

June, 1846, Bandon, County Cork, Ireland

Chapter 1

I burst through the front door and Mammy laid quivering on one side of the straw bed, her body a limp heap of bones. I flung myself to the cold mud floor next to her. *Dear God in heaven, the typhus has set in.*

My mother barely turned her head and stared at me, her eyes rheumy, her skin sallow, her arms unmoving. Holding her head in my arms, I said, “I have soup, Mammy. Open your mouth; let me feed you.”

I yelled to my best friend, “Brian, grab a spoon from the table over there; left side of the wash pan.” I dug the spoon into the turnip soup I’d just scrounged from the soup kitchen in Bandon, where Brian and I worked.

Mammy’s lips trembled as she struggled to open her mouth. I got her to swallow half-a-spoonful. Heat from the fever seeped through her pores like poison, saturating the air around me. I fed her till she shook her head to say, no more. A vein in her neck quivered. Grabbing an old pillow case, I wiped away soup running down one side of her mouth.

My mother ate very little these days. Walking a tight-rope between starvation and typhoid fever had taken its toll on her bowel. *Dear Lord, help me. She’s all I’ve got; just her and my beloved Ireland.*

My thoughts soon got interrupted. I swore I smelled the rotting flesh of the dead, just like I did when I hurried past the Bandon River earlier, on my way home. Struggling not to let this overwhelm me, I closed my eyes and opened my soul to better memories of my



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country before the Potato Famine.

Rolling hills once stood green and lush as far as the eyes could see. We sang till our throats grew sore, danced till our legs tingled, and guzzled stout at the end of every work week. Now, we suffered like lambs waiting to be butchered. *How much longer could we tenant farmers cling to life under these horrid conditions?*

Today, reality set in as I looked around. The mud floor of the cabin had started to crack. The front door had given way to rot, leaving us at the mercy of the elements. Old clothes stood piled in one corner, and the straw bed crumpled like hay in a barn full of famished horses. No table sat next to the bed, so the chipped cup of water I'd left Mammy earlier remained on the floor next to her head. It hadn't been touched. Her hand trembled too much to reach for it.

Holding my mother's head in my arms once more, I picked up the cup, "Try to drink some water, Mammy."

That day I walked away, fell to my knees and pleaded, 'Dear God, save us all; I beg you. Bring Ireland back to its simple beauty and warm living.' I whispered Psalm 27; 'The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear ...' When I completed the Psalm, a calm washed over me and things seemed less unbearable.

Brian wrapped his arms around my shoulders, jolting me out of my misery. He'd stopped by the cabin earlier, propped Mammy's head up on the old bed pillow, and covered her with more old clothes. Old clothes helped shield her from the cold, since we had no blankets.

I stared into Brian's hazel eyes, which seemed to peer into my soul today. *Given his painful past, he must know what I'm feeling.* My six-foot, fair-haired friend wore his only pair of black pants, black sweater, and an old, gray winter jacket.

Brian had been an orphan. At only three years old, his father had been deported to Australia as punishment for a 'misdeed.' And his mother died one year later of a broken heart, according to the women nearby. Brian never told me what 'misdeed' his father had committed, and I never asked. Why should I cause him more

heartbreak, when it made no difference what his father had done? Better to just leave things alone.

Today, I could tell from Brian's stare that he felt my pain. That gave me enough assurance. After all, Mammy had been like a mother to him. And to me, he was the brother I never had.

"Let's head to the soup kitchen; get our hands on more soup or scraps of food after work. Better than nothing," Brian said.

"I'll meet you there. Want to make sure Mammy's all right."

"You taking her back to the fever hospital?"

"Waste a time. Crowded, nasty; still can't get in. Mammy not strong enough for hours of waiting."

"And Dr. Barnfield up and died last month. Poor man," Brian said.

"Fever finally took him out. He'd treat her at home if he was still around, for sure."

I heard my mother wail, "Come here, Son." I hurried back to her bedside and knelt on the floor. She grabbed my arm with her trembling hand. It was hot and sweaty, but the rest of her body shivered from the cold.

"Thanks for taking care of me."

"Oh, Mammy, no need to thank me. You know I'll always take care of you." I tried to lift her spirits, but she just stared at me with those blue eyes that struggled to stay open.

"If you think I won't make it, leave on one of those big boats. Don't stay here and die, Son. Move on; you're twenty years old now. Just thinking 'bout your beautiful blue eyes and curly brown locks will make me go in peace. You're tall and thin, just like your Papa. I'm ready to join my sweet, hard-working Conan O'Sullivan, in heaven. I miss him so."

"Don't you talk like that, Mammy; you're not going anywhere."

"I love you, Sean."

"Love you too." Tears threatened to fall, but I held them back.

After my father died, I used to sleep with my back against hers so we'd stay warm in the winter. Nothing warmed the cabin, and

freezing gusts of wind from the Bandon River often lashed us like whips hurled by an evil master. But Mammy now forbade me from huddling next to her. “You will not catch the typhus, not from me,” she said.

So, these days, I slept next door in the mud cabin Brian shared with old man O’Brien and his son, Harry. Brian had lived there for years, and worked the fields with them before the Potato Famine devastated us all. Old man O’Brien had taken him in after his mother died.

“Be back soon with more soup,” I said to Mammy before heading out. As I hurried along, my belly growled; I was hungry. But if I had to give Mammy my own soup to keep her going, that’s what I’d do. Keeping her alive meant everything to me. Next, came my determination to help get Ireland back to the country we all knew and loved.

During this walk to the soup kitchen, I started talking to myself and wondering if I had gone mad. “Those damned Brits,” I muttered. “Every potato farmer here is starving to death, yet all the food we produce, cattle, vegetables, grain, stocking salmon, sea trout and brown trout from the Bandon River, gets sent to England. They eat well, and still host their lavish balls and dinner parties. I swear, they must be punishing us for staying Catholic and not opening our arms to their Protestant churches. If that’s not it, then why the Hell are they letting us starve to death?”

The wind blew colder, jolting me out of my wrath. I tugged the collar of my old jacket up and held it over my ears. Scurrying along as a freezing gust had me shaking like a leaf, I glanced up. The sky was blue; the sun shone brightly down. But the fields around me showed a pallid brown. And the stink of rotted potatoes polluted the air. I fought back vomit.

My mouth flew open as I approached Broad Street. Crowds of people stood lined up, waiting for the only food they’d have for three days, a cup of soup. Broad Street was almost a mile from the soup

kitchen, yet they stood in line, shivering, quietly clutching their cups and waiting for the soup that would keep starvation at bay.

I walked along the lines for five blocks and finally got to Queen Street. Half-a-block more and I'd be at the kitchen. I stopped and looked back at those in line.

Sweet Jesus, they were all quiet, too hungry to utter a word, too cold to move, but for the shivering of their skeletal bodies. They huddled there in scanty old clothes, seizing warmth from anyone quivering next to them. I stared at those standing close to me. Over the past months, I'd learned what starvation looked like, large noses, big bellies, sagging flesh and jutting bones. Dr. Barnfield once told me that the nose was the only part of the face that didn't shrink from starvation.

I turned, entered the soup kitchen through the back door, and saw Brian scooping soup into cups with an old ladle. I grabbed the ladle next to him and got to work. Hundreds waited to be fed; we had to keep them from falling off a 'cliff' to certain death.

In the next two hours, I filled dozens of soup cups, collected one penny each from those who could pay, moved empty iron boilers aside, and scalded my hands while lifting boilers full of hot soup up to the table. I did all this, hurrying to keep the line moving. Brian's voice soon moved me out of my thoughts.

"Hey Sean, remember the first day the shock of the potato blight slapped you in the face like a cold, wet, rag?"

"Aye. Can't get it out of my mind, Laddie. I'd dug up a potato in the field behind my cabin, and as I tried to clutch and pull it from the ground, my fingers sunk into slime. I couldn't believe it! I kept digging and pulling more mess out of the ground. And the stench almost made my knees buckle."

"Big blow to me too. Just kept digging, hoping for better luck," Brian said.

"I finally gave up. Later, I watched Mammy throw herself to the ground, weeping, when I told her the news. She said, 'Sweet Jesus, all we eat is potato; that's how we pay the rent too. How in God's name

will we make it through this?’ Then she said, ‘We’re three shillings short on the rent money.’”

“What, how did that happen, Mammy?” I’d yelled.

“Had to save us from starving. Found turnips and some barley outside of O’Donnells,” she’d said. I glanced at Brian; he listened closely.

“Your Daddy started working for the scheme right after that, didn’t he?”

“Aye, but he had to walk two hours to and from that job repairing roads, with nothing in his belly, for days. Men were dropping like flies, dying from exhaustion and starvation.”

“So sorry, Sean. Memories of the two of us picking him up off the ground at the corner of Duke and King Streets still haunt me.”

“And after taking him home, we had to lay him down to die ‘cause there was neither potato nor water to put to his lips.”

“That day still torments you, eh?”

“Don’t think the pain will ever leave. And it’s worse with Mammy. I have to keep her alive, Brian.”

“We’ll do everything we can for her, my friend. By the way, you seen Cara lately?” Brian suddenly changed the subject, like he always did.

“Stopped by last week to check on her and her mother. Brought them soup.”

“You two still together?”

“Nah.”

“What the Hell happened?”

“Staying away.”

“Why? Thought you two would be together a real long time. She’s a pretty girl, Sean.”

“You know she always called me a mammy’s boy, right?”

“Yah, you are a mammy’s boy.” Brian giggled. I smiled and kept talking; didn’t feel like taking that bait.

“Well, one night we were together and she looked me in the eyes and said, ‘Mammy’s boys make great husbands, Sean.’”

“You walked away ‘cause of that?”

“Yah. She had that hungry, hopeful look in her eyes. I’m just not ready to be anyone’s husband, Brian.”

“Why didn’t you just tell her that?”

I sighed. “Tell a woman that and all you get is a forever puss on her face. Better to set her free to find some fella open to husband talk.”

We’d just emptied the last boiler of soup and I’d turned around to take it to the back of the kitchen, when I heard a commotion. I flung the boiler down and spun around.

“Sorry, no more soup. Come back in three days,” Quaker Tomas, who managed the soup kitchen, shouted. Men yelled and women bawled. Babies screamed and puked. Some babies went quiet. One woman shook her limp baby, then she flung herself to the ground and let out a chilling wail, still clutching the baby.

“She’s been clutching a dead baby and didn’t know it,” Brian said.

Oh, sweet Jesus, that poor mother. And that sweet, innocent baby. I’m going to be sick.

I grabbed my gut and ran back into the kitchen. Vomit threatened to erupt from my bowel. I bolted through the back door of the kitchen and clutched my throat as vomit spewed to the ground. I held my head back up, grabbed my sleeve, and wiped vomit from the side of my mouth. I breathed air deep into my lungs, over and over.

“You okay, Sean?” Brian asked, his head stuck through the back door. He hurried over and put one arm around my shoulder.

“Three more days with no food and half of them will be dead.”

I held my head down; tears rushed down my cheeks and fell to the ground. My gut clenched, devastation threatening to overcome me. Brian shook his head and sobbed so hard his body trembled and he gasped for air. I tightened my grip around his waist.

“Take deep breaths, Brian; take real deep breaths.”

I stood there for a while, my arm around my friend’s waist as he breathed in and out, reaching for calm.

Returning to the kitchen later, I was just in time to see the Quaker turn and head in my direction. He paused, stared at Brian and me, and he started talking. I quickly wiped my eyes.

“Tomorrow, we take soup to out-of-the-way places. We’ll be taking three horse carts. We’ll have nine boilers of soup, three shovels, and an axe. Sleep good tonight and be here by five in the morning.”

He paused and looked at me, and then at Brian. A sense of foreboding swept over me. After seeing that dead baby, vulnerability had taken over my emotions.

“Get ready to see dreadful things, but we need you to stay strong. We’ll feed you real’ good. Keep your strength up, or you’ll be no use to those who are dying,” The Quaker said.

I winced, but I knew I had to do it. I needed the extra work. We were still short on the rent and month-end drew closer.

I walked home that evening, clutching a small cup of soup that I’d scraped from the bottom of two boilers. Brian had also managed to scrape together two cups of soup for old man O’Brien and his son. We hastened along in silence, me dreading a sleepless night after seeing that dead baby. My heart still ached.

I whispered another prayer. *Please Lord, have mercy on the soul of that poor baby. And Lord, Mammy is depending on me; I won’t let her down. If she knows there’s a white cross of eviction on the front door of the cabin, it will kill her for sure. She has nowhere else to go. Mammy will never survive, crouched in a hole in the ground with straw over her head, like most tenant farmers live after the landlord burns their cabin down. If I have to serve soup to earn a few more shillings, I’ll do it to keep Mammy alive. And I’ll do it to help get Ireland back to the land of peace and happiness it once was.*



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