# THE CHANCER

'Hilarious and heart-warming, *The Chancer* sparkles and hooks you in from the first page. A dazzling debut from Fiona Graham. I devoured it'

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'Chance would be a fine thing. But *The Chancer* is the finest— and funniest—thing of all'

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'Fantastic book! Sharp, funny and extremely enjoyable'

**– SEAN MAGUIRE**

'Outstanding! Full of heart and packed with humour'

**– ANITA STRATTON,** *Radio Broadcaster*

'You'll smile, you'll gasp, and you'll laugh out loud. *The Chancer* is a rollercoaster ride with a heart of pure Irish gold. Graham's debut is pacy, punchy and a pure joy'

**– CHRIS HARVEY,** *STV*

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by Vanessa Mendozzi

He was born to be a star.
Pity no one else thought so.

# THE CHANCER

A Novel

FIONA GRAHAM

**FIONA GRAHAM** lives in County Galway, in the west of Ireland, with her husband and daughter and their two dogs. Fiona grew up in Scotland but has lived in Ireland for most of her adult life. Fiona wrote and produced the award-winning Irish feature film *Songs for Amy*.

*The Chancer* is Fiona's debut novel.

**WWW.FIONAGRAHAMWRITER.COM**

*For Sean and for Sheena*
With love and laughter

CHAPTER 1

# NOW, 1989, LOS ANGELES

Donnie scanned the stage for somewhere inconspicuous to puke, but it was too late. He was being ushered closer towards his big moment and felt utterly paralysed with fear. He swallowed the acidic puddle of vomit in his mouth and blessed himself. Holding his clammy hands tightly together to stop them from shaking, he prayed for success to the God he desperately now hoped existed.

Randolph Lettering strode onto the stage as the announcer belted out a welcome around the venue.

'It's Randy! I can call him Randy because I know him. It's Randolph Lettering!'

Randolph stood in the centre of the stage, lit up in a halo of light. He gave the audience a hearty wave.

'Welcome to our music special at The Troubadour! And it definitely will be special! We've got some amazing music on the show tonight, and our guests include The Bangles!'

The crowd cheered, but Randolph was a little disappointed with the LA crowd, grungy and dressed in black. He was used to the slick, colourful New Yorkers. So Randolph upped his game, hoping to rally some enthusiasm.

'And all the way from Australia, we should be so lucky, Kylie Minogue!'

A more spirited cheer—they were warming up.

'And as well as our musical guests, we have a couple of guests from the movie business … here to save the world, Bill

Murray! And our *Big* guest, Tom Hanks!'

A few exuberant whistles filtered through thunderous applause. Randolph knew Bill Murray and Tom Hanks would achieve that but wasn't sure how his next guest would go down.

'But first up, we have someone you have never heard of because this is his first film.'

The audience fell silent.

'He's landed on his feet in a new George Lawless movie, *Cracked* … Maybe he'll join the walk of fame one day, but it all starts here. Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome … Donnie McNamara!'

Donnie shielded his eyes from the white glare of the lights and peered at the audience—row upon row of black silhouettes, like crows on a telephone wire at dusk. He thought his bowels were going to explode or implode. Either way, he shuffled onto the stage, clenching his buttocks. Randolph smiled broadly, disguising his instinct that this would be an onerous interview … but a favour was a favour.

Donnie managed to sit down without falling and, perched in front of Randolph Lettering, his adrenalin finally kicked in. *This was it!* He gave the audience a coy little wave of his hand, grinning so hard he thought his lips would rip. Donnie felt that every second he had spent dreaming, every time he had ignored rejection, deflected humiliation and upheld his self-belief, had led to this moment. This was the beginning of his journey to The Oscars.

'Good to meet you, Randolph!' Donnie seemed to have no control over his shrill voice.

'It's okay, I won't bite,' Randolph smiled. He shook Donnie's damp hand and subtly wiped the residual sweat on his suit trousers under the desk. 'So, Donnie, you're a farmer from a remote village in Ireland, and now you're making a George Lawless movie! Tell us— how did this all come about?'

Donnie cleared his dry throat and tried to remember at least some of the script Sable Vonderhyde, the scary publicist, had

given him, but his mind went blank, and instead, he stared at Randolph … Randolph Lettering. He was sitting right in front of him, being interviewed … about a movie he was making. Donnie's dream had been on borrowed time, and if he didn't hit the jackpot now, he would have to retreat, bury his dream forever and accept the fact that he was going to spend the rest of his life knee-deep in cow shit. But here he was, with success in sight, being interviewed by the legendary talk show host. The question bounced around Donnie's head—*how did this all come about?*

Was it on the annual family pilgrimage to Dingle for summer holidays when they had watched in awe as an entire village was built for the set of *Ryan's Daughter*? Or was it his first-ever trip to the cinema? The magnificent wonder of the big screen had been a feast for his senses, transporting him to a cliff top, his heart in his mouth as he evaded the enemy and plunged into the water with Butch and Sundance.

His memory of that day was so vivid he could still feel the rain trickling down the back of his cagoule as he queued with his elder cousins and big sister in the pouring rain. There was a busker with thick sideburns and long hippy hair that flapped in the wind. He belted out tunes on his guitar to those queuing, hoping they might relinquish their precious money to show their appreciation. Donnie had clenched his fist over the coins in his hand, partly to conceal them and partly to ensure a fit of inadvertent generosity didn't overcome him—any surrender of coins would mean no tin of coke for the film. His cousins, PJ, Antony and Liam, wanted to light up, so they had led his big sister, Kathy, and him to the back row. Donnie was pushed into the row first, and to his disgust, he was seated next to a couple slurping at each other's mouths. Purple smoke swirled around the beam from the projector, but as soon as the movie started, he forgot about the pair snogging next to him and marvelled at Paul Newman and Robert Redford blowing up trains, galloping under gunfire and kicking up one hell of a

storm. That could have been that day it *all came about,* or it could have been his first stage appearance in the nativity play. It hadn't been a question Donnie had ever considered.

Randolph Lettering wanted to click his fingers in front of his guest's face, but he resisted the temptation.

'Donnie? How did it all come about?'

Just as Donnie's brain kicked into gear to answer the question, he heard a hideously familiar voice from the audience shout out.

'Everyone knows you can't fucking act!'

As Randolph's eyes darted towards the heckle, Donnie felt like someone had stabbed him in the chest. He managed a nervous laugh and tried again to speak, hoping the voice was an anxiety-induced hallucination.

'Well, Randolph, for as long as I can remember, I wanted to be an actor, and I don't think anyone really took me seriously—'

The heckler boomed over Donnie from the crowd, 'Took you seriously? Why would they? You suck, you useless, little, lying bollox!'

Donnie felt he was falling from a great height even though he was still sitting in the chair. Wide-eyed, he stared into the black depths of the audience as Randolph looked round to Paul, the keyboard player. Paul shrugged back at him. Randolph was used to the unexpected happening on live television, and at first, he thought the heckler might be some prank, but now with this language, it was clear he was not, and why the hell had the producer not cut to the ads?

Being a pro, Randolph continued undeterred, 'Seems you have a bit of a fan already.'

The audience laughed and then gasped as a hulking figure made straight for the stage.

The producer, aware that he should be cutting to ads, felt the urge to let it play out for a little longer. He could see the security heading straight for the figure, and although he may well be fired for this, it could make ratings soar. The risk was

worth taking.

Donnie saw him coming, signalling the imminent collapse of his new world. He had a feeling of being sucked through the floor into the jaws of humiliation. He felt dizzy as he tumbled into a career death roll. There was no time to filter his thoughts.

'WOULD YOU EVER FUCK OFF, FRANCIS!' Donnie shouted at the top of his voice, slid from his chair, and hid behind Randolph, covering his face with both hands.

The producer was about to yell, *'Cut!'* when two security guards hauled the man away. Donnie crawled out slowly from behind Randolph. The producer held his hand up—he wanted just a few more moments of this television gold, and Donnie was about to deliver it.

Donnie stumbled, stupefied, towards camera one. Then, looking directly at the camera, he whispered, 'Hi, Mum, Dad, Kathy, Sheena. I've got a lot to tell you.'

CHAPTER TWO

# BACK THEN, 1971, BELLVARA, IRELAND

Sheets of rain lambasted the streets of Bellvara and pelted down on the few unfortunate people still outside. This wasn't soft Irish drizzle—it was biting rain that hurt, whipped up from the Atlantic, and menacingly hurled at the shore. Some people huddled in doorways; some stood under the thatch, waiting for the storm to abate before running to the next shelter en-route home. Others dashed into The Pier Head bar and made a mental note to hunker down there for the remainder of the day.

A red Zetor tractor pulled up behind a donkey and cart carrying the milk churns. The tractor was Mickey-Joe McNamara's pride and joy. He was a powerful man with a face that looked like it had always lived outdoors. Excessive beatings as a child meant that Mickey-Joe grew into a man who didn't take any shit from anyone. He operated on the edge and had a complete disregard for caution. With an unusually broad smile, he helped his daughter, Kathy, steer from his lap. His wife, Elizabeth, was squeezed in beside them. From the nettled look on Elizabeth's face, the journey had been somewhat hazardous.

Mickey-Joe climbed out and shielded his wife and daughter from the Atlantic storm as they ran to the steps of the school.

Through the rain, Elizabeth saw a familiar figure hobbling purposefully towards them.

'Mickey-Joe, it's your mother!' Elizabeth called out to her,

'Nuala, what are you doing out in this weather? You'll catch your death.'

Mickey-Joe's mother, Nuala, wore a thick woollen coat which was bulging from the weight of the rain. Jam-jar glasses enlarged her smiling eyes, and her cheeks had been slapped red by the wind. Mickey-Joe caught her arm, and she leaned on him to climb up the steps.

Elizabeth looked worried.

'The doctor said you were to stay at home. You need to keep warm, Nuala.'

Nuala beamed, revealing shiny, white, false teeth.

'Nothing would warm me more than seeing the little chiseler's play.'

'Right, let's get this over with,' Mickey-Joe sighed as he opened the door of the school hall. Mickey-Joe had no idea how it had happened that he was here, at Donnie's nativity play, when he distinctly remembered telling his wife he hadn't a notion of going.

They opened the doors into a big, stuffy hall that smelt damp from all the drenched people lined in rows on uncomfortable wooden chairs. At the front of the hall, there was a makeshift curtain made from an old bedsheet and a dimly twinkling Christmas tree that had already shed most of its needles. Elizabeth, Mickey-Joe, Nuala and Kathy found some empty seats near the back of the hall. Mickey-Joe sat down with a breathy grunt and took off his sodden cap. He knew he would be here for longer than would be bearable. Beside him, Elizabeth placed her hand on his arm. Mickey-Joe wasn't sure if the pressure she was exerting was a display of gratitude that he was there or a warning not to leave. Kathy rested her head against Nuala's sopping coat as Nuala strained to see the stage through her fogged-up glasses and waited for her grandson's big moment.

At the front of the hall, Lorcan and Delia Brawley sat on the best seats in the house. Their only son, Francis, was in the play.

The Brawleys had inherited old Jack Brawley's estate and had moved back from London with big plans that never materialised. Lorcan was generous to a fault, helping locals whenever someone was on their uppers. His wife, Delia, provided a tight-fisted balance, underpaying staff and overspending on herself. Lorcan had long since realised he had married the wrong woman. Delia's initial beauty and charm were short-lived, and by the time they had their first child, Francis, they were sleeping in separate bedrooms. By then, they both knew that Francis would be the last offspring. Despite their private lack of affection, they kept up public appearances, and many wondered how a gentleman like Lorcan coped with his acerbic wife.

Lorcan reached into his pocket and felt the flask that provided him with his coping mechanism. Subtly, he took a small swig when Delia wasn't looking. Not just because she was likely to disapprove to keep her Holy Joe image intact in public but because he had no wish to share it with her.

'I still can't believe they didn't give Francis the part of Joseph,' Delia whined. 'After everything we've done for this school. Do you know *who* got it?'

Lorcan shook his head. He wasn't sure what the question had been and hoped that a shake of the head was an appropriate response. Sometimes he wasn't sure if Delia had spoken at all or if he just had a constant recording of her whining in his brain.

'It was Donnie McNamara. I can't get over it. I think that kid is retarded.'

She stared at Lorcan for his agreement, but none came.

Behind the makeshift curtain, Donnie felt an adrenalin rush. In that moment, he knew this was what he was born to do. His purpose in life was to act. His talent had finally been recognised because the part of Joseph usually went to the most popular kid or the most good-looking kid, and Donnie was neither. He was far from ugly, but he had a clumsy face, as if God had been

in a bit of a hurry when he put it together. The good Lord had blessed him with bright blue eyes and thick dark hair, but not much thought was put into fine-tuning the arrangement of the rest of his features. In Donnie's opinion, God had bestowed him with talent, and when the teacher recognised this and called out his name for Joseph, Donnie was so ecstatic he thought he would burst. This achievement was made all the sweeter because Francis Brawley, whom Donnie despised, had wanted the part of Joseph, but he had been given the part of the Innkeeper as a small consolation. Francis wasn't clever, but he was good-looking, athletic and rich, which seemed to make him very popular, and he got whatever he wanted. He lived at Brawley's estate with his parents. His parents wanted him to experience 'local life' at Bellvara's national school before enrolling in Ballycraven Boarding School. So Donnie eagerly awaited the day Francis would be shipped off, a heavy trunk in hand, out of Donnie's life. Donnie didn't know how the torment from Francis had started, but he could still taste the dirt in his mouth and hear Francis's taunting laugh as he tried to scramble to his feet and run away. He later found his school bag up the tree, missing a couple of sacred sweets, and every school book inside the bag had missing pages.

The curtain tumbled down, and the show was on! Donnie was ready to walk onstage with the very pretty Roísín O'Donnell, dressed perfectly as Mary. She offered Donnie her charming elfin smile as he linked arms with her. She elevated Donnie, and he squared his shoulders and looked straight ahead at Francis. To Donnie's surprise, Francis gave him a thumbs up.

Donnie and Roísín walked in front of the audience towards a prop door made from wooden pallets. Donnie knocked, and Francis, as the Innkeeper, opened the door.

'Is there any room at the Inn?' asked Donnie.

Francis smirked and, in a voice that boomed across the hall, answered, 'There is for Mary, but you can fuck off, Joseph!'