Chapter 1

CHRISTMAS was Eoin's favourite time of the year. He had a stack of memories of joyful mornings when he benefited from being the only child – and grandchild – in his family.

As he stretched out in his bed and lifted his legs over the side he wondered what delights would be under the tree for him this year.

Since he had started to do well at rugby there was no point asking Santa or his family for the usual presents of sportswear, as his wardrobe was stuffed solid with jerseys and tracksuits in both Leinster blue and Ireland green.

He had dropped a few hints about how he missed cycling since he'd outgrown his bike, and how good it might be to help him vary his fitness training. While he had been rested during the Mini World Cup he had borrowed a bike to get around the university campus and enjoyed the freedom it gave him.

Although it felt like so long ago, it was only a week or so since Ireland had won the final and Eoin had helped solve the mysterious theft of the William Webb Ellis Cup – with a little help from the man after whom the cup was named. Thinking of those days brought him back to the exciting moments of glory when Sam Farrelly had scored the winning try and Charlie Bermingham had lifted the trophy over his head. He felt a warm fuzzy glow rush through him and he jumped up from the bed, lifting an imaginary World Cup over his own head and taking the applause of the crowd.

He had been surrounded by newspaper reporters and cameramen after the game, but the Garda detectives had told him it was important he didn't say anything about the crime or the operation to recover the trophy as it might prevent the thieves from being sent to prison. Eoin was happy to keep quiet as he hated being the centre of attention anyway.

The IRFU was particularly delighted with his detective work, however, and he was chuffed when he got down home to Ormondstown for the holidays to find a letter of thanks from its president. He was even happier when he noticed that the paperclip on the top of the page was attached to four thin pieces of cardboard: 'Ireland versus England at Aviva Stadium, Saturday 30 March' was all Eoin bothered to read before he whooped with delight and rushed to show his mum.

He'd decided to say nothing to his grandfather, but instead slipped one ticket inside the pair of socks he always bought him for Christmas. That would be an excellent present!

Eoin dressed quickly and rushed down the stairs as quickly as he had every Christmas morning since he'd been able to walk. He popped his head into the kitchen, where his parents were already hard at work preparing breakfast and dinner.

'Happy Christmas, Mam, Happy Christmas, Dad!' he smiled. 'I wonder what's under the tree for me?'

He hugged his parents and handed over his gifts to them, before crossing to the sitting room, where a shining bicycle awaited him.

'Just what I wanted!'

'Why don't you run over to see Dixie?' suggested his mother. 'He's been on the phone already so he's up and about. Tell him your dad will collect him about one o'clock.'

'That would be great – but are you sure you don't want a hand peeling sprouts?' asked Eoin.

‘Does the great detective Sherlock Holmes peel sprouts?’ asked his dad. ‘No, run on there and see your grandad.’

Eoin winced at what his father had said – he really hated the attention he had got over the incident, and got particularly embarrassed when people called him a hero – but then he grinned gratefully and wheeled his bike out of the house, pausing to admire its perfect dark blue paintwork.

Eoin’s grandfather, Dixie Madden, was once a great rugby player, and he had become Eoin’s greatest supporter. He lived in a cottage nearby and Eoin called to see him every day he was home from boarding school.

‘Hi, Grandad, merry Christmas to you,’ Eoin called as he spotted the old man opening the curtains at the window.

Dixie lifted his hand in salute and moved to open the door.

‘Well, was Santa Claus good to you?’ he asked.

‘Very!’ replied Eoin, hopping off and pointing to his brand-new bike.

‘Oh, that’s a beauty,’ smiled Dixie. ‘Does she move well?’

‘Like a dream,’ replied Eoin. ‘I got over here in about two minutes flat,’ he pointed to his watch. ‘I’ve never run it faster than five.’

‘That’s good news, you’ll have that bit more time to spend with me when you call over now,’ Dixie chuckled.

‘Dad says he’ll call over at one o’clock,’ Eoin said, as the old man ushered him inside.

‘That will give us plenty of time to talk about rugby,’ said Dixie. ‘We will have to get that project of yours finished too.’

Eoin’s face fell.

‘Grandad… it’s Christmas Day! You don’t expect me to do school work today, do you?’

‘Ah no, sure this isn’t work at all,’ laughed Dixie.

‘Hmmm,’ mused Eoin. ‘It certainly sounds like it. What do you have in mind?’

‘Well, your project is on the origins of rugby and William Webb Ellis – the chap whose trophy you discovered. But besides Ellis spending some time here as a boy, there’s nothing about the early days of rugby in Ireland. So, well, I thought you’d like this…’ said Dixie, handing Eoin a parcel. ‘I’ve a few other presents for you, but this will be useful.’

Eoin tore open the wrapping and saw that it was a book on the history of the rugby stadium on Lansdowne Road. He riffled through the pages, catching sight of old players whose names Dixie had mentioned to him. His friend Brian, too, had told him about the stars he had seen play at the ground.

‘Wow, thanks Grandad, this is excellent,’ he grinned. ‘I promise I’ll start reading it tonight.’

Dixie laughed. ‘Well, I don’t expect you’ll allow it to get in the way of the important Christmas things such as eating and watching TV…’

Chapter 2

After lunch, Eoin dished out his presents – socks and chocs – but he especially enjoyed seeing the delight on his grandad’s face when he saw there was a surprise bonus tucked inside. They made plans to meet up before the game and have a full day’s fun with his parents.

The rest of the day flew by, but over the evening several visitors arrived, and each set wanted to hear Eoin recount his adventure.

He was therefore delighted when the last of them left, and with a yawn he said good night and hauled himself upstairs.

Eoin was tired and happy as he lay down on his bed. He reached over and picked up the book Dixie had given him, and read through the early chapters before he decided it was time for sleep. He flicked on a few pages and was amazed to see there was a whole chapter on his friend Brian.

He had heard the story of the young Lansdowne player, and how he had lost his life, but it was still interesting to read about it in detail, and the book told him a lot more about Brian than the modest ghost had let on. Eoin read that Brian had been a seriously good prop, and had just been selected for the Leinster junior side to play Munster when he became the only player to lose his life playing on the ground. He grinned at how his friend had faced the same dilemma as he had in opting to play against his native province.

He studied the photo of Brian, amazed that he looked the same now as he had almost a century before. He felt a tinge of sadness that he wouldn’t see his pal for a couple of weeks, and wondered what ghosts got up to over Christmas.

Eoin closed the book and nodded off quickly, sleeping deeply and soundly until a loud knock came to his front door early the next morning.

‘Howya, Eoin!’ came the call as he peered round the side of the curtain. ‘Get down here and we’ll go for a spin!’

Outside was his great friend and school-mate Dylan, and he was pointing at a shiny bicycle of the same make as Eoin’s, although his was painted red.

‘Santa got the rugby colours right, anyway,’ chuckled Dylan as Eoin wheeled his own bike through the doorway.

Eoin was startled at what Dylan had noticed. Although Eoin was from Munster, he went to school in Leinster and had been selected to play for that province. It meant he got a bit of slagging thrown at him around Ormondstown, but he had got used to that and reckoned it was just some people’s way of acknowledging his success. Still, he never wore a blue Leinster shirt around town, reckoning that might be just a little bit too provocative.

Dylan had no problem with wearing rugby shirts though, and was rarely seen in school or over the holidays without the red Munster shirt he had earned in the interprovincial championships the previous year. He was even wearing it today.

‘I might repaint the bike green to keep them guessing,’ laughed Eoin.

‘But they’d think you were just being cocky about playing for Ireland,’ frowned Dylan.

Eoin laughed. ‘Yeah, you’re right. Everyone has an opinion about me now that I’ve been on the TV news. I’ll just paint it purple and hope nobody notices it’s me cycling it.’

The pair rode around town twice, which didn’t take very long. They stopped for a chat with Dylan’s sister Caoimhe and her pals, who were out on their new bikes too.

‘They’ll have to put cycle lanes in Ormondstown soon,’ laughed Dylan. ‘Looks like everyone got a bike for Christmas.’

‘I saw you in the paper for rescuing that trophy,’ said Iris McCabe. ‘You were very brave.’

Eoin blushed and laughed it off. ‘I didn’t do much, I was in the back of a Garda car when all the action happened.’

‘The papers said you were a “brave schoolboy star”, chuckled Caoimhe. ‘I cut it out for you in case you missed it.’

‘Did you stick it in the scrapbook you have about him?’ asked Iris.

Eoin and Caoimhe blushed, and Eoin changed the subject. ‘I wonder is there anywhere we could buy locks for the bikes? I wouldn’t leave them out around town without being chained up.’

‘I’d say you’d be all right,’ said Iris. ‘Sure, everyone knows everyone in this town. No one would steal from their neighbours, would they?