

PROLOGUE

18 September 1982

Seamus Darby took a deep breath and let the cool night air plunge into his lungs, whooshing through his system like a drug. He felt light-headed. Wired. He floated home, thinking of tomorrow and the All-Ireland final, thinking of Kerry and five-in-a-row. Thinking of history.

The night had passed like a dream. The Offaly players had sat in a small back room in the Tullamore GAA centre for two hours, listening to their manager, Eugene McGee. The silence was immaculate. He told them what they had willed themselves to believe: they were good enough. None of the pressmen who had visited Offaly's training session the previous Tuesday night believed they could win. The bookies had laid odds of 1/5 on Kerry. On the day of the final only one Sunday newspaper would back Offaly. Three days before, the front page of the *Kerryman* was dominated by a picture of 1981 captain Jimmy Deenihan lifting the Sam Maguire cup, with the banner headline: 'A Prelude to History?' The world was treating Offaly like fall guys. But Darby knew. They all knew. Offaly weren't afraid any more.

'If someone threw a ball into the room that night,' says Darby, 'there'd have been someone killed.'

Darby got home and paced the front room. The last few months had been special and promised to live with him forever. When McGee added him to the panel in mid-summer, Darby had waddled in overweight and carrying baggage. When picking championship panels

to carry Offaly into the summer, McGee had ignored him for years. Darby had his All-Ireland medal from 1972 and a happy life beyond football. He had kids and a wife. He had a business to run. Did he need all this?

In the end, something tugged at him, and he sacrificed himself for McGee. Now, he was glad. The few months of training had made him the footballer Offaly had always wished him to be. He had lost weight and knocked the edges from all the bad habits that had slowed him up. He already had a place on the team before injury scuttled him. The following day he would sit on the bench, fidgeting and crackling with excitement. If Offaly needed him, he was ready.

He was edgy. Adrenalin was jumping through his veins, making him mad, now. His wife, Veronica, stared at him. 'We're going to win, Veron,' he said. 'We're going to win.'

He needed a drink, something to soften the edges and soak up the tension. He wanted to run into Paddy McCormack's pub next door, but people had a nasty way of twisting those visits into the kind of rumour he'd find hard to shake. Instead, he rang Kevin Farrell, his brother-in-law.

'Have you anything at home?' asked Darby.

Kevin had a bottle of brandy. 'But I've nothing to put in it.'

'Right,' Darby replied. 'I'll be up.'

He found a bottle of 7-Up. The bottle of brandy was demolished. Darby picked up the phone and made some calls. He rang Fr McWee, the parish priest in Edenderry and President of Offaly County Board, and an old friend who always prayed for the team and the players. 'You'll think of us tomorrow morning at Mass?' said Darby.

'Don't worry, Seamus,' the priest replied. 'You'll be on and you'll score a goal or two.'

It was near three in the morning when Darby and Veronica headed for home. That night he slept soundly, the brandy softening his nerves and lulling his senses to sleep. Morning would come soon.

Saturday morning in Ventry had started badly. As Páidí Ó Sé pointed his car towards Killarney for Kerry's last training session before heading to Dublin, he saw something that chilled his blood. A red-haired lady.

It was the worst luck. He knew old fishermen in Dingle who would leave their boats in the harbour all day if they saw a red-haired lady. For the previous few weeks all this five-in-a-row business had been nipping at him. Now this. 'We're fucked,' he mumbled to himself.

That Saturday morning in Killarney, the groundsman, Paddy O'Shea, pulled the gates shut in Fitzgerald Stadium after Kerry's final training session. A faint aroma of olive oil wafted around the dressing room as the players got their final rubdowns and prepared to head for Dublin.

Kerry had trained more than fifty times in Killarney all year, but this was only the visible part of an iceberg that had seen Páidí traverse the hills of west Kerry, the Tralee boys flatten out the bumps on a patch of green behind Banna Strand, and John O'Keeffe and Jimmy Deenihan pump weights in Dinny Mahony's gym in Tralee.

The boys headed to Mickey Doc's at the Park Place hotel for steaks and salmon. Training tonight had been solid. John O'Keeffe sat it out, having taken the previous two weeks off to rest his injuries and prepare himself to mark Matt Connor. Jack O'Shea, Mikey Sheehy and a few lads had taken penalty kicks on Charlie Nelligan. Tim Kennelly had been slamming them into the net. The tables were quiet, save for the occasional squall of laughter from Páidí Ó Sé's corner. His mood had lightened again. Maybe this Kerry team was beyond *piseogs*. There was something of a cause in proving that.

The week in Kerry had passed quietly. The press night in Killarney a few days earlier had gone like all the rest. Jack O'Shea cheerily took questions and joked with reporters. 'Just put me down for whatever I said last year,' he told one. The only player who had seemed jumpy was Páidí. When reporters asked him questions about five in a row and the final, he grimaced, and ducked and dived out of answering. As Ó Sé

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conducted one interview, a Kerry selector pulled another player aside to arrange a trip to a local school with the Sam Maguire cup the following Friday. No one doubted. No one was worried.

No team had ever given them reason to. No one had beaten Kerry in the championship since 1977. When opponents scrolled through the names and considered their reputations, they were beaten before they even took the field against them. The Kerry team was charismatic, blessed with rogues and genius. In an era when Ireland was racked by unemployment and made dull and grey by emigration, Kerry offered a thrilling splash of colour.

The public revered them. To their coach, Mick O'Dwyer, five-in-a-row felt like destiny. Their mighty rivalry with Dublin that defined the seventies had evaporated and no one in the years since had stood tall enough to stare Kerry in the eye. Five-in-a-row was their reward. Their birthright. Their destiny.

Kerry had already been serenaded through the summer by songs of celebration. Killarney and Tralee had bickered over who should welcome the team home first. T-shirts emblazoned with five-in-a-row slogans were doing hectic business. There were mugs and commemorative plates. A special Kerry jersey was designed for the day. The public were clamouring for history. O'Dwyer had tried to block out the glare, but some shafts of light had already got through to the players. Injuries had hurt his team all summer, and occasionally O'Dwyer's worries had got the better of him. A few nights earlier, he had run a man selling T-shirts from Fitzgerald Stadium, like a godless merchant from the temple. Now he had one day left to get through. Five-in-a-row was theirs to win.

The 1982 final promised to shape lives forever. It would make heroes of some, and shatter others. Some would be jolted from their sleep in the middle of the night, still reliving the moments the game slipped away from them. Others would find themselves destitute and alone. Some marriages and livelihoods would strengthen and prosper after 1982.

Others would fall apart. Some friendships would improve. Others would end. Even when their lives would threaten to melt down, the All-Ireland medal would withstand the heat, an indelible image of the remarkable story it represented. It would be the backdrop for triumphs and tragedies, happy times and sad ones.

Like all epic stories, it began simply, with a young man sitting at a typewriter.