

Chapter 1

When I was nine years of age, my family and I moved from our home in Cobh, County Cork, to begin a new life just outside Belfast, in what was then a new and very small Housing Executive estate called Rathcoole. As I tried to come to terms with a very different lifestyle, not to mention the very strange accent of the local people, two dogs became very special to me – Pete and Trixie.

Pete lived with Peggy and Kevin Martin, about three doors from our house. He was a small, bearded, wiry-coated, black-and-white, belligerent, overweight Scottish-terrier mix, with a tail curling menacingly over a short stocky back. He thoroughly disliked people, except his owners.

Pete was not impressed when I first started wandering into the Martins' house, drawn there like a moth to a light by the cakes and fancy biscuits Peggy would dish out to all the kids in the street. He grumbled and snarled, he complained and he huffed, and he made it very clear that I was not welcome in *his* house – I was not to go near his bed or his toys and I was most certainly never, ever to go near him! Pete also became enraged by anyone who might venture too close to his Peggy or Kevin, irrespective of age, colour or creed. The thing was that neither Peggy nor Kevin tried to stop him because, to tell the truth, I don't think they were really too bothered. They loved him warts and all – he was like a son to them.

After a while, I took to visiting Peggy and Kevin every day until, in effect, their house became my second home. I had my lunch and dinner there and in the evening, could generally be found watching kids' television when Kevin came home from work. I often stayed on to have supper too, before finally being packed off to my own

house to sleep. I suppose I was a real pain in the ass, but I was too young to see it. Mr Pete, however, was getting well ticked off with all of this cosiness. He grumbled and he guarded and he barked for weeks and weeks.

Then, completely out of the blue, Pete and I became mates. I don't know how or why – he just suddenly melted. It started with him *not barking at me* when I went into his house one day – in fact, he actually wagged his tail, slowly and a bit uncertainly, but he did wag it just the same. When I went outside, he followed me, and when I sat on the low wall at the front of his garden, he sat at my feet.

A day or two later, he followed me down to the shop and eventually I was allowed to sit on his favourite chair, play with his toys and, most astonishingly of all, stand close to Peggy without him barking at me! He even took to hanging around our door at home (on the odd occasion I was there), waiting for me to come out. My mother, who Pete also disliked, often had to get me to move him so she could go round the back to bring in the washing. Everyone was gobsmacked by Pete's sudden and totally unexpected change of disposition. It was the equivalent of seeing Dr Paisley sitting down to tea and crumpets with His Holiness, the Pope. Pete, Martin and I had become virtually inseparable.

I was now the only person apart from Peggy and Kevin that he liked, and there were to be no other exceptions. I learned, though, that the price of this new friendship was that I had to play on my own – my friends were all afraid of Pete so they gave us a very wide berth.

One day while he was eating his dinner, I made a big, painful mistake. I got down on my hands and knees beside him and pretended to share his food. Without realising it, I had stepped way over the mark and, in a flash, Pete bit me on the upper lip, removing a chunk from it. There was blood everywhere. I ran around, holding my mouth and screaming.

Poor Peggy, who had been out enjoying the peace and quiet of her garden, heard all the commotion and came charging in. She scooped me up and rushed me into the bathroom to try to find something to stop the flow of blood. She then ran with me next

door to Mrs Downey, a very motherly neighbour, who took one look and hurried me off down the road to Dr Canavan's surgery. Nobody had a family car in those days – we either walked or got a bus and on that day we walked.

Doctor Canavan was a lovely, gentle man, someone I liked and trusted, and I was so glad to hear him say, 'I can fix that. I'll put this new stuff into that hole to make it heal more quickly. Now if you would just hold him still Mrs Downey, I'll stitch his lip.'

Until that moment, I had never heard of stitching up the human body. My mother was forever doing repair jobs on my clothes and I was familiar enough with needles to know they really hurt when they stuck in you. The good doctor reached for my lip with an encouraging smile on his face and a funny-shaped needle between his fingers. I saw the needle coming closer and then I felt it being pushed into my skin. My God did it hurt! It was so painful that I thrashed around and Mrs Downey had to sit on me to keep me still. When he eventually finished, he smiled and told me I would soon be as good as new and that I was to stop stealing Pete's dinner.

When we got home I went straight to Pete's house and, as ever, he was overjoyed to see me. I suppose he thought there was no harm done – he had just disciplined a young upstart in his pack. He had needed to teach me a lesson and that was the end of it. He enjoyed the position of pack leader and all of us were merely his subjects. Peace returned. I gave him a hug and we remained the best of friends until the day he died – yet, oddly, I have no memory of that part at all.

The very first dog I ever owned myself was Trixie, a little female cairn terrier. My parents bought her for me for my tenth birthday after we'd spotted her in the window of a pet shop at Smithfield Market in the heart of Belfast. Although I had always wanted an Alsatian, Trixie was so tiny and so cute that I fell in love with her on the way home on the bus. I have no doubt that we formed the beginnings of a very special and lifelong bond that day, which grew and grew as the weeks went by. Just as it had been with Pete,

wherever I went, Trixie went – when I sat down, she was on my lap and when I was in bed, she was there too. When I was upset, say because my dad had given me a box around the ears for some misdemeanour, she was at my feet, staring anxiously up at me. I swear she could read my thoughts.

At eighteen, I went off to study at a college in Kilkenny and for the first time the two of us were apart. I hated being away from her, not seeing her every day – it made me feel empty and shadowless. Things were just as bad for Trixie, my mother told me – she immediately went off her food and took to moping around the house, or sleeping all day in my bedroom.

One night, I had this really bad dream in which I saw Trixie being knocked down by a car on the road outside our house. I could see her lying motionless and then being taken, all bloodied and broken, to the vet's. Later on I could see wires and tubes attached to her while she struggled to stay alive. It was so real ... I woke with a shout and sat bolt upright in bed, gasping for breath and soaked in sweat.

At half past six in the morning, I rang home and blurted out, 'Mam! What has happened to Trix?'

'Nothing at all, boy. She's grand. Why are you ringing at this hour?'

'I'm sorry, Mam. I couldn't help it. I had a terrible dream last night. I saw her being run over by a car. She's all right then? You're sure?'

'Don't worry, boy. She's fine. It was only a dream.'

I should have felt better hearing that, but somewhere at the back of my mind was a niggle that things weren't quite right.

A week later, my best friend Chris Craig, who had not been well enough to start with the rest of us, came to college. The very first thing he asked me when he saw me was how I'd known about Trixie being knocked down.

'What?' I replied.

'How did you know? Your mum couldn't believe it, you ringing her at six-thirty in the morning.'

'What are you on about?' I asked him.

'Trixie, you twat! You were right! She was knocked down and badly injured. She ended up in intensive care at the vet's on the

Antrim Road. Your mum lied because she knew that if she had told you, you would have been on the next bus home.'

I have never forgotten that dream and, although some of the details have faded, the fact that it happened at all will never leave me. Happily, she made a full recovery. She was a fighter who lived life to the full, and when a few years later her life came to an end by the natural order of things, I cried for weeks. We all did.