

ISBN 978-1-78270-321-1

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First published by Award Publications Limited 2018

Published by Award Publications Limited,  
The Old Riding School, Welbeck,  
Worksop, S80 3LR

[www.awardpublications.co.uk](http://www.awardpublications.co.uk)

18 1

Printed in the United Kingdom

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## Prologue

*In a very beautiful and sacred place, an extremely long way from where you are reading these words, stood a huge wooden statue of a happy, smiling God. He guarded some priceless treasures, which any man would marvel at and a terrible few would seek to possess.*

*And, in a very dark and squalid place, which is also an extremely long way from you, and even further away from the huge statue of the smiling God, there sat three ruthless and villainous men, huddled together in a grimy basement.*

*These shadowy figures sat hunched over a small table under a single shaft of light, studying an ornate and ancient map. The beam picked out its amazing intricacies, as well as the rising smoke from a pungent and highly distinctive cigar that the largest of the three men smoked as if his life depended on it. He and his fair haired companion listened with grim determination as the oldest man of the trio told them excitedly of his wicked plan.*

*It was really a very simple scheme: to steal the priceless relics from under the nose of the mighty statue,*

*so that they would sit forever in the old man's collection, for his eyes and his enjoyment only. The man was impossibly rich and very used to the two men opposite acquiring the objects of his desire. Indeed some years before they had stolen the very map laid out before them from an ancient order of Celtic wizards, who had been searching for it high and low ever since.*

*In truth this latest undertaking was simple, the only difficulty being that of endurance, because the treasures were housed on a plateau set amongst the most colossal mountains on earth. But the two younger villains were well used to strenuous challenges in the execution of the old man's fiendish dreams.*

*His gnarled hands slid two things across the exquisitely decorated map, as if making a move on an elaborate board game, travelling from one continent to another. The first was a bulging rag doll made of red and green patchwork pieces, which contained in its hollowed stomach their expenses of \$30,000 dollars. The second article was an enormous box of cigars; a present for the larger man and his personal favourites. His face lit up with a greedy smile when he saw the gift, as his sinister fair haired companion carefully counted the money and the old collector watched them both like a hawk.*

*Finally, they all nodded in agreement and the old man carefully rolled up the beautiful map. All three retreated from the table like a receding fog, leaving only the solitary light to pick up the remnants of the disturbed*

*cigar smoke, as it rose into the darkness, filling the dingy basement with its distinctive aroma. An aroma that would be impossible for anyone to forget. An aroma that would linger for an eternity, long after both the cigar and its smoker were gone.*

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## Chapter One

Connor knocked on the door of number 10 Normandy Avenue. It was the first gloriously hot sunny Sunday of the summer holidays. Connor had been looking forward to his best friend Freddie's birthday bash all week; to a house full of fun and laughter and most importantly, fabulous food.

The August sunshine blazed on his back as he heard footsteps from within. Freddie flung the door open wide, smiled and then winked.

"Perfect timing as usual, mate. Mum's just putting the grub out."

Freddie's real birthday wasn't until Friday, but Mrs Malone had decided that a weekend party would mean more people could attend and she was right; the lounge, kitchen and small garden were jam-packed, resounding with the animated Irish voices of all Freddie's relatives, mixed with music

and bursts of laughter.

Connor smiled at Mrs M, who was organising the table at the far end of the lounge. It was absolutely groaning with awesome food, with more large platters on every other available surface.

“Help yerself Connor, darlin’,” she said. “Thanks so much for coming. Let’s look at yer, don’t yer scrub up well?”

Connor mumbled his thanks and filled his plate, mainly with pork pie and salami at this first visit to the feast. He moved into the garden and spotted both of Freddie’s gorgeous grown up sisters. They were helping Mr Malone, who was dashing about, servicing the glasses of his guests, looking as wiry and vibrant as usual.

Freddie was slim like his dad with a tonne of mousey brown hair. He and Connor were complete physical opposites, different in practically every way, but they were nevertheless inseperable best friends.

Ten minutes later as Connor next refreshed his plate the front door suddenly seemed to burst open and with his usual whirlwind entrance, Freddie’s mad Uncle Patrick arrived in the centre of the lounge, wearing the loudest Hawaiian shirt ever created. He had a box of his favourite Irish beer under one arm and tucked under his other was an intriguing four foot cylinder.

Freddie tugged at the strange tube. “What’s this?”

Patrick swatted his hand away. “Ah, get arf lad! All in good time. Patience is a virtue, and we need all the virtue we can get in this family,” he said with a laugh and a glint in his dancing blue eyes.

He put down the box of beer, ruffled Connor’s super-neat black hair and pointed through the doorway, saying,

“Connor, I need the biggest glass you can find in that there kitchen.”

With a big smile on his face and a couple of sausage rolls for the journey, Connor headed off. It wasn’t a party until Uncle Patrick showed up, but it took him five minutes to get his hair back the way he wanted it.

With his best friend in great demand with all of his relatives, Connor was happy to wander about and chat to everyone. He felt like a celebrity. They all knew who he was and said things like, “So you’re Freddie’s famous best friend are you?” The only chat he didn’t enjoy was with a really old, deaf guy, a great Uncle of Freddie’s called Finnegan. However loud Connor tried to answer his questions, he couldn’t make himself heard or understood. Eventually he gave up and headed off back to the buffet. As he walked away, he heard Finnegan proclaim to his equally old and deaf wife,

“He’s no stranger to a pork pie is he, Kathleen!” Connor restored his shaken confidence with a second slice of Mrs M’s lemon drizzle cake.

It was soon time for Freddie to open his presents. There were Nintendo games, some cool trainers, the odd five and ten pound note (new school socks from Kathleen and Finnegan! “Great! – Just what I need!” Freddie politely gushed) Connor watched as Freddie continued to unwrap a succession of gifts any thirteen year old boy would be thrilled with.

Then Uncle Patrick finally stepped forward. With outstretched arms and a mock curtsie he ceremoniously handed Freddie the mysterious cardboard tube, which he had not put down since his arrival. Connor knew that whatever was housed within must be truly special. Freddie took delivery of the gift with two careful hands. He cautiously opened one end and gently shook the contents free of the tube.

There were excited gasps when an ancient-looking scroll was revealed from its depths. Connor had never seen anything like it in real life.

“Wow!” he gasped and stepped forward to help Freddie unroll the intriguing present. As they moved apart slowly, a huge antique Map of the World was revealed between the two boys, with all the countries in different, bright colours and all the cities, deserts and mountains clearly marked. It



had beautifully painted animals scattered around their home continents, and famous buildings and landmarks illustrated next to each major city. It shimmered and glowed in the August sunshine, with little sparks of light flashing from the paint pigment as the sun's rays caught it at different angles. Connor saw Patrick and Finnegan share a little smile across the hushed garden.

Freddie was speechless. It was an amazing present. He felt like it should be on display in a world famous museum, not due to be hung in the third bedroom of a suburban semi-detached house. He hugged his favourite uncle and eventually stammered. "It's the best ... Thank you. It's just brilliant."

The Map smelt truly wonderful; a little musty, but more like a mysterious blend of exotic spices, as if bought from a faraway street market. It oozed a sense of power. As Freddie held it, he felt a deep calm and tranquility flood through his limbs. That feeling couldn't have come at a better time, as it was an old family tradition for the Malones to perform on their birthdays and Freddie's task had been set months before. Now his big moment had arrived and a slightly wobbly Uncle Patrick tapped his near empty beer glass until silence fell amongst the expectant crowd.

"As you all know, this young man has reached

an important milestone. And in the tradition of the Malones, he will perform, perhaps the most special task of his young life, because the poem he must recite is one of the most important things ever written. It contains the wisdom of a man called Kipling – that’s the poet Connor, not the cakemaker!” Connor happily blushed amongst the good natured laughter, thrilled to be included in the speech in whatever capacity. Patrick slapped him hard on the back, re-ruffled his now neat again hair and continued,

“Rudyard Kipling crafted a great gift for the world. A poem called ‘If—’. I hereby declare that my favourite nephew—”

“You’ve only got one!” pitched in Mr M as if in a double act with Patrick.

“That’s as maybe, Declan, but nevertheless I still declare that if you follow the poem’s wonderful advice, and strictly navigate the road ahead with your new map, there will not be a problem in life that can’t be solved. May it guide you safely through all your own magnificent adventures.” *It was typical Uncle Patrick*, thought Freddie. *Always slightly over-doing the build up.*

But now it was his turn. Freddie was gently thrust forward by his dad as Connor held the map and nodded encouragement. Freddie took a deep breath and began his recital. After the first line,

he felt his nerves melt away and he made a sound job of reciting the poem. A huge cheer erupted at the conclusion and Freddie's mum had to be given a hankie by Kathleen, who grumbled loudly to Finnegan that she hadn't heard a single word. But Finnegan just smiled serenely as if he'd heard everything perfectly. Patrick beamed and wrapped Freddie in a giant bearhug.

Connor thought the poem and Freddie's performance were totally brilliant. During the last few climactic lines, he scanned the smiling faces and felt a rush of happiness that he was involved in the warm and happy gathering. Everyone wanted him there, especially his cool best friend – and it was all just about to get better; Freddie's Birthday cake was being cut and Connor had his eye on a large side bit, which consequently had double the icing.