

CHAPTER ONE

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

The rising sun cast an amber glow upon the sky, transforming the surface of La Rochelle's motionless harbour into a perfect mirror in which its handsome towers and the sail masts of boats were brilliantly reflected.

A crisp, morning breeze blew gently from within the township, carrying with it the scent of freshly ground coffee and golden pastries from surrounding restaurants and bakeries.

Irrespective of the harbour's splendours, it was with a heavy heart that Giselle McTavish stood at the edge of the pier. Her eyes darted desperately about in search of her uncle's yacht.

It was nowhere to be seen.

Besides the familiar ships and sailboats that permanently occupied the harbour, the only other vessel was an antique galleon, so large it made all the other boats look miniature by comparison. Outfitted with

enormous brown sails and with a hull swollen like a bloated belly it was the kind of ship no longer seen in the world.

Giselle checked the clock tower. It was 7:56.

“Good morning,” a man muttered deeply, taking her by surprise. She hadn’t noticed him standing beside the galleon’s gangplank. He was handsomely dressed in brown slacks with a white linen shirt and black waistcoat. After pushing back his outlandish, curly dark hair, he began coiling a thick rope around his arm.

“Good morning,” Giselle replied, smiling begrudgingly. She checked the time again, but not a minute had passed.

“Scottish hey?” he asked. His accent was distinctly Australian.

“Ay,” she forced herself to smile again before continuing to scan the harbour. She didn’t want to be rude, but she was far too distracted to engage in conversation.

Her every nerve had been tittering with anticipation as the days passed, bringing her closer to the thirteenth of April. She had received mail from her Uncle Edmond, announcing that he would be docking at La Rochelle to host a cocktail party on board his yacht to celebrate his sixtieth birthday. Finally the day had arrived but he was nowhere to be seen.

As the loud bells of the clock tower chimed, announcing eight o’ clock, Giselle scanned the adjacent streets for her friends, Panelli and Delilah.

“Do you need some help?” the persistent young man offered, placing the coiled rope over his shoulder. “My name’s Nickolas. Nice dress by the way.”

She glanced down at her long white dress.

“Giselle,” she replied. “But no thank you, I’m waiting for my friends.”

“And your uncle perhaps?” he asked, a wry grin spreading across his face.

Giselle’s heart raced at the mention of her uncle, though she didn’t imagine this stranger to have been acquainted with him. Her uncle hadn’t once visited them since they had moved from Inverness in 1956. And that was three years ago.

“What makes you say that?” She ran a hand up through her thick, auburn hair.

“I’m his first mate - picked me up from Australia almost three years ago. Your uncle’s gone for some breakfast. He’ll be back soon. I’m supposed to keep watch for a beautiful Scottish redhead going by the name of Giselle, and escort her to her cabin.”

Giselle unwittingly blushed.

“Oh, really?” she asked. “Well, if you’re his first mate, where’s his yacht?”

“You’re looking at it,” Nickolas pointed to the galleon behind him with his thumb.

Giselle rolled her eyes. That was not her uncle’s ship.

“You must have me confused with someone else,” she said. “Besides, I’m not going anywhere until I’ve found my friends.”

“Wouldn’t be those two by any chance, would it?” Nickolas nodded past her.

She turned to see her friends, Panelli and Delilah, emerging from a path in the trees. The clicking of their heels grew louder with each step.

Panelli, in a long black sleeveless dress, waved to Giselle and increased the speed of her walk with elegant poise. Delilah followed casually behind, looking innocently pretty in a pale pink dress with a white bow tied at the front.

Giselle left Nickolas to intercept them.

“Who’s that you were talking to?” Panelli asked in lieu of a greeting, looking intrigued.

“He says he’s my uncle’s first mate,” Giselle replied. “Reckons he’s been asked to show us to a cabin on board that ship.”

“Does he really?” Panelli asked hopefully. She started walking towards Nickolas, but Giselle grabbed her by the hand.

“Panelli!” she demanded. “That’s not even my uncle’s ship.”

“Who cares?” She shook her hand free and walked toward him.

Giselle watched in disbelief as Panelli quickly became acquainted with Nickolas and proceeded to follow him up the gangplank onto the ship.

Giselle groaned. Although they had all finally turned eighteen, she felt a weight of responsibility having assured Panelli’s parents that a night on board her uncle’s yacht would be safe. She looked around for her uncle one last time and then picked up both her and Panelli’s bags. “Come on, Delilah, we can’t let her go up there alone.”

Suddenly questioning their own safety, Giselle sat down the bags at the base of the gangplank.

“Perhaps you should wait here.”

“For what?” Delilah asked.

“In case it’s not safe. That way if we’re not back in ten minutes, you can call for help. And let me know if you see a white yacht entering the harbour.”

“How will I do that?” Delilah frowned.

“Just call out. I don’t know ... you’ll figure it out.”

With a deep breath, Giselle climbed the steep gangplank alone.



On deck, a tingle of goose bumps crept up the back of Giselle's neck. The sun was lost behind the immense aftcastle and the slow creaking of timber cast away all sound of the waking harbour. Unease caught in her throat when she saw Nickolas holding a door open at the stern of the deck, gesturing her inside.

With a deep breath, she walked purposefully past him and through the doorway, finding Panelli staring at a large abstract painting on the wall of a small room.

"What do you think you're doing?" Giselle whispered angrily.

"He says it is your uncle's ship!"

"I told you, it's not!"

"It is now," Nickolas added and closed the door behind him.

Giselle began to panic and was about to run for the door when, with a click of a pull cord, a trail of lanterns ignited, illuminating a stairwell descending into the depths of the ship. Without a word Nickolas began walking down.

"Are you coming?" he called back.

Giselle recognised their chance to leave and reached for the door.

"Don't you want to see what's down there?" Panelli asked.

Giselle realised that she wasn't going to leave until she had.

"Two minutes, then we're getting off!"

The way down smelt strongly of floral perfume and musty timber. Down one flight of stairs, Nickolas was waiting at a door. Although the stairs continued, the lanterns did not. He opened the door into a long hallway with numerous rooms on both sides and directed them to the third on the right. Panelli was the first to enter.

"This is cosy," she called out.

“See,” Nickolas smiled, directing his hand towards the door.

“No, I insist,” Giselle refused to have him get in the way of her only exit.

“You really don’t trust me do you?” he smiled coolly.

“I don’t even know you.”

She followed him inside, relieved to find nothing more than a quaint panelled cabin. In it were three single beds, a dresser and a porthole that looked out into the harbour.

“Where’s the rest of your crew?” Panelli asked vaguely.

Giselle began to wonder the same. She couldn’t remember seeing anyone else on board.

“Getting breakfast,” Nickolas answered. “We’re always keen for some variety whenever we’re docked.”

Giselle peered out the porthole as a white yacht entered the harbour towers.

“Come on Panelli,” she beamed. “We’re leaving.”

She had almost reached the doorway, when a deep voice, one she had not yet heard that day, echoed from the hallway.

“Is my finest cabin not adequate for my special guests?”

Delilah walked into the cabin looking rather cheerful. She was followed closely by a middle-aged man in a tan suit and tatty old brown hat. His kind eyes were striking against his dark leathery skin, wrinkled from a smile lost beneath a thick, light grey beard. It was Giselle’s uncle Edmond.

“Uncle Edmond!” Giselle bellowed, relief softening her face. She hugged him tight and inhaled his salty scent.

“Giselle, it’s so good to see you! Your lovely friend Delilah here tells me that Nickolas almost failed to convince you on board. My

apologies, I should have informed you of my new ship prior to my arrival.”

“You mean this really is your ship?” She almost hoped it wasn’t after the way she had spoken to Nickolas.

“Indeed,” he replied.

Giselle could feel her face turning red.

“If you’ll excuse me, captain,” Nickolas said looking rather smug with a grin on his face. “I better get back up on deck. It was a pleasure meeting you ladies.”

“Certainly,” Edmond replied. “Thank you for your help, Nickolas.”

Nickolas gave Giselle a wink before departing, leaving her feeling even more embarrassed.

“And who might you be?” Edmond asked Panelli. She introduced herself with a shake of her hand.

“I’m sorry again that I wasn’t here to welcome you on board myself,” Edmond said, walking over to the porthole. “This place is always so nice this time of year. And what do you all think of my new ship?”

“It’s enormous!” Panelli exclaimed.

“Like an old pirate ship,” Delilah added.

“That’s what I thought,” Edmond beamed.

“I didn’t even believe it was yours,” Giselle muttered.

“I hardly believe it myself.”

“Where did you get a ship like this?” Giselle asked.

“Would you believe, we found it un-manned in the middle of the Pacific Ocean,” Edmond replied.

“You found it?” Delilah gasped.

“About six months ago,” he nodded. “And such a lovely old ship, I wasn’t going to leave it for someone else to claim. I’ve never seen anything quite like it before.”

Giselle looked closer around the cabin, now in ore of its every detail. From the heavy solid door to the strange carvings that covered almost every surface, this ship was truly a handsome creation.

“So you just took it?” Panelli’s mouth hung open.

“Yes,” Edmond replied. “We commandeered her and left *The Voyager* at the next harbour.”

“Does this one have a name?” Delilah asked.

“There’s a strange marking on the stern, but we are yet to come across anyone who can translate it. Therefore, I’ve named her *The Baroness*. I’d offer to show you all around, but I’m afraid time is against us and we’ll be setting sail shortly. However, if you’ll accompany me, I need to collect my waistcoat from my quarters. If you’d care to see that much for now, I’d be thrilled to show you the rest once we’ve set sail.”

Giselle and her friends agreed and grabbed their coats.

Back up the stairs and out onto the deck, the day had developed into a beautiful spring morning with the sun shining gently down through the sail masts above. A string quartet had set up beside the nearest mast and was playing a melodic tune.

Giselle no longer saw the ship as frightening and grim, but as an incredible discovery for her uncle. How fascinating it must be to sail such a ship around the world. And that night she had the entire evening to explore its every nook and cranny.

Through the bulwark on the portside of the deck, an assembly of guests in suits and evening gowns was accumulating on the pier.

Giselle felt a pang of guilt at the sight for her parents who were stuck in London. At the same time, she hoped that they would make it back for the following evening. They had arranged for Edmond to stay in La Rochelle an extra night so that he could attend a local ballet recital in which she was performing.

Edmond led them up the companionway to the quarter deck and past the wheel through a set of doors. Inside, his quarters were lit by sunlight streaming through stained-glass windows. It looked like a maritime museum; beautifully decorated by world globes, sextants, maps, telescopes and other relics of old sea travel.

While Edmond fetched his waistcoat, Giselle's friends sat on a nearby chesterfield. A large table covered in scrolls and maps on the left side of the room caught Giselle's attention. Above it were two documents pinned to the wall. One was a map of the world marked with dozens of red crosses. The other seemed a very old, discoloured parchment preserved in a plastic sleeve.

On the latter, were many strange indistinguishable lines and shapes along with two images; one, a warped star in the bottom right corner, the other, two trees with trunks entwined together in a vertical spiral at the top right.

When Edmond returned, he joined Giselle beside the table.

"What do all the crosses mean?" she gestured to the map of the world.

"Those are the places my crew and I have ruled out in search of a great treasure."

"Treasure?" she gasped.

Panelli and Delilah quickly stood up.

“Yes, treasure.” He looked eagerly around at their attentive faces. “When I first looked upon this parchment, I assumed this star was a compass rose.” He pointed to the warped star on the parchment inside the plastic sleeve. “That was until I discovered a great artefact; a most fascinating sculpture carved from stone baring an indentation identical to this star.”

“And this was located at one of these red crosses?” Giselle asked.

“No,” Edmond beamed. “It’s right beneath us, in the belly of this ship.”

Giselle couldn’t help but smile at the fascinated looks upon her friends faces.

“Besides the page, this artefact was all we found when we first came aboard,” Edmond continued. “In my quest to discover the history of this beautiful ship, I have uncovered many things but not yet its origin. I believe that secret lies with something that is missing from this artefact and that the markings on this page are a map that will lead me to it.”

“You mean those scribbles?” Panelli asked.

“Indeed.”

“But how will that lead you anywhere?”

“I’m hoping that whilst navigating my way around the world, I’ll be able to match these scribbles with coastlines. Greater discoveries have been made with far less.”

“And these crosses are the places you’ve already searched?” Giselle asked, utterly fascinated. This was even more thrilling than his previous adventures.

“Yes ... and still we are yet to find a match. I’m actually beginning to wonder if it’s even a land map at all.”

“What else could it be?” Delilah asked.

“Perhaps a map from within the stars, or of land that has been swallowed by the sea, or maybe it’s from another world,” he added, lifting an eyebrow.

“Another world?” Panelli scoffed, utterly unconvinced.

“Panelli!” Giselle gave her a stern look.

“It’s fine,” Edmond chuckled. “I get that a lot. Seeing is believing, after all. But never mind that now. It’s time I greet the rest of my guests.”

Back out on the quarter deck, Nickolas was standing at the wheel. Giselle caught his eye at first glance, but quickly turned away. She moved to the balustrade and looked over at the deck now filled with guests.

She was still mortified from their earlier encounter. But how could she have known any differently? He didn’t even mention Edmond’s name, but she was just supposed to trust him, some stranger? Giselle wasn’t overly cautious, but she certainly wasn’t a fool. She resolved to avoid him as much as possible.

“How are we looking?” Edmond asked him.

“Very well, Captain. Everyone’s aboard and we’re ready to cast off.”

“Excellent, then it’s time I get the festivities underway.”

Edmond took a bottle of champagne from an ice bucket, walked to the balustrade beside Giselle and rang a large bell. The music stopped, and everyone looked up to where he stood.

“Hello everyone,” he said aloud. “Welcome, and thank you all for coming.”

“Good to see you Edmond,” a man yelled out from the crowd.

“Thank you,” he said.

“About time!” A woman called.

“I know, I know,” Edmond chuckled. “My visits have been far and in between for some time now. I promise, after tonight you’ll be sick of the sight of me.”

The crowd gave a cheer.

“In a moment we’ll cast off and spend the afternoon sailing these beautiful waters before anchoring in a secluded cove for the night where we will celebrate to our hearts’ delight. Now without any further ado, let the festivities commence!”

He popped the champagne’s cork and with that, the party began. The quartet resumed playing and the crew started performing their duties. The gangplank was drawn, mooring ropes were untied and brought aboard, sails were raised and they were off, moving slowly out of the harbour towards the open sea.

“Perhaps once we’re anchored, would you mind showing the girls the rest of the ship,” Edmond asked Nickolas.

Giselle’s heart dropped. She didn’t even want to look at Nickolas, let alone have him as their guide.

“Of course,” he replied.

“Wonderful,” Edmond smiled. “Now, I must go mingle. Come along Giselle.”

Giselle gladly followed with Panelli and Delilah trailing behind. Though, upon reaching the deck, she noticed Panelli had stopped halfway down.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“You know how I get sea sick,” Panelli said with a frown. “I can’t see a thing down here. I think I’ll be better off up there. At least until we’re out of the harbour.”

“Yeah, right,” Delilah scoffed. “I think we all know the blue-eyed reason you’re going back up there.”

“Do what you want,” Giselle said. She only wanted to follow her uncle.

“I’ll see you both soon,” Panelli said, satisfied, and ran back up the steps.

As Giselle turned in search of her uncle, the La Rochelle towers caught her eye. Passing through them into the Atlantic Ocean, she felt an exhilarating happiness to finally be part of one of Edmonds adventures, even if it was just for one night.

“Giselle,” Edmond called, welcoming her into the crowd with an open arm.

The remaining sails were raised, setting them at speed and blasting through the waves.



After four hours sailing amongst the beautiful Atlantic coast islands, The *Baroness* was anchored in the middle of a narrow cove sheltered by towering hills covered by thick foliage. A chilling breeze indicated a cold night ahead.

After numerous introductions, canapés, and a glass of champagne, Giselle left Edmond absorbed in conversation and made her way to the starboard bulwark. She stared at the cold dark ocean, relishing a moment’s solitude.

With a fresh plate of sweets, Delilah came rushing towards her, giggling and pointing at Panelli and Nickolas dangling their legs over the quarter deck.

“Just let them be,” Giselle said, resigned.

“No, come on,” Delilah grabbed her roughly by the hand and pulled her away.

Giselle wrenched her hand free and followed her slowly through the crowd to the base of the companionway. Nickolas and Panelli were already on their way down.

“Coming to join the party are you?” Delilah asked smartly.

“Nickolas was about to show me the rest of the ship,” Panelli replied.

Giselle looked amongst the crowd, pretending not to listen.

“Mind if we tag along?” Delilah asked.

“Not at all,” Nickolas answered. “That was the plan after all. But we better hurry, the party’ll be moving into the dining room soon. And Giselle ...”

Giselle reluctantly turned to him.

“... Don’t look so embarrassed, I wouldn’t have believed me either.”

Giselle’s face tightened. Who did this guy think he was?

Through the throng of guests, Nickolas led them to a set of timber doors at the bow-end of the deck.

Inside was a lengthy room with long tables set with white tablecloths and silverware. It was warm with the comforting smell of leather and old timber. A waiter stood behind a bar to the right, polishing glasses.

“This was just an empty space before Edmond transformed it into a dining room,” Nickolas explained. “No doubt he had tonight in mind.” He greeted the barman and continued behind the bar down a short flight of stairs.

Giselle’s nose filled with a fragrance of lamb and rosemary.

At the base of the stairs was the ships galley. A curly red-haired man was busily chopping up vegetables and stirring steaming pots.

“Oh that smells so good!” Delilah moaned.

“Ay, thank you,” said the cook in an Irish accent. “It appears you’ve found some lassies of fine taste aboard our ship, young Nick.” He set down his spoon and wiped his hands on a towel.

Nickolas chuckled, “The Captain’s niece, Giselle, and her friends, Panelli and Delilah. Ladies, this is Tom, our cook.”

“Well, how about you?” Tom asked.

Giselle smiled politely in response.

“Why don’t you come have a taste? Surely being the Captain’s niece entitles you to some perks.”

Giselle followed Tom to one of the large pots, from which he ladled hot stew. It was beautifully thick and spicy. She paused mid-slurp, hearing a steady hum of voices from above.

“We should probably get back up there,” Nickolas said. “Smells great though, and you know how the sea air makes me.”

“Ay ... hungry no less,” Tom took back the ladle. “No worries, lad. You girls have fun up there.”

When they returned to the dining room, the setting sun was glowing through the windows. The quartet had moved inside and a middle-aged man was directing everyone to their places.

“There you are,” Edmond called from behind a table on the opposite side of the room. “You’re over here with me.” He pulled out chairs for the girls and welcomed them to their seats. Giselle sat beside him.

Candlelight soon replaced the sunlight, at which time Tom and other members of the crew brought out bowls of lamb stew and plates of bread slathered generously with butter.

Giselle hadn’t realised how hungry she was until she started eating. Without a single word to anyone else, she enjoyed scooping the stew

with her bread before finishing it off with her spoon. Unable to accept seconds, she sat back with a satisfied appetite.

Everyone was then hushed by a chiming sound, indicating it was time for a toast. Tom was beside the bar, holding his glass and spoon.

“Can I have everyone’s attention please?” He waited for silence. “First of all, I’d like to say happy sixtieth to our dear friend and Captain, Edmond.” He raised his glass. “I’m very honoured to be a part of this crew. The other lads and I think Edmond’s one of the nicest fellows we’ve crossed paths with. Though he might not be good in the kitchen, he makes a damn fine Captain. And we’ll keep following him to the ends of the earth, for many years to come.”

Applause broke out across the room.

Tom waited for silence again and called Edmond up to join him.

“I will take this chance to thank everyone again for coming tonight.” Edmond said. “I’m having an absolute blast. When I left this place, I hoped that I would keep the friendships I made all those years ago. And here you all are. Thank you.”

A table was carried out from behind the bar, with a white cloth covering something in the middle.

“What are you up too?” Edmond asked suspiciously.

“Oh, just a little reminder of what’ll happen to you if you decide you don’t want to be our Captain anymore,” Tom chuckled to himself and pulled the cloth away, revealing a sculpture of a man in a dingy. “Up shit creek without a paddle.” He slapped Edmond on the back.

The smirk on Edmond's face gave Giselle the impression that he expected no less from his cook.

"It's your birthday cake lad, and we'll cut it up, so everyone can take a piece of you home with them. But for now, my chores are finally over ..." He threw his apron behind the bar. "... Let's party!"

Tom signalled to the quartet and they resumed playing. He danced to the beat, moving towards Giselle.

"Fancy a dance, love?" he asked, offering her his hand.

Taken by surprise, she looked questioningly to her friends.

"Go on, go on," Panelli encouraged.

With mild hesitation, Giselle took his hand and went with him to the dance floor.

To her surprise, Tom began bouncing about on the spot. Though, prior to the first song ending, he stopped jumping and gave her a mischievous grin before leading her closer to the quartet.

"What are you doing?" she asked, searching back for her friends.

"Singing," Tom bellowed.

"What?" she practically yelled, incredulous.

Tom signalled the quartet, and they quickly changed their song to a folk tune with a happy fiddle. Tom sang along with a verse into Giselle's ear.

"Got it?" he asked.

"I guess so," she replied in a huff. Her hands felt clammy, but she saw the fun and the words were simple and catchy.

He pulled her in front of the building crowd and with a deep breath she sang along,

*“... Away Fair lady
Away with you
We’ll drink our fine whisky
And chow down on stew
This here fine lassie
Will join me here too
In homeland of Ireland
For one drink or two ...”*

They repeated it, and then continued with everyone chanting along.

With a quick glance away, Giselle’s exuberance vanished at the sight of Panelli leaving through the door. She immediately stopped singing and began walking through the crowd.

“Where are you going?” Tom asked, catching her up.

“Panelli just walked out the door.”

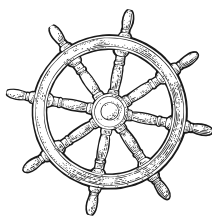
“Ah, don’t worry,” he assured. “Probably just chasing after young Nick.”

He was probably right, but still, she wanted to know.

“Though, we may as well be sure,” Tom said calmly, no doubt recognising her concern. “It’s not safe out there at night.” He opened the door for her, letting in the cold air from outside.

Feeling the chill on her arms, Giselle grabbed her coat from her chair and followed Tom out onto the deck.





CHAPTER TWO

AN UNFORESEEN STORM

The door muffled the sound of music and separated the party from the stillest of nights, one that was bitterly cold and without a cloud in the sky. Gentle flickers of candlelight shone from numerous lanterns scattered about the bulwark. Panelli and Nickolas were nowhere to be seen.

“Panelli, where are you?” Giselle called.

“Perhaps they went down to the cabins?” Tom Suggested.

She gave a nod and followed him down the stairs.

They were about to enter the hallway leading to the cabins when Tom tapped her on the shoulder.

“No one’s supposed to be down there tonight,” he said, pointing to a faint light further down the stairs.

Giselle paused. It didn’t seem the type of place Panelli would likely go wandering by herself, let alone with a stranger. Still, believing it was worth investigating, she followed without objection.