

*The Irish*

CHAPTER 1

*Chicago*

The year is 1914, and the city of Chicago hums with the rhythm of industry. The streets echo with the clatter of the few remaining horse-drawn carriages and the engine rumble of modern automobiles. Amid the smokestacks and cobblestone alleys stands a haven for weary souls, the object of attention of a tall young man on the sidewalk opposite. Still. Silent. Had there been others present, they might have thought a statue but, right now, this sidestreet is empty and his attention is focused on the establishment, a working man's bar, with peeling paint around the door and windows, something that says we don't put on airs, we are the genuine article, somewhere where he hopes he'll fit in, a potential refuge among his own kind.

Only that morning, he'd arrived in the Windy City, ten dollars in his pocket and the clothes on his back as his only possessions. Barely two weeks after fleeing the union-busters in Pennsylvania, he had trekked, hitched, rode rail cars, to get here. His plan was to find his way to an Irish bar and seek out compatriots who are more likely to be sympathetic to his current plight. The search isn't hard, the city has evolved into ethnic zones, Italians, Irish, Negroes, Chinese, Poles, but he knew to head to the North Side, an emerald heartland, where he is now. He hopes this is will be the right bar for his needs.

Hesitating no longer, he crosses the road, enters carefully under a worn sign, weather-faded, above the door, which says "The Blarney Stone", and pauses inside the entrance, without letting the door close behind him, available for a quick exit should he need it. What he sees is a bar hung with fake shamrocks and a colour scheme that was once green but which has darkened over time from nicotine, still contributing to the effect from the pipes and hand-rolled cigarettes of the clientele, a dirty fug floating slowly, like a spectre around the room. A picture of the Pope on a wall, among photographs of boxers and baseball players, incongruously placed. A weak sunlight comes reluctantly through the small windows, ashamed to be entering such a place, and shines half-heartedly over the crowd within as if it doesn't want to identify them, unintentionally providing a sanctuary of anonymity. The foot-worn planks of the wooden floor liberally sprinkled with sawdust – a smell of fresh pine mingling with spillages of old stale beer and the tobacco smoke, not strong enough to hide the hard-set aromas, which are added to by the body odours and soaked-in smells from the workplaces of the drinkers, carried in on their

clothing from the slaughterhouse, tannery and brewery.

Perceiving no obvious threats, the stranger decides he fits in. Letting the door close behind him, he walks up to the bar, a battle-scarred wooden counter with chips and burns and perhaps a dent or two one doesn't question. The dings from bottles being slammed down, the burns from stubbed out cigarettes, bearing testimony to the long service it has provided the clientele. Standing behind the counter, the bartender, a tall streak of a man of good features, looks the newcomer over, making an assessment of the stranger – probably early twenties, six-foot, which makes him taller than any of the customers, flame red hair curling over a collar, scarred knuckles, needing a shave- and decides that the stranger is a fellow Irishman and obviously not a cop, or worse, an Italian.

Sean O'Leary, for that is the stranger's name, orders a beer and waits for it to be brought to him, watching the actions of the bartender to measure him, an ingrained habit to size up all those he interacts with as possible foe, friend or a neutral. A bartender is generally a font of local knowledge and Sean expects to have to tap that knowledge to succeed in his mission. When the beer is placed before him, the desire is to gulp it down and have a second, for he has a hard thirst, but he can't afford that, not knowing how long he has to stretch his meagre finances. The ale hits a stomach empty except for some stale crusts eaten that morning, saved from his last meal, a sandwich in the previous town. As he sips, he looks over the rim of his tankard, more intensely studying the room, not acting too hasty or desperate to make contact. If he doesn't want to be sleeping in a park or under a bridge, he needs to make this work for him, perhaps finding someone with a sofa for a fellow countryman on hard times.

Resting an elbow on the counter and hooking his heel over the tarnished brass footrest, he assesses the customers as low-class, low-skilled men, who earn their wages by brawn not brain. Here is their companionship in life's struggles, numbed by cheap booze. Men he has known all his life, in one way or another, only one step out of the gutter and teetering on a kerb unless they keep their jobs, ready at any unfavourable incident to fall down. As he slows his drinking and even takes pretend glugs of his beer, making it last, he notices a number of men have started to loudly disappear, as if a plug in a bath of humanity has been pulled and they are swirling into the plughole, actually a door into a back room. As the barroom empties, casually he asks the bartender what is on.

“What's happening that I'm missing, fella?” With a nod of the head to the interior exit.

“The boys like a bit of a fight. We've got Crazy Cavanaugh tonight. He'll take on all-comers, five dollars a time. Winner takes a purse of fifty dollars.”

“Fifty! That's a lot of cash.” Especially to a man with his last ten dollars, less the price of the beer.

“Has to be,” replies the barman as he dries glasses with a well-used cloth, holding one glass up to check for smears, as if he could tell in the dingy light. “He's unbeaten, so it takes a desperate man to get in the ring with him; you have to need the money badly to take that risk,” an unconscious act of warning off a young man who might be tempted.

“I think I'll have a look-see,” and Sean, first draining the last of beer in his tankard, walks away from the counter and through the door where everyone has gone.

The back room is bigger than the bar room, a space where once a lorry would drive in and make deliveries. Empty of furniture except for a table and chair, where a bookkeeper, an older man, sporting a soup-strainer moustache, wearing a shiny brown derby, polished by years of wear, sits to take the bets, a billy-club on the table top next to a cashbox and a desk lamp, which illuminates a ledger where he diligently records wagers. No windows here to let daylight into the room but a couple of ancient overhead lamps shine a yellow light, making the spectators look jaundiced. Ring is a misnomer, except for the shape; a circle drawn on the floor in chalk, around which the spectators stand, clutching beer glasses. At the back of the room, Cavanaugh is stripped to the waist, a big man carrying a bit too much weight for agility but still powerful. His eyes, wild and twitching, suggest he is taking something or else he really is crazy. Facing him, his opponent is a young worker from the meat-packing factory; handsome in a rugged sort of way, thick black hair with a flop over his brow, strong nose and broad chin. Stripped to the waist, he looks fit and a possible contender; working in the meat factory has put muscles on him. No doubt, cuts of meat leave the factory under a coat and he dines on red meat at home.

Sean's reverie of observing and assessing is interrupted when into the circle steps a portly man. A huge moustache swirls from his upper lip to cover his cheeks, a fancy waistcoat with a gold watch and chain over his pot belly, a derby jauntily tipped on his head - the referee and master of ceremonies. Strutting around, thumbs hooked into his armpits, like some exotic rooster, he waits for the crowd to settle down. An unlit cigar sticks out from the corner of his mouth, almost as a piece of organic decoration for the lips.

Sean recognises the set up. This is a bareknuckle fight to the finish. No rounds. If a man goes down, he is given a chance to get up then the fight will continue. The referee does not have much to do except to rouse the crowd. Time for action, removing the cigar, the man calls out.

“Gentlemen, Gentlemen. Place your bets before the bout starts. We have Mr Cavanaugh

challenged by Shamus Flynn. Now, Mr Cavanaugh says he's been under the weather this week as his kitten died so he may not have his mind fully on the fight.”

This gets a laugh from the crowd and the referee smirks at the success of his joke.

“Shamus looks a fit young man. He's got youth on his side and the strength of a Hercules.”

Letting the crowd take a longer look at the contender, his beady eyes take in the money changing hands. Many are considering Cavanaugh a safe bet, despite the poor odds, history on their side. Gamblers and friends of the contender are betting heavily, believing the time has come for Cavanaugh's reign to end, or they are just tempted by the faint chance of a big win. A nod from the bookkeeper that enough bets have been taken (an unspoken message that whatever the outcome, the book comes in at a profit) and the referee speaks again.

“Gentlemen, up to the mark if you please.”

The murmur of the crowd ceases as both fighters walk up to the ring centre and face each other. A palpable tension from gamblers who desire winning and who fear losing their cash. This close to his opponent, young Flynn now looks nervous, the bravado evaporating now the booze is wearing off and he is removed from the mates who have encouraged him. Engaged to be married, he'd been keen on the prize money to set up home with his intended. Crazy, and it is obvious no one calls him that to his face, glares; a fighting dog waiting to be taken off the lead.

The bookkeeper, having closed and locked the cashbox with a key on a chain around his neck, takes a quick dram of whiskey before he strikes a bell on his table.

O'Leary watches with interest, to see how things are done here. Back in the “old country” he'd done some fairground boxing and had proved proficient punching out farmboys on the circuit. In the mines of Pennsylvania where he had worked, fistfights are toe-to-toe until a man goes down and he has had a share of these. Young Flynn gets some punches in to the body of Cavanaugh, but the big man seems oblivious, even smirks, and responds with a right hook, which the younger man blocks. The kid is not exactly a novice after all. Sean notices that Crazy is open to left hooks – maybe the sight in his right eye is not so good; the kid should take advantage of that.

Blows have been exchanged and no one has yet gone down on the floor, when Cavanaugh drops his guard and Flynn sees his chance.... or thinks he does. As he opens his stance to get his punch in, a steamroller of an uppercut slams in to his chin, his eyes roll up, a red mist driven from his mouth by his gasp, followed by a couple of crimsoned teeth and Flynn goes down like

a felled tree with a crash, raising clouds of sawdust. This raises cheers from the Cavanaugh supporters and groans from Flynn devotees, winners and losers of money.

The referee stoops over the supine meat packer, can see the kid is unconscious and breathing, nothing, in his mind, he needs to worry about. Raising the winner's arm, he calls:

“And out by a knockout. The winner... King Cavanaugh!”

The atmosphere of excitement and anticipation changes – the vacuum of defeat and the spectacle over sucking it dry. The disappointed and now poorer meatpacker's friends throw a bucket of mop water over him, their hopes of extra beer money gone. The dirty water dilutes the blood from the loser's mouth, runs down his face and puddles in the sawdust. A few happy gamblers queue to collect their winnings from the table as others start back to the barroom to drown their sorrows. From the back of the room, where he has been standing and observing, Sean's voice cuts through the clamour.

“Any chance of a fight, or does he only do the one?”

The momentum of bodies stops immediately and a couple of dozen faces turn toward him, curious at the intervention by a stranger. Slowly, the referee comes over from the bookkeeper, the crowd parting like the Red Sea for Moses, and he looks the new arrival up and down.

“A new face. And what might your name be?”

“Sean O'Leary. I've got five dollars.”

“Now then, boyo, Mr Cavanaugh needs to enjoy his moment of glory, so join me at the bar and we'll see what we can do.” Turning to the crowd who have lingered to follow the new development, “Don't go away yet, lads. We might have some more entertainment for you. Follow me, Mr O'Leary. I'm Pdraig Hennessey, the owner of this fine establishment.”

Those who have lost money and are thinking of leaving decide to stay and have another beer, even if no money to bet, there could be free entertainment.

At the bar, Hennessey orders a whiskey for himself and has a pint of beer put before O'Leary.

“Tell me about yourself, Sean. You don't mind me calling you Sean, do you.”

“It's my name.”

“Fine, fine. So, when did you arrive in our fair city and where are you from?”

“In today. From Limerick, via New York and Pennsylvania. I'll be looking for work but the fifty dollars will tide me over until I find it.”

Hennessey laughs, his belly wobbling, shaking the watch chain. “You're confident you'll win the fifty? You might end up losing five and needing a surgeon.”

“I'll take that chance.” Sean looks Hennessey directly in the eyes, needing to make an

impression, win or lose later.

Making his decision, the bar-owner turns to the crowd of drinkers. “Gentlemen! We have a contender!”

Hennessey has calculated and sees the chance to take more money off the punters and to sell more beer and whiskey. No skin off his nose if this fresh big, dumb ox of a young man is to take a hiding. Business might be better than average today. It isn't always easy to find contenders willing to go up against Crazy.

In the backroom, Sean strips to the waist after handing over five of his dollars. Onlookers, on seeing his physique, previously disguised by baggy coat, and thinking that Crazy might be less than 100% having had a bout, especially those who like longshots, start to lay money on the newcomer. Meanwhile, Sean considers his options. In the fairgrounds, he might let his opponent tire himself a bit before going in to trade punches. Here, the ring is too small and the crowd will push at his back should he try to work the edges. Gut punches might not be effective – Crazy has some fat over his muscles and it will be hard to wind him. It will have to be head shots; get left hooks to the side of the head – ear and temple – keep pounding, while avoiding that killer uppercut, so keep his guard up. Move fast, in and out – no standing still. Losing five dollars will almost wipe him out, winning fifty will tide him over nicely.

Hennessey struts into the ring like a fighting bantam cock released from a basket.

“Gentlemen! Gentlemen! We have a contender. As Mr Cavanaugh has had a fight already, we are only offering evens on Mr O'Leary.”

A moan from the crowd. It is only worth a longshot bet if the odds are good. Some of the betting moves back to Crazy. Hennessey has considered the physique and the confidence of the challenger, whom he realises has a height and reach advantage. He is curious about the stranger and less interested in making money (or losing it) than wanting to see the outcome. Before too much money shifts across, he gives a nod to the bookkeeper. The bell sounds and Crazy launches an attack, eager to get the contest over. Sean receives a pounding on both arms held up before his body, then takes an opportunity to step back and aside and sweep a left hook in. Crazy takes it on the jaw, shakes his head slightly and comes back with a left-right combo of jabs.

Sean decides to pedal clockwise around the other man, be a moving target always to what he hopes is a blindside, managing a couple of hooks to Crazy's left cheek. He can see an effect as his opponent pauses ever so slightly after taking a hit. Then Crazy gets a right hook back and

Sean feels it, a buzzing in his ears. Shaking his head to clear it he sees Crazy's grin, the man confident this will not take long. Feinting with a right hook, to which Crazy responds defensively, Sean gets him with two rapid left jabs like a steam hammer, one on the ear and one on the jaw hinge. The old fighter's eyes widen at the shock of the hurt; his hesitation allowing Sean to slap him over the ear with an open palm. From Crazy's reaction, it certainly is painful, a pressure wave with potential to burst the eardrum. Seizing the initiative, Sean resumes with left-right combos, as fast as he can, hammering Crazy who starts to wobble. As soon as he sees the opening he wants, Sean gets one good left hook with all his weight and muscle behind it to connect with the jaw hinge again, breaking it. Immediately, the fight goes out of the big man. His jaw hanging lopsided, he puts his arms up for protection and takes blow after blow before falling to his knees in subjection before the younger man, causing the crowd to shout, even those who have bet on Cavanaugh: "Finish him!"

Sean looks at Hennessey and shakes his head.

Afterwards, in the bar, with the winning punters slapping him on the back and placing whiskey shots in front of him, Sean is approached by Hennessey, who comes alongside and places his hand, friendly-like, on Sean's forearm.

"Why don't we go into my office, where it's quieter?"

"Why would I want to go in there?" asks Sean. "It's nice out here, with all these people."

Hennessey removes his hand and chuckles. "You're smart. Not just tough, but smart as well. I have a proposition for you," turning away and walking over to his office, which he enters, leaving the door open as an invitation or temptation.

At the bar, Sean weighs up his options, looking at the open door. He's beaten up the money-maker that is Crazy Cavanaugh and he'll be taking fifty dollars off Hennessey, which he needs to collect. The office could be a trap for the man's minions to take him out back, recover the money and beat the crap out of him. On the other hand, sometimes you have to gamble to make opportunities and today Sean feels lucky. Pointing at the row of shot glasses paid for by his admirers, he says to the barman:

"Pour them back in the bottle. I'll take it with me when I leave."

Only pausing to see his instructions obeyed, he walks over to the office and enters, leaving the door ajar. Not only will he have something to drink later, people might question why the bottle is still there if he never comes out of the office; not that he really believes anyone would care but it feels a precaution.

“Why didn’t you finish Crazy off? You had him at your mercy.” Hennessey’s small eyes pierce Sean, who shrugs.

“Waste of effort. The man was beaten. I’d won. Nothing more to prove. And maybe one last hit might have bust my hand. It is a lose-lose choice to carry on.”

“So not an act of mercy, then?”

“Had you held up twenty dollars as a bonus, he’d be laid out good and cold.”

The answer seems to satisfy the bar-owner.

“Yup. Smart. I saw that by the way you fought. The usual mugs just go wading in, but you spotted his weakness and took him. I can use a man like you. I need muscle but I don’t need gorillas.” Hennessey is all business: “A hundred a week and bonuses.”

Sean stands taller. “What do I have to do to earn that?”

With a growl, “Anything I say. Is that going to be a problem for you?”

“I guess not,” Sean smiles.

“Good. Come back tomorrow first thing.” Passes over a note he’d written as he talked. “Meantime you go to this address and tell Mary I sent you. You’ll have a room to yourself. Then go to Rafferty’s the tailors on XX<sup>nd</sup> Street.” Passes a second note. “Choose a suit and shoes, nothing flashy. He’ll send the bill to me. Finally, get a haircut and a bath. See you in the morning.”

“Before I go...”

“What?”

“My winnings.”

Pocketing the fifty dollars as he leaves, Sean can hear Hennessey laughing uproariously behind him. On the way out, he scoops up the bottle of whiskey from the counter and nods to the barman, Dougal, who returns a big smile. It’s been an interesting day, out of the ordinary.



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