

# CHAPTER ONE

‘You’re useless, McLaughlin! You hear me? Useless! Now get back to your seat!’

Patrick’s colorless face grew paler as he turned away from the angry teacher and, with his head bowed, he walked slowly down through the other pupils to his seat. One of the pupils, a stout, freckle-faced boy called Joe Moore, nicknamed Buster, stuck his tongue out at Patrick. Buster was the biggest boy in the school and he was also the school bully. Everyone in the class was afraid of him, but Patrick glared at him before sitting down.

‘Now!’ bellowed the teacher, Mr. Foley, who was a thin-faced tall man with a pencil-slim mustache. ‘Get out your history books and turn to page 81.’ His eyes narrowed, as he looked straight at Patrick. ‘McLaughlin, stand up and read the first page.’

As Patrick read the words in his quiet voice, he little knew that today would be the beginning of a strange and wonderful adventure that would change his life forever.

After school, as he was heading along the low school wall in the direction of the road that would take him home, he was stopped near the end of it by Buster and three of his pals.

‘How’s “useless?”’ taunted Buster, dancing around Patrick.

The bully’s cronies began to do the same. ‘Useless! Useless! Useless!’ they chanted.

Patrick gritted his teeth as he waited for them to stop. He didn’t try to force his way past the bullies, for he knew if he tried Buster and the others would forcibly stop him. He had had a few run ins with the them before.

‘I think that’s what we’ll call ye from now on, McLaughlin, useless. Aye the name suits ye, for ye are useless,’ laughed Buster, prodding Patrick hard on his chest, forcing him back against the wall. ‘Aye, useless. That’s a good name fer ye isn’t it, eh? Eh?’

Patrick’s face grew red with anger as the bully prodded him harder. Bunching his fists, he trembled with a mixture of rage and concealed fear as he said quietly, ‘Are ye finished now, Moore? I’d like to get home if ye don’t mind.’ He stared right into Moore’s small eyes.

The bully ground his teeth and glared at him for a few seconds, but suddenly he stepped away from Patrick. ‘Go ahead,’ he said, ‘who’s stoppin’ ye?’

The tension eased from Patrick and he took a step to go past the burly bully, but as he did so, Buster stuck out his leg and pushed him hard. With a surprised cry, Patrick stumbled over the bully’s leg and fell, hitting his shoulder hard against the pavement. He lay stunned by the pain for a few seconds as Buster and his pals walked away laughing loudly and chanting, ‘Useless! Useless! Useless!’

Patrick scrambled to his feet and stood rubbing his painful shoulder as he glared after them. Seconds later, still wincing from the pain, he gathered up his books and, with a heavy sigh, he once more headed for home.

The tiny cottage where Patrick and his mother lived was two miles from the school and out in the Derry countryside. The cottage lay halfway up a hill in such a position that it commanded a breathtaking view of the city below. Almost the whole length of the sparkling River Foyle could be seen threading its way through the city to greater Lough Foyle.

It was a beautiful end of June day and, as Patrick walked up the long road to his home, he took a deep breath of the clear air. He smiled as he thought about the long summer holidays to come: no school, no Foley, and especially no Buster and his pals.

A minute later, he was approaching a wide bend in the road that had high hedges growing on each side and, as he rounded the bend he didn’t see the old woman. He was just walking past when she spoke: ‘Good day to ye, Patrick.’ Her voice was deep and hoarse.

‘Eh?’ Startled, Patrick turned gaping at the strange old woman who lay on the banking below the hedge.

She was dressed in black with a green tartan shawl covering her head and shoulders. Her yellow, wizened face and white hair peeked from under the shawl. With an alacrity that belied her

age, she pushed away from the banking saying, 'Patrick, would ye mind at all if I walked a little with ye?' She smiled a smile that lit up her face.

'Nun...nunno,' stuttered Patrick, staring at her and wondering who she was and how she knew his name. 'Do...do ye live around here?' he asked, as they began to walk slowly up the road.

'No,' said the woman, who was a head taller than Patrick. She smiled once again, her dark lively eyes making Patrick feel uneasy as she studied him.

'How did ye know my name?' he asked.

'Oh, I know yer name all right, Patrick McLaughlin,' said the mysterious woman, her dark eyes twinkling mischievously. 'I know all about ye.'

'Ye do?' said Patrick, suddenly growing annoyed with her. 'What's there to know?' he snapped.

Suddenly, the woman stopped, her smile vanishing as she scowled at a huge black, beady-eyed crow that had just landed on top of the hedge in front of them. Cawing loudly, it fixed its black, wicked eyes on Patrick.

In an instant, the woman darted at the crow screaming as she flailed her arms, 'Get away with ye! Get away!'

The suddenness and speed of her action surprised Patrick and he gaped as the angry crow, cawing with fear, leapt into the air and flew away down towards the city.

'Always beware of the crows, Patrick,' the old woman muttered as she glared after the bird.

'Crows?' said Patrick, frowning. What the heck is she on about, he thought? She must be crazy.

'Aye, Patrick watch out fer them,' said the woman, looking up and searching the clear sky.

As they continued walking on up the road, the woman turned to face him. 'Patrick,' she said quietly, 'there is a good reason why I have waited to meet ye.'

Patrick stopped. 'Waited to meet me?' he exclaimed. 'What do ye mean? What reason?'

The woman looked around before answering: 'I have been chosen to help ye receive yer Gift.'

Patrick frowned. She's crazy, he thought, looking to see if she was carrying anything. She wasn't.

'Aye,' said the woman. 'The Luricans have asked me to help them give ye yer Gift.'

Patrick stepped back from her. 'Gift? What gift? I...I don't understand. Who are the Loor...Loor...?'

'Luricans,' said the woman. Her next words had Patrick convinced she was crazy. 'Lurican is another name for the Little People.' She smiled at Patrick's reaction, and then gave a little laugh. 'Oh I know what ye are thinking, Patrick McLaughlin. Yer thinking I'm an insane oul biddy. Well, I'm not, and if ye'll bear with me a while, I'll explain.' Her old face cracked into another wide smile. 'Ye know Patrick yer a very lucky boy to be given the Gift. There are some who would give a fortune for it.'

Once again, Patrick thought she's definitely crazy. He could see she was not carrying anything. Maybe this gift she's talking about is very small, he thought.

As if reading his mind, the woman said, 'The Gift cannot be seen. It must be bestowed, given, but it cannot be seen.'

Patrick shook his head. He was anxious now to get rid of the woman. 'I...I still don't understand,' he muttered.

'And sure, how could ye?' said the woman. 'How could ye? Look Patrick, let me try and explain it to ye. The Luricans, the Little People, can and do, on certain occasions, bestow their magical gifts to humans, certain humans who have the goodness in their hearts. Ye see, Patrick they can't give all their magical gifts to one of their own. They must pass some on to outsiders, someone deserving, like yourself.'

Patrick stared at her. 'But how am I deserving?' he exclaimed.

The woman smiled. 'In here,' she answered, prodding her chest with a bony forefinger. 'In yer heart. In yer heart, and besides ye are also called Patrick.'

'What's my name to do with it?' snapped Patrick, growing annoyed again. 'There are lots of Patricks at my school. There are three in my class.'

'Aye,' said the woman, 'there are other Patricks to be sure. But the secret is here, in yer heart.'

Ye have a good heart, Patrick McLaughlin. The bully Moore has tormented ye this past spring and ye have not retaliated.'

Patrick gritted his teeth as he remembered. 'Well, I felt like it today. I felt like thumping him, but I knew it would only upset my mother if she found out I was fighting. I wouldn't want to upset her.'

The woman smiled and gently touching her chest, she repeated, 'In yer heart. In yer heart, Patrick.'

Patrick sighed. This is all a bit much, he thought. He wished the woman would go away, yet he was curious. 'These little people?' he asked. 'Who are they? Ye surely don't expect me to believe they're fairies—leprechauns—do ye?'

'No, Patrick, I don't,' said the woman quietly. 'But that's who they are and tonight they will give ye yer Gift.'

'Tonight? But...?' Patrick's frown deepened.

'In the fields above yer cottage there is a Fairy Ring.'

'Yes, I know where it is,' said Patrick. 'I've played up there quite a lot. What about it?'

The old woman smiled again. 'It is there ye will receive yer Gift. Ye are to go there after midnight.'

'But...'

Suddenly, from out of the sky, flew a crow, cawing loudly it swooped down at Patrick. With its legs extended, it tore at the shocked boy, but, just in time, Patrick ducked. Nevertheless, the vicious crow tore a tuft of black hair out of the back of his head and soared back into the sky. Looking up, Patrick and the woman could see several other crows cawing as they hovered like black spiders ready to descend on an unfortunate fly. Suddenly, screeching loudly, they began to drop towards them. Terrified, Patrick covered his head with his hands and dove for the protection of the hedge. Cowering, with his face against the bank, he could hear the woman screaming at the attacking birds. She was standing with her arms stretched above her head. Abruptly, the frightened crows veered off their attack and cawing angrily, they flew towards a wood several miles away.

Patrick waited a while before leaving the protection of the hedge. Crouching, and with his hands still covering his head, he looked up. There was no sign of the crows. Sighing with relief, he straightened and looked around. There was no sign of the old woman either. Frowning, he looked up and down the road. She couldn't have just vanished, he thought, could she? He stood there for nearly three minutes thinking about all that the mysterious woman had said. Then, shaking his head, silently denying to himself that his insane conversation with the woman had taken place, he began to walk on up the road to his home.

A few moments later, when he reached the gate at the bottom of the lane that led to the cottage, he saw them. Almost covering the thatched roof were hundreds of huge, black crows and every eye, every wicked black eye, was glaring at him.