he also knew the vast and dangerous attraction of gambling, especially during the long months of the dark, wet winters.

So, as his son left to start his working career, he warned him of the dangers of loose women, playing cards and drinking spirits.

"Stick to beer," he recommended, "With beer, you drink until your belly is full, and you can't drink any more, but spirits can ruin you financially. And be careful of gonorrhoea—that's a terrible dose!"

Rickie ignored the advice. Not all of it, in fact, only the gambling bit. You see, he thought nothing of it, a wee game of cards. *A small bet, who cares? I'm fully found at the hotel staff accommodation and don't need my wages for anything special. In fact, I stand to win a bunch of dosh,* he thought to himself.

And that's how it started. The funny thing, however, was that although he allowed himself to be drawn into the addictive milieu of gaming, luck rarely ran with his opponents.

The net result was that he was able to build up a nice cash reserve while enjoying himself doing so. Maybe not so much enjoyment as such... Morning would dawn and the story across the table through the haze of cigarette smoke and smell of beer farts and untidy bachelor rooms would be, "*Urru, letsch hov a few lascht ones for the boreen.*" So a few last hands of poker were played by the group of sad drunks and these were vain efforts to wrinkle back some of their fortunes already lost to Rickie. The cards would be reshuffled one more time, and mantra-like, doled out to the hopeful wretches as the dark night slowly changed to dawn.

Now with money in hand and more falling his sober way from his inebriated, involuntary donors, Rickie suddenly noticed that the romance of an exciting, pulse-tickling card game had turned sour. It was a dirty, dry, stale affair that robbed him not of money but the brightness of an early morning start to his day.

He would have to drag himself through a full twelve-hour shift at the Towers pub on only thirty to sixty minutes of sleep. What helped him through his sleep-deprived shifts, however, were those special moments and the delightfully colourful characters he encountered in this self-same pub.

The pub was more than a pub. It was a shrine, a citadel of shelter, a cavern of political advice and disagreements, fistfights, verbal squalls, let's see who can speak, or is that SHOUT, the loudest. All, of course, generously assisted by the lubrication of the public house elixirs that flowed in merry abundance from opening hour to the strict by-law-imposed closing time.

His full name, Pdraigh, was pronounced Paw-ric. He lived alone halfway between Glenbeigh and the Cailldubh (Black Mountain), a full half-day walk from the village. His small farm clung to the side of the high mountain with spectacular views across the length and breadth of the County; that is when it was not covered in misty clouds or being blasted by the driving rain.