

## **CHAPTER THREE**

In the dressing-room before training, the talk was always the same. Who had been put out in the corridor for messing in school? Who got the most homework? Who had the toughest teacher? And, who, just who, was responsible for the awful smell of toe-jam that had been there since the first time any of them had walked in the door to tog off. This particular Saturday, the pong seemed milder than usual. That may have been because everybody was too excited to notice. The first match of the year was just twenty-four hours away.

After three weeks of endless games of backs and forwards, the real thing was drawing near. They could all sense it in Murph's voice when he rang around the houses earlier in the week to remind them to be on time for what he called 'the dress-rehearsal'.

Still, Charlie Morrissey was just sauntering in

the door when Peter and Davey were walking out onto the field, already toggled out.

‘Your pal is here,’ said Charlie, gesturing over his shoulder with his gear bag.

‘What pal?’

‘The Yank.’

Charlie was right. There he was, baseball cap and all, standing deep in conversation with Murph by one of the goalposts.

In the five days since the incident outside Paudie Sweeney’s shop, Peter hadn’t even thought about the stranger. Well, apart from that time during computer lab when he asked Davey whether he should Google John Wayne just to be sure it really was an actor’s name.

Now the international man of mystery was laughing and joking with Murph. They were slapping each other on the arms. Shaking their heads the way adults do when they think something is too funny. It was like they were best friends all of a sudden.

That was the last thought to go through

Peter's mind when everything went black.

*Boosh!!!*

He'd been so taken with the sight of the stranger that he'd wandered right into the goal-mouth. Deaf to the cries of his team-mates, he'd taken a Johnny Delaney pile-driver right to the side of the head. Then he'd crumpled in a heap.

'He's not out cold,' announced Murph who'd raced to his side. 'He's just a little groggy.'

Not too groggy. He still noticed who was standing in the crowd hovering over him as he lay on the dewy grass.

'You ... You're ... you're the Am ... American.'

Everybody laughed. Even the American.

'Yes I am,' replied the man in the baseball cap. 'Guilty as charged.'

As was the ritual, once it became apparent the injury wasn't serious, the rest of the team became more amused than concerned.

'I thought there'd be birds flying around his heads like in the cartoons,' said Davey as he watched Murph tend to his injured friend.

‘The sound-effects weren’t exactly WWE-standard either,’ remarked Charlie Morrissey, Cork’s number one wrestling fan.

‘It might help if you guys moved back to give him some air,’ said the American. He was standing amongst them now and they noticed a couple of things. He spoke like every television character they knew and he had the thickest legs they’d ever seen in shorts.

Maybe it was the accent. Perhaps it was the size of the legs. But they moved back quickly and gave Murph room to bring Peter back to the land of the living.

At a safe distance, of course, they began to gossip.

‘He has legs like tree trunks. Did ya see them?’

‘He reminds me of John Cena.’

‘What about the accent? He talks like something off the television. Maybe he’s from Nickelodeon?’

‘Sorry guys, that’s the only accent I have.’

The American was suddenly standing in amongst them now, bouncing a ball and smiling at their comments. He had the whitest teeth they'd ever seen. One more thing they'd all talk about later.

'So, you guys ready for the Balleer Bryckery boys tomorrow?' His mangled pronunciation of the name of their first opponents drew a few muffled laughs and swapped glances.

'They're called Ballybricker actually,' said Davey, his head down as he spoke.

By then, nobody was listening anyway. The American had begun rolling the ball on his pointer finger, basketball-style. Every high-speed turn mesmerised the boys more and more.

'I see you're putting on some entertainment for the troops,' said Murph, flicking the ball back into his own hands to the delight of his team.

'I am,' replied the American.

'Well, I think it's about time I introduced you.

Lads, I'd like you all to meet Shaun Reedy.'

The American made an elaborate bow in their direction at the mention of his name.

'Shaun is the son of a very old friend of mine. Shaun's father left Dromtarry for America a long time ago and he's back to stay in the town for a few weeks.'

If Peter O'Connor's eyes lit up as he downloaded all that information, they were positively bulging at what came next.

'Shaun has played a bit of sport over in New York and, if it's alright with ye boys, he's going to help me out with the team for a few weeks.'

'Is he going to be your assistant?' asked Johnny Delaney.

'Exactly,' said Murph. 'That's what he is. My assistant. And after forty-odd years, it's about time they gave me one.'