

Chapter 1. I am the sea-swell

One of the very few advantages of being dead, I've discovered, is that you can say whatever you like. Freed from the burden of exquisite politeness, you can utter whatever painful truths, cruel jibes, gut-wrenching confessions, and acid parting shots you wish, without having to endure the drama, endless protestations, embarrassment, or threats of retaliation such candor inevitably elicits.

Eamon Byrne thought as much, I suppose, but in saying what he did, he unleashed a howl of rage and bitterness so intense, perhaps not even he could have imagined its consequences. Certainly when I heard him speak from the grave, I thought him merely churlish and insensitive, although not altogether mistaken. But that was before I had more than a passing acquaintance with the people of whom he spoke. "I suppose you're wondering why I called you all together," Byrne began, a smirk on his face that turned into a grimace, then a gasp.

"Eamon always did like to be the centre of attention," Alex Stewart whispered to me, leaning close to my ear so the others wouldn't hear. "Eamon also had a way with a cliché, apparently," I whispered back.

"Particularly," the man went on after a few seconds of labored breathing, "particularly," he repeated, "seeing as how I'm dead."

"Bit of a comedian too," Alex added with a sigh.

The face on the videotape leaned toward the camera, blurred, then lurched back into focus, the camera adjusted by some invisible hand. It was not an easy face to look at, sunken cheeks and eyes, an oxygen tube extending from one nostril, gray hair plastered to his head, but I could see the shadow of a proud and once handsome man.

"I'm amazed he'd allow himself to be videotaped in this state," I whispered to Alex. Alex inclined his head toward me again. "I never had the impression he much cared what people thought, Lara. Quite the contrary as a matter of fact." As he spoke, a foot-long tortoise inched its way across the Oriental carpet.

"Shhhh," the pinched-faced woman in the row in front of us hissed over her shoulder. Two other like-faced women in the same row turned at the first's admonition to glare at us, mother and daughters, like three peas in a pod, the family resemblance that pronounced. I resisted the temptation of saying something unkind, and contented myself with glaring back and thinking uncharitable thoughts.

It was an unpleasant little group, I thought: the three women, and seated between them, like spacers of some kind, two men. The men had taken their jackets off, the oppressive heat and staleness of the room vanquishing any attempt at acknowledging the solemnity of the occasion. They slouched in their chairs, two white shirts and pale necks topped by fair hair, as much as I could see of them. For a moment they made me think of the cotton batting they stick between your toes when you're having a pedicure to keep you from messing up the wet nail polish. It was a surprisingly apt metaphor I was later to learn, not just because of what it said about the two men, but because of the way they divided the women of the family in life.

To our left, the big toe, was the mother, Margaret, tall, fair and stylishly thin, neat in a suitably black nubbly-wool suit, with the short, boxy jacket and braid that one associates with Chanel. She was justifiably proud of her legs, good for her age, which she crossed and uncrossed at regular intervals. Next to her sat the first ball of white fluff, her son-in-law, Sean McHugh, then his wife, Eithne, Margaret's eldest daughter, also tall, fair and thin, with an edginess about her that suggested she was the worrier of the family; then the next ball of cotton, Conail O'Connor, seated next to his wife Fionuala, the second daughter, who looked much like the others, except not quite so tall and with a certain blousiness that marked her as the vamp of the threesome. The women were united by both a rigidity in the spine and a bitterness of outlook that had carved itself into the features in their faces, most noticeably for the mother, who looked as if she had a chronic bad taste in her mouth, but already, too soon, for her daughters. The men, on the other hand, were

characterized by a softness about the chin and be belly that matched what I saw to be, in the very short time I'd known them, a propensity to indolence.

The next toe, had she chosen to sit with the others, would have been Breeta, the youngest daughter. Instead she sat slouched in an armchair, as far away as she could, in that crowded room, from her mother and siblings. She seemed a bit younger than her sisters, mid twenties I would have said. While the older sisters were the usual two or three years apart, there were at least six or seven years between Breeta and the next youngest, Fionuala. Breeta was, perhaps, the little surprise at the end of the child-bearing years, or a last ditch effort to save her parents' marriage. If it were the latter, it was unsuccessful, I'd warrant a guess. Overweight, with a rather pouty demeanor, but pretty nonetheless, she took after her father, I thought, looking at the face on the TV screen, with her dark hair and pale eyes, and bore only passing resemblance to the other three women. Her attitude was one I'd seen in others of her generation, a kind of studied indifference to the world around her. Whether this total lack of interest in the day's proceedings was feigned or genuine, I couldn't begin to guess.

The only person in the room who showed any evidence of regret for the passing of the deceased was a young man with flaming red hair, his face, flushed by the sun and sprinkled with freckles, genuinely solemn, I thought. He looked to be a man who did physical labor outdoors, his muscles straining the seams of his plain but neat suit jacket, his worn shirt collar tight around his neck. His name was Michael Davis, I'd learned, and in addition to being one of the few in the room who mourned Eamon Byrne, he was also one of the two people in the room treated with the same coolness by the rest of them as was Alex. Appropriately enough, Michael was stuffed into the back row with Alex and me, along with the other social outcast a man I had been told was a lawyer representing an as yet unidentified person.

The group was rounded out by two lawyers who were looking after Eamon's estate, a maid by the name of Deirdre -- I'd mentally named her Deirdre of the Sorrows because of her morose expression, whether habitual or brought out for the occasion I didn't know, and because as a loyal retainer at the Byrne estate, she was apparently entitled to the use of only one name -- and another indentured individual by the name of John, also of one name only, who smelled of stale booze and whose hands shook as he pointed everyone in the direction of their seats. John kept backing out into the hall from time to time for what I assumed to be a wee nip from a flask, a fact I might not have noticed, save for the fact that his shoes, black lace-ups, squeaked when he walked. Nor should I fail to include in my list of those present, the tortoise, a family pet that had the run, or should I say the slow walk, of the house. It was a new experience for me, having to keep a sharp eye out to avoid stepping on a pet tortoise, and it gave me a whole new appreciation for the way Diesel, Official Guard Cat for the antiques store I co-own, manages to stay out of everyone's way. Aside from the tortoise, what I found interesting sitting there watching all of this reasonably dispassionately, was that, although I could not see the faces of the five family members seated in front of us, except from time to time in profile or on the rare occasion on which they chose to acknowledge our presence by hissing at us, it was still quite possible to get an impression of how they felt about everything, and everyone.

It was quite evident from the back, for example, that while they were seated together for the occasion, and despite their similarities in appearance and attitude, most notably a chilly disdain, if not outright ill will toward Alex, they didn't get along. All the marks of a warring family were there. They rarely looked at each other, all the women sitting ramrod straight, heads resolutely forward, the men slouched down but never looking at anyone except their partners next to them. They also assiduously avoided looking at Breeta, although she, from time to time glanced their way, and they absolutely ignored Michael and the mystery lawyer. It must have taken a great effort of will not to look about the room or to turn one's head as the door banged, but iron will was something they apparently had in abundance.

It should be evident by now that I was not fond of these people. If any of them, with the possible exception of Michael Davis, had any redeeming qualities whatsoever, so far I hadn't come across them. As I glared back at the three women, I began to wish I hadn't come to Ireland at all, a thought I immediately regretted. If Alex Stewart felt the need of my presence here, then my presence he would have.

Alex Stewart is a very dear friend of mine, a retired gentleman who lives a couple of doors away from me, and who comes in on a regular basis to help us out at Greenhalgh & McClintoch. That's an antiques and design shop in a trendy part of Toronto called Yorkville, so trendy, in fact, that we probably can't afford to be there. Some months earlier, Alex suffered a blow on the head and what the doctors described as a very tiny stroke during his convalescence. It barely slowed him down, just a little numbness on one side for a few days, but it scared the living daylights out of me. I'd been clucking and fussing over him ever since in a way that I'm sure nearly drove him mad.

So when Charles McGlynn, solicitor with the firm of McCafferty and McGlynn of Dublin, no less, had called to tell Alex that his presence at the reading of the will of one Eamon Byrne was required, and Alex had expressed some reservations about going, I insisted upon coming along with him. To keep from embarrassing him, I told him I needed a holiday, and indeed, much to my own surprise, the idea of me taking a vacation being an even more novel idea than a tortoise for a pet, I decided to have one. In addition, I'd managed to convince a friend of mine, a sergeant in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police by the name of Rob Luczka, and his daughter Jennifer, to come along with us. The four of us planned to tour about Ireland after the reading of the Will.

Alex said he didn't know why he'd been summoned, but I was hoping that he'd come into a minor fortune of some kind so he could spend the rest of his days in luxury. I could think that knowing he'd continue to come into the store to help out anyway, that being the kind of person he was, but at least I wouldn't have to worry about whether or not he could afford to live on his pension and the paltry sum we were able to pay him.

Alex's airfare was to be covered by the Byrne estate, apparently, and I cashed in a few thousand frequent flyer points, of which I have approximately a billion, to get tickets for myself and Jennifer Luczka. I have that many points because the merchandise Sarah Greenhalgh and I sell in the shop is purchased all over the world. I do almost all the buying, since Sarah doesn't really enjoy that part of the business, on at least four major buying trips a year.

I don't know why I don't use my points more often. I tell people I'm saving them for a round-the-world trip, which I know I'll probably never take. Why should I? I'm doing what I love, and get all the travel anyone could want just doing my job. The truth is I'm rather superstitiously keeping the points in case Sarah and I are ever so broke that the only way we can stay in business is for me to travel free. My best friend Moira, who owns the swank beauty salon cum spa down the street, says that the accountants or actuaries who are paid to worry about such things as people hoarding enough points to bankrupt an airline will send someone to kill me one day.

We'd only been in Ireland for twenty-four hours or so, and I was already beginning to regret using those points. There we were, seated in the gloom of a room in Eamon Byrne's estate, which, according to a discreet sign out at the road, was called Second Chance. The house was quite beautiful, pale yellow stucco with black roof and white trim, an impressive long and curving drive, and acres and acres of grounds stretching toward the sea. The driveway was lined with hydrangea bushes laden with stunning pink, blue and purple flowers so heavy they almost touched the ground. Across the back of the house was a sun room, all done up in white wicker and green chintz, with a view of an absolutely gorgeous gardens, and further away, across a stone patio and staircase lined with white plaster urns, the blue of Dingle Bay. It was remarkably light and airy, quite in contrast with the general mood of the place.

We, however, were in the library, which suited the occasion to a T. A rather large and impressive room also at the back of the house off the sunroom, it was panelled in very dark wood, with oversized black leather chairs and a desk so large they must have had to build the house around it. The library had apparently also served as Eamon Byrne's study. On this occasion, the curtains, of bordello red velvet, floor to ceiling, were pulled across the very large windows to keep out the daylight, and regrettably both the air and the view, all the better to enjoy the show. The room had, to my occasionally oversensitive nose, a faint smell of antiseptic.

In contrast to the quiet elegance of the exterior of the house, this room was cluttered, almost to the point of chaos. Byrne, it appeared, was an inveterate collector, and not necessarily a discriminating one. This is not to say that what he collected wasn't good -- a cursory glance about me when we'd first arrived indicated he knew what he was collecting very well -- but he didn't appear, at first glance anyway, to restrict himself to a specialty. If there was a unifying theme to his collecting, it was not immediately apparent to me. There were paintings, prints, books, hundreds of them, many of them leather-bound and quite old, on shelves, piled on the furniture and on the floor, which itself was covered by three Oriental carpets of real quality.

The paintings that adorned the walls, oils all of them, were dark, primarily of large sailing ships battling either the elements or enemy ships at sea. Along one wall were glass cases in which were displayed some very old weapons, largely swords and spear tips, and on the bottom shelf of the case were rather extraordinary iron pots or bowls, some of them at least twelve inches in diameter, others even larger; Iron Age cauldrons, I decided. All were laid out against a red velvet backdrop, a perfect match for the curtains. I figured, as I looked about me, that it must have taken tens of thousands of dollars and about a mile of red velvet to do the room. A single sword, its blade eaten away in places by time, was mounted on the wall behind the desk, and another, obviously special, was mounted under glass on the desk. It was an impressive collection to be sure, but it did lend a rather menacing air to the proceedings. It made me think that, for Eamon Byrne, on the assumption it was he who'd amassed the paintings and the weapons, life was one long battle of some kind.

The television and VCR were placed on the credenza behind the massive desk, the TV raised on a stack of books. It was placed just slightly to one side of the desk chair, which gave the impression, from the angle at which I was sitting, squashed with Alex at the back of the room behind the more important people in Eamon's life, that the talking head was where it would have been had Eamon been alive, a sight that would normally have made me giggle, had the situation not been so lacking in humor.

With the exception of Breeta, flopped in the large armchair folding and refolding a lace handkerchief, the rest of us were perched on rather uncomfortable metal folding chairs in two semi-circles around the desk. The VCR was being handled by Charles McCafferty, one half of McCafferty and McGlynn. At least I think it was McCafferty. He and his partner wore virtually identical rather expensive-looking suits, dark, nice cut, matching vests with watches and fobs, and white shirts with very starched high collars and French cuffs with silver cuff links. They also sported almost identical designer haircuts, and expensive-looking reading glasses that allowed them to peer down their noses at the rest of the world. One distinguished them, apparently, by the pattern on their silver-gray ties, one diamonds, the other stripes, their idea, I suppose, of rugged individuality. I'd mentally named them Tweedledum and Tweedledee. I shouldn't do this, I know, make up monickers, often, but not always, disparaging, for people all the time. But, let's face it, I'm dreadful at remembering names. And no matter what I called them, McCafferty and McGlynn appeared to be doing quite nicely, thank you. They had that prosperous look to them, lack of sartorial originality notwithstanding. It was humbling to think that for what they had both forked out to dress themselves, I could probably pay off my mortgage.

"You'll be hearing shortly from either McCafferty or McGlynn -- they're virtually interchangeable as far as I'm concerned -- about the terms of my will," Eamon Byrne continued after another long pause for breath. Tweedledum looked uncomfortable with Byrne's notion that he and Tweedledee were indistinguishable, although I could not have agreed more. The three hags, as I'd already come to call them, turned their attention from us back to the television.

"Not to keep you in suspense, you will find that I have left my company, Byrne Enterprises, to my daughters Eithne and Fionuala, or Eriu and Fotla as I liked to call them when they were small, and de facto, I suppose, to their husbands Sean and Conail. Sean and Conail have, of course, been running, or should I say running down, the business during my illness, seeing as how they prefer warming the seats of their favorite bar stools to an honest day's work, in Conail's case, or swanking around like an English squire, in Sean's." The two men shuffled angrily in their seats, as the face, drawn with the effort, continued speaking. "I expect that unless my daughters see their way clear to turfing the two laggards out, their inheritance will quickly become worthless."

"To my wife Margaret I have left Second Chance, including the land, the house, and all its contents, with two exceptions, Rose Cottage, which I will speak of later, and my collection of antique weapons, maps and manuscripts, which, by previous arrangement, I leave to Trinity College, Dublin. I have also provided her with an allowance that most would consider generous, but which she will no doubt consider miserly. Being responsible for the upkeep of the house and grounds should be instructional for Margaret, who may begin to have some appreciation for what it took to keep her in the style which she felt her due. Unless she can find herself another husband of some means in short order, I expect she'll be selling it soon." Judging by the knots at the back of Margaret's jaw, accompanied as they were by a sharp intake of breath, she was less than amused.

"To my youngest daughter, Breeta, who, until she left home in a fury two years ago, was my favorite, my little Banba -- I'm sure I'm not telling my other two something they didn't know -- I leave nothing. She said she despised my money, and so she gets none of it." Breeta said nothing, only bending, perhaps to hide her face, to pick up the tortoise as he began to amble under her chair. She sat stroking its little head as if this was the only thing in the world there was to do.

"I have settled upon what I hope is a generous sum for the staff of Second Chance. In addition, I have made arrangements for a monthly stipend to be paid to Michael Davis, if he agrees to go back to finish his schooling. I sincerely hope he will take me up on my offer, and make something of himself. He has eased the burden of the last few weeks for me considerably." All eyes turned to Michael, none that I could see friendly. Michael looked charmingly grateful for his good fortune, but his furrowed brow indicated he wasn't sure how he'd eased Eamon's burden.

"Rose Cottage, its contents, and the land on which it sits, I leave to Alex Stewart of Toronto, who I hope is here today. It is Alex who gave me my second chance which, despite everything, I am grateful for, no matter what I said at the time, and while he has refused my offer of compensation during my lifetime, I hope he will accept this now. Rose Cottage has been a place of great pleasure to me and I hope that Alex will enjoy it too."

Rose Cottage, I thought. Not quite the small fortune I'd had in mind for Alex, perhaps. He certainly looked somewhat taken aback by the notion. I had a sudden vision of a stone cottage, its front yard ablaze with flowers, a miniature version of the grounds at Second Chance. Roses in profusion, that was its name after all. White and pink, I decided, ramping up trellises, arching over the entranceway. A thatched roof, of course. Inside, whitewashed walls and dark, exposed beams, a huge stone fireplace, logs blazing, a carved wooden swan on the mantelpiece. Huge comfy sofas, down-filled, perhaps, covered in chintz in what? A soft, hazy green? Celadon, perhaps? No, wait, rose, dusty rose. It would have to be rose. But large and soft and squishy. Sofas to sink way down into, a good book and a glass of sherry at hand. Alex would have to modernize the kitchen and plumbing, no doubt, but that would be fine. I'd help him. And there'd be a shortage of closets, but I'd ship over a couple of antique armoires from the store as a present. Minor details. In short, it was perfect. The floors would probably need refinishing, wide planks, stained dark, with area rugs, dhurries, I'd think, that would pick up the rose, with the celadon and cream.....

My mental excursion through the ozone was disturbed by the crackle of psychic tension in the room. When I came to, as it were, Margaret was so tense that cords stood out on her neck, and even from the back I could tell her jaw was rather firmly clenched. Breeta sobbed just once, out loud. Her older sisters' shoulders were hunched up to their ears. As Eamon spoke about Alex, the anger in the room, kept in check so far, threatened to boil over. They may not have been too thrilled about Michael's good fortune, but Alex's, for some reason, really bothered them. The face, undeterred, stopped only for a moment to sip liquid through a straw. "There is one other person who may be here, but who, fearing the wrath of my family, may send a representative instead." The hags turned and looked at the lawyer seated to our right. He nodded and smiled somewhat less than pleasantly at their direction.

"I have, with regret, acceded to my family's wishes, and have left nothing for Pdraig Gilhooly in my estate." The lawyer, who I surmised was representing this Gilhooly fellow, whoever he was, frowned. Margaret's back relaxed a little. The face continued. "I want Pdraig to know that nothing would have made

me happier than to have him accepted in our household. Perhaps he will sue for a share of the estate. It is one of the benefits of being dead that I will not have to deal with this. I leave that family squabble and all the others I have had to endure, to the living.

"It is a source of considerable pain to me that there is so much strife in this family. In an effort to address this, even in death, I have designed an exercise that will require you to work together." Shoulders stiffened all around the room.

"As unorthodox as this may be, I have some hope for it, the foolish optimism of a dying man, if you will. I have asked that after the Will is read, McCafferty and McGlynn give each of you an envelope. These two legal bookends have objected, of course, that this is not appropriate. Their protestations, mild as they were, were intended no doubt to protect their backsides should anything untoward occur, while still permitting them to collect the additional fee they require for this endeavor. They are too accustomed to the lush lifestyle of St. Stephen's Green to refuse my request, particularly when I told them I would find other executors for my estate if they did so.

"In each of the envelopes there is a clue that, taken with the others, will lead to something of great value. One clue in itself will not get you there. Some lead to information about the object itself; others point to its location. In other words, to find it, you must work together. I am not trying to be even remotely subtle about this. If you need a reason to participate, let me remind you of what I have already said. For some of you there is nothing from me on my death, for others, not as much as they might like. Those who have received something of value from me may well find that what I have left you has become worthless. This object has, if you find it, sufficient value to help you all. I would urge you to learn to work and live in harmony. I very much doubt that you will be able to do so, but I sincerely hope you will prove me wrong. If you do not, then something truly remarkable and priceless will remain hidden, possibly forever. That is all I have to say."

With that, the face raised one hand in what could be interpreted as a gesture of dismissal, either for the cameraman or all of us. The camera drew back from the face slightly to reveal yet more tubes and hospital paraphernalia, rows of pill bottles on a bedside table. From Byrne there came no expressions of affection, not even a good bye, just the picture of a dying man lying there, lines of pain etched into his face, slowly fading to black.

For a minute or two, we all sat looking at the blank screen as we contemplated the last words of Eamon Byrne, no sound save a vague hiss from the television, the ticking of a clock in the hall, a muffled call of birds, the rustle of palm fronds, and somewhere far away, the faint roar of a wind-swept sea.

Breeta bestirred herself first. "Effing brill, Da," she sighed, hoisting herself out of the chair and heading for the door. "Just effing brill."

"What does effing brill mean?" Alex, looking perplexed, whispered to me, as we watched Breeta's exit.

"I think the second word is brilliant, and the first begins with an f," I whispered back.

Alex looked over at Breeta's rather large departing rear and shook his head disapprovingly. I stifled a smile. Alex was, for many years, a purser in the merchant marine, no less, but I have never heard an obscenity pass his lips, nor have I ever heard him swear. I, on the other hand.... But so much for stereotypes.

Tweedledee nervously cleared his throat as a signal that the more formal part of the proceedings was to begin. "Most unusual," he began. "I suppose it is necessary for Miss Breeta Byrne to attend?" he said, looking over at Tweedledum.

"Highly unusual. Should be here," Tweedledum replied. Tweedledee shuffled papers uncomfortably for a moment or two, as Deirdre pulled open the curtains. I could see Breeta heading down through the garden toward the sea.

"May I suggest we all take a short break," Tweedledum said. "Perhaps Deirdre," he said turning to the maid, "you would bring us some fresh tea, and Mr. Davis," he said, thinking better than to ask John to do anything too taxing, seeing as how he'd backed out of the room several times during the proceedings, "you might go and ask Miss Byrne to oblige us by returning to the house."

The fabulous five in front of us arose as if one unit and in single file, left the room. Needless to say, no one bothered to suggest we join them or have a tour of the house or anything, leaving Alex and I and Padraig Gilhooly's lawyer to fend for ourselves, while Tweedledum and Tweedledee fussed with papers and envelopes. Gathering that we were to stay where we were, I gratefully unfolded myself from the uncomfortable chair, and being no longer obliged to watch out for the tortoise, Breetta having taken the creature with her, stretched and looked about me as Michael Davis, visible through french doors on to the patio, jogged off in the direction we'd last seen Byrne's youngest daughter.

It perhaps goes without saying that the reason I am in the antiques business is that I love antiques, and once I'd adjusted to the chaos in Eamon Byrne's room, and freed from the acid glances of his family, the place was a real feast for the eyes and the soul for someone like me.

You can tell a lot about people from the art they collect, and while I was sticking with my snap analysis that life for Byrne was a battle of some kind, I began to see a thread of coherence in what he'd amassed. I decided after a few minutes that the paintings were the anomaly. They'd probably been in the family, his or hers I wasn't sure, for a long time, and they'd been positioned where Byrne, sitting at his desk, wouldn't see much of them.

What Byrne did like to look at were two things: the weapon collection, and his maps. The weapons were, I decided, very old and reasonably consistent with a particular period, although I wasn't sure what that period would be. That is to say, Byrne did not collect weapons in general, he collected a specific period. There were no muskets and pistols, for example, no Prussian helmets or war medals, just very old swords and spear points.

Maps were everywhere in that room, framed on the walls, spread out on a work table, lying about the room in the form of large atlases. There were also several rolls in the corner of the room, and I'd be willing to wager dollars to doughnuts that they, too, were maps. As well, there was a cabinet with long shallow drawers that would probably house more maps.

I've had old maps in the shop from time to time, and at that time was beginning to look for more of them for a new customer who was an avid collector. Essentially, most of the maps you see on the average wall these days are prints pulled from old atlases, and most of them date to the middle and late nineteenth century.

Botanicals, botanical prints, have been very trendy lately, and prices have soared, but I've found maps to be a nice steady item. A lot of people buy them because they look nice on their paneled den walls, decorator art I call it, but there are serious collectors out there who look for the rare and unusual and are prepared to pay for it. These people are particularly thrilled by sheet maps, that is maps that are not cut out of atlases, but were printed or, in really rare cases, drawn, on individual sheets of paper or textile.

My customer, an normally amiable fellow by the name of Matthew Wright who collected early maps of the British Isles, would have killed, or at least seriously maimed, for a couple of Byrne's. Matthew has told me that Britain and Ireland were known to the ancients, due to a flourishing trade with the islands, and that as august a personage as the Alexandrian astronomer Ptolemy had mapped that area in the second century. All of Byrne's maps were of Ireland, and a couple of them at least I recognized. One was a Speed map, John Speed having been a mapmaker in the early seventeenth century. It was not entirely accurate, in terms of its survey of Ireland, but it was undoubtedly the best of its time. Byrne's was dated 1610, and while it was not necessarily a first edition, because Speed's maps were usually dated then, but were copied for a long time afterward, I was reasonably sure it was an original.

Another map was attributed, according to a bronze plaque on its frame, to William Petty, who, if I remembered correctly, had produced the first atlas of Ireland sometime in the seventeenth century. There was a third map, under glass on top of the map cabinet, that was rather charming, with the lines of sunrise and sunset over Ireland for several points during the year depicted, along with drawings of monsters arising from the sea around Ireland's shores. The rest of the framed maps were also good, although not as unique as the Speed and the Petty, but an impressive collection indeed. I could see why Byrne had seen fit to leave it to Trinity College, and I expected they'd be more than pleased to have it.

What was interesting, if one were inclined to try to understand Byrne from this collection, was that in addition to the framed maps, there were hundreds of others, none of them, to my relatively untrained eyes at least, valuable, attractive, old, or particularly noteworthy in any way. There were current Ordnance maps, Michelin road maps, maps of all shapes and sizes. This said to me that while Byrne collected the weapons for their antiquity, he collected maps for a different reason, one that I thought at the time I would probably never know. After a few minutes delay, no doubt to first serve the family, Deirdre wheeled in the tea service on a little trolley, handing cups of tea all round. I thought a sip or two of the legendary Irish whiskey would have been a considerable improvement, but understood that the occasion called for solemn sobriety.

"He died right there," Deirdre said, after handing me my teacup. "Right where you're standing." Involuntarily, I jumped, almost dumping my tea on the oriental carpet.

"We had his bed set up in here," she went on, not noticing my distress. "He couldn't get up the stairs at the end. Lung cancer," she added. "Came on sudden. Very bad, it was. He liked it here, though, with his books and his maps, and the view of the garden and the sea. We put the bed where he could look out. He was alone. Sad really. The night nurse hadn't come in yet and the rest of them," she said, tossing her head in the direction we'd last seen the family, "were at dinner. And Breeta long gone." Deirdre looked even more morose, if that was possible. "In the prime of life, he was, not old at all. I thought he'd last till Christmas, you know. Lots of people do, hold on until Christmas, I mean."

"Why don't we have a look outside?" Alex said, taking my elbow.

"Fine idea," I said gratefully, and Alex and I, throwing caution to the winds, risked the ire of the Byrne family by opening the french doors and stepping outside to the flagstone patio at the back of the house. We stood there soaking up the sun while we waited, carefully sipping cups of tea so strong and hot you could feel it corroding your insides on the way down.

"What a place!" I exclaimed when we were out in the fresh air. Alex nodded.

"What did Byrne mean when he said you'd given him a second chance?" I went on. Alex had told me he'd known Byrne many years before, that's all. In fact, I'd found him a little cagey on the subject, an attitude I was soon to find out was due to a promise he'd made Byrne so many years before.

Alex gestured to me to move away from the house. "I'm not sure how much his family knows of this," he said quietly, "so let's make sure we're well out of earshot." We moved into the gardens, pausing to enjoy the scent of a profusion of rose bushes.

"The first time I saw Eamon Byrne he was holding up the bar in a seedy dive in Singapore." Alex began. "My ship was in dry dock for repairs, and so I and the lads had a bit of shore leave. Eamon was drunk, of course, the proverbial drunken Irishman, and a little morose, to boot. Not a happy drunk, but a talkative one. You know how it is, people who want to talk whether you want to listen or not. Went on and on about Ireland, how beautiful it was, but none so fair as the woman he loved and lost, that kind of thing. Real drivel, I thought. In fact, I'd have to say he was a crashing bore. But I went back the next night, same place. The booze was cheap, and they didn't water it down too much. Eamon was there again, just as drunk.

"This time he wasn't nearly as talkative. Just stood there holding up the bar, downing glass after glass of cheap Irish whiskey, crying into his glass. Hard to say, isn't it, which is worse: a talkative drunk or a

morose one. The only thing he told me was how he'd let his family, his mother, I think, down. He was a disgrace, really. Smelled bad, and it was not just the booze. Hadn't bathed in days. I just wanted to get rid of him.

"One minute he's got his head on the bar, then, in a flash, he's straightened his back, as if he's reached some resolution, some conclusion, and he staggers off the bar stool and out into the street. I have no idea why I did it, he was so unpleasant, a sixth sense maybe, but I followed him. He walked down to the water and stood for the longest time on the pier, brooding, staring into the water. I was about to pack it in when suddenly, quick as a wink, he threw himself in. Even in the dim beam from the light at the end of the pier, I could see he couldn't swim. He didn't even try. Just sank like a stone. Well, what was I to do? Just stand there and watch him drown? I went after him.

"Are you saying he couldn't swim, or that he wouldn't?" I interrupted.

"Probably couldn't. A lot of sailors refuse to learn to swim. Figure if they go overboard in the north Atlantic, or somewhere like that, they might as well go straight to the bottom as struggle hopelessly on."

"But you're saying he was trying to kill himself. That it wasn't an accident."

"It was no accident, of that I am certain. It was really hard to find him in the dark and I can't tell you how heavy he was, but I managed to haul him out. The poor sod was trying to fight me off, but he was too drunk. I dragged him back to a filthy little hotel, him cursing at me -- his daughter comes by her choice of language honestly, I must say -- put him to bed, and watched over him while he slept. The next day I made him wash, and we had a little chat about life, the one I had from time to time with the young lads on the ship who went somewhat astray, shall we say. We had a terrible row, actually. Somewhat comic, I'd think, in the overall scheme of things, if it wasn't so desperate. Here I was trying to think of reasons why he shouldn't kill himself, and him arguing with me.

"I told him a life was a terrible thing to waste, and he told me his wasn't worth saving. Then I told him he was a coward, doing what he did, no matter what had happened to him. He said it was his life, and up to him what he did with it. I wasn't making too much headway until I noticed he was wearing a small cross around his neck. I told him he'd roast in hell if he died by his own hand. I remember he just looked at me, then said he'd roast in hell for much worse things than that. But it seemed to do the trick. He pulled himself together. In the end, he forgave me for saving him, I guess. He said something to the effect that it wasn't my fault because a man could only go when he was called, and that he hadn't been called that day in Singapore. Nice fatalistic touch, really, the idea that your day of death is preordained. Superstitious people, the Irish, in many ways."

"No hint of what he'd done that was so terrible, then?" I asked.

"He said he'd broken something actually, although I can't recall what it was."

"Just a minute," I said. "Are you telling me he tried to kill himself because he knocked over the family's favorite Royal Doulton figurine, or something?"

"It would be more likely to be the Waterford crystal here in Ireland, don't you think?" Alex smiled. "No, I think it was something more like a taboo. He used a word I didn't recognize, it wasn't English. I wish I could remember it, because someone around here might be able to tell me what it was. Maybe it will come back to me. The memory isn't what it used to be, unfortunately. Old age, I'm afraid."

"It's still better than mine," I replied. "So then what? Obviously you were successful in talking him out of suicide."

"I got him a job as a deck hand, and for the next few months we sailed together. It's backbreaking work, you know, on those ships, but it was what he needed, I guess, and he was a good worker. When we got back to Europe, he took his wages, which he'd managed not to drink, and left the ship. He made me

promise I'd never tell anyone about what he called his moment of weakness, and I never have until this very moment. And I don't think I'll tell his family now, quite frankly, even though it doesn't much matter, I suppose, now that he's dead.

"I can't say I really got to know him, we'd never be close friends, and we lost touch soon after. I'd never seen him again until today. If you count that video as seeing him, that is. That and his picture in one of those business magazines about five years ago: he was being touted as a big success in one of those international roundups or whatever they call them. I recognized him, although he looked a whole lot different. To be honest with you, I have no idea why he should remember me in his Will, really. I did very little for him, and I certainly wasn't expecting to be given anything when he died."

"He said you'd refused compensation before," I said.

"He sent me a letter about ten years after we'd parted company with a check for ten thousand Irish punt in it -- his fortunes had clearly improved over the intervening years -- but no return address. I never cashed it. There was no reason for him to do that, really."

"It makes perfect sense to me," I said. "As he said, you gave him a second chance. He even named his house and property Second Chance, didn't he? It was an important moment, a watershed of some sort in his life." Alex shrugged. "I wonder where this Rose Cottage of yours is," I added. "I hope it's nice." At this moment Michael Davis hove into view. "I didn't find Breeta," he said. "I looked everywhere. What'll we do?"

Michael's news required a major consultation on the part of Tweedledum and Tweedledee, but in the end they opted to proceed with the reading of the last Will and Testament of Eamon O'Neill Byrne of County Kerry, Ireland. There were no surprises, except perhaps to learn that both Deirdre and John had two names, like the rest of us: Flood in Deirdre's case, Deirdre Flood, and Herlihy in the case of John. Michael Davis looked suitably grateful for the gift Eamon had bestowed upon him, John Herlihy surreptitiously poured himself a congratulatory drink from a crystal decanter on a side table, and even Deirdre of the Sorrows showed something akin to a small smile when she heard what she would get. They were reasonably generous sums, Deirdre's not being as large as John's, which I took to mean she had joined the staff at Second Chance rather later than he had. The lawyer for Pdraig Gilhooly sat stone-faced through the whole affair, and shoulders stiffened once again when Tweedledee came to the part about Alex and Rose Cottage. The sons-in-law squirmed with pleasure when their wives' inheritance of Byrne Enterprises was confirmed and Margaret looked suitably shocked, as her husband had predicted, by the mere pittance, though plenty by most standards, that he'd left her. There were the usual puts and takes: an unbelievably complicated formula on how, if any of them died, where the remaining funds were to go, and so on. I confess I didn't pay much attention.

Then came the moment, considered unorthodox even by Byrne himself, when the two lawyers went about the room handing all those named in the Will, an envelope with their names on it scrawled in a shaky hand: Eamon Byrne's, no doubt, written with one last dying effort. Margaret got one, as did both Eithne and Fionuala, and also, surprisingly, since this was to have been a family exercise, Alex, Michael, and Pdraig Gilhooly's lawyer. Only one envelope remained unclaimed: Breeta's, since she wasn't there to receive it. Tweedledum took that one, and with fanfare, locked it in the safe in the wall of Byrne's office.

Everyone sat looking at their envelopes, nice creamy linen ones with the initials EONB embossed on the flap, as if opening them might set off a letter bomb. All except Alex that is. He opened his immediately and stood up. "I'm not sure I approve of this," he said, "but, in the interests of getting it over with, mine says 'I am the sea-swell'." The rest of them all sat there for a moment staring at their hands, not looking at Alex, nor anyone else for that matter. Then they got up, every last one of them, and clutching their envelopes, unopened, hastened from the room.