

NICKY AND THE LOST TEMPLAR

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CHAPTER 1

1307, northwest Atlantic

It was a rare day without wind on the island. Autumn had been walking among the trees, leaving a riot of red and yellow in her wake. Long stretches of pine, fir and spruce remained green, as did the grass, at least until the first frost. The air smelled deliciously of sea and tree sap. To the north, pewter clouds were gathering, promising snow. To the south, the sun was radiating cheer and warmth, unperturbed by the change of seasons.

A man was standing on the shore with his feet firmly planted on a slab of granite. He had a long dagger strapped to his hip and a knife tucked behind his belt. The leather tunic he wore had extra padding on the left shoulder, giving him an uneven look. His hair had grown long again, as had his beard, and since he was not into braids, he would have to trim both of them soon.

He shielded his eyes and looked intently toward the southeast. If a ship were to enter the bay, it would come from that direction. Today the horizon was empty, which was disappointing. But Jean Baptiste de Saisi was not one to despair. A ship would come next year; he was sure of it. In the meantime he could explore the mainland and map the coastline or add more booby traps at the treasure sites.

The thought of the treasure brought a wry smile to his face. The king of France had been scheming to get his hands on the fabulous wealth of the Knights Templar for a long time. When their Grand Master

received some rather disturbing reports, a decision was made. They would relocate everything somewhere safe, as far away from Paris as possible. But nowhere known was safe. One of the knights, Sinclair, suggested a mysterious land far to the west, and so to the west was where they sailed. It would have to be done in stages, without arousing suspicions. Jean Baptiste had come in the second wave, on a ship that carried an entire library of priceless scrolls.

Gold was easy to hide. It could go underground and even underwater because it did not corrode. Scrolls were a different matter entirely, and these were so ancient and delicate that they had to be handled and preserved with utmost care. At the suggestion of the Order's alchemist, they were sealed in clay jars filled with mercury. If kept dry, away from fire and earthquakes, they should last for hundreds or even thousands of years.

Jean Baptiste doubted the king of France would be interested in scrolls. He was heavily in debt and needed all the gold he could get. But his hands would close around nothing but air. Jean Baptiste had a foreboding that the vengeful monarch would not take it kindly – not after they had declined his request to become one of them and join the most prestigious and powerful order of all times. They answered to no one but the Pope, who, if the secret reports were true, was slowly becoming the king's puppet.

They could ... what ... run? Stay in the west? The proud knights could never face such humiliation. No, they would stand their ground and fight.

Were they fighting at this very moment? Is that why they did not return for him?

He studied the horizon once more and saw nothing but grey sky blurring into one with grey ocean. What

a strange fate his was, to become stranded here, so far from home, guardian of a secret treasure. Jean Baptiste sighed. He needed to occupy himself with something or he would go mad. For one, there was the pressing need to survive the oncoming winter.

The wind was picking up, whipping his hair around his face. Jean Baptiste could not make a ship appear, but he could pray for his brothers and the success of their mission. He went down on one knee and bowed his head. His quiet words unrolled like a banner in the relentless wind. Perhaps someone in heaven was listening.

In a nearby fir tree a raven as black as midnight was eavesdropping. It was Yngvi of Clan Rune, who claimed to be descended from the god Odin's ravens, Hugin and Munin. Yngvi's grandmother reminded him of his illustrious ancestry on a regular basis. He had no qualms about spying on everyone, including Jean Baptiste. Was it not his duty to see and to report, just like Hugin and Munin had done?

Yngvi knew he could just ask the mysterious man anything he wished to know, but it was far more interesting and challenging to ferret things out. For example, he knew where a certain squirrel had hidden its nuts for the winter – just like he knew where Jean Baptiste and his associates had hidden theirs. The precious hoard, however, was protected and sealed. There could be anything down there, Yngvi mused – magical runes, ancient spells or even echoes of a curse.

They were strange things, words. And, stranger still, Clan Rune knew lots of them. All ravens could speak common raven, of course, but how many could discourse in Old Norse or L'nui'sin? None outside Yngvi's clan – at least not in this part of the woods. These ravens were special. And Yngvi was further enhancing the clan's

reputation by learning a new language. He struggled with it, but it was only a matter of time before he could speak through his beak “like a born Parisian,” whatever Jean Baptiste had meant by that. He shook himself out of his reverie. It was getting nippy, and he blew on his toes to stay warm.

When Jean Baptiste stood up and brushed off the grass and sticks from his pants, the raven swooped down and circled around him. The sun’s rays made his black feathers shine blue. He beat his wings leisurely to prepare for landing and, slowing down, grabbed for purchase.

“Yngvi, my raven friend!” Jean Baptiste smiled. “That was quite the dramatic entry. You are as quiet as a shadow.”

The raven gave no reply, but the knight could tell he was pleased with the comment.

“I hope you can perch in greater comfort now.”

Jean Baptiste waited for Yngvi to sink his claws into the shoulder pad. They were like knife points, and he bore their scars from earlier encounters.

“Let’s walk. I want to look at the island to the north.”

Yngvi knew it was the one that housed the knights’ treasure. He had made discreet inquiries with some crows farther down the shore, and they had confirmed that the men had been busy in more than one place. This island, however, was the only one near which they had left a guard. It had to be something important. Knowing about it made Yngvi’s beak tingle. He and his cousins had been about to do a reconnaissance when an insufferable eagle decided to move to the island, making it off limits to the ravens. *For now.*

Presently, he was enjoying the ride on Jean Baptiste's shoulder. They set out on a narrow path winding among solitary rocks and heath the colour of rust.

"So what is new in Seal Cove?" Jean Baptiste asked. He knew the ravens lived in the forest behind the cove even though they frequented this island as well.

Yngvi sifted through the thousand new things from this morning, such as air currents, temperature and food availability. He chose what Jean Baptiste might find interesting.

"An eagle on the island to the north," he said levelly.

"How fitting that an eagle should live there! But you are not enthused?" the knight shot him a sideways glance.

Yngvi puffed up his feathers and ground his beak. He thought about how the ravens would have to chase the eagle away from their nests come springtime and how much harder it would be for smaller birds to compete for food. He searched his ever-growing vocabulary for the French word for a bully.

"What do you call a swift, unexpected death from above?" he hazarded.

"A good one," the knight nodded his head firmly. He believed in a warrior having an honourable end, not one at home in bed. But he had an inkling it was not the same if you were a small furry creature and your last word was *squeak*.

"Does the eagle make you worried, Yngvi?"

"Handsome, fast, arrogant, aloof ... What do you call that?" the raven answered with a question.

"A born leader," Jean Baptiste answered. "Why, this eagle is a king of all birds." He made an all-encompassing gesture with his free hand.

Yngvi's raspy voice rose by an octave.

“We ravens never voted for him. This ‘king’ could not win a single riddle contest, let alone spell his own name,” he said acidly.

Jean Baptiste raised his eyebrows.

“Can you spell your name, Yngvi?”

The raven replied, indignantly: “I am Yngvi of Clan Rune! I can spell my name and write it at midnight with my wings tied behind my back.”

He did not add that his grandmother had actually made him do that on several occasions.

“Show me how you write your name.” Jean Baptiste wanted proof.

They were almost through the forest now. The sound of the surf crashing against big rocks was getting louder. Yngvi felt a wave of relief. While he enjoyed riding on Jean Baptiste’s shoulder, seeing all those tree trunks struggling for space and light made him claustrophobic. He was a free spirit from the sky, and he needed to see its blue infinity on a regular basis.

Jean Baptiste took a few more strides, and then they were on the shore. There was a small beach, and the raven could guess that was where he would be asked to write his name. Without prompting, he took off and, wings outstretched, landed softly. There was a flat patch of sand begging for someone to doodle in it. Jean Baptiste watched in polite silence as Yngvi took great care drawing strange symbols with his big toe.

When the raven had finished scribbling, he hopped onto a rock and started grooming himself. Jean Baptiste came closer and scrutinized Yngvi’s name. In his life he had seen many different types of writing – even hieroglyphs and petroglyphs – but none of them resembled these.

“What kind of symbols are they?” he asked finally.

“Why, runes,” Yngvi said matter-of-factly and dislodged the last grain of sand from his feet.

The knight bent down and traced the runes, committing them to his memory. *Runes? Riddle contests? Where had these ravens come from?* Jean Baptiste shook his head.

“I am speechless, Yngvi. Your name looks very mystic, very beautiful.”

Yngvi tried not to look smug. The runes were magical symbols obtained by the Norse god Odin from the well of wisdom under the world tree Yggdrasil. He had given up an eye for them too. And while he was nursing his empty eye socket, a pair of ravens that happened to be sitting in the tree had taken a quick drink from the same well. Too smart now for their own kind, they were left with no choice but to enter Odin’s service. They flew over the world, watching and listening, and reported everything back to the god. Such glorious times!

Jean Baptiste gestured for Yngvi to perch on his shoulder again. A wave came rushing ashore, washing over the runes, smoothing the sand as if to invite more writing. Yngvi felt tempted, but his empty belly reminded him that he was rather hungry. He eyed Jean Baptiste’s left ear and gave it an affectionate peck.

“Ouch, no biting of ears, please. Here, you can have this.” A piece of flat bread was produced and passed to the bird. Yngvi caught it deftly in his beak and chewed in quiet concentration.

Jean Baptiste turned and studied the island ahead of them. It was a massive piece of white rock, forested on one side. Its steep slopes rose from the ocean in a ring of fog. *The vault – the secret archive. It would last forever.*

“Say, Yngvi, would the new eagle attack people if they disembarked on that island?”

Yngvi finished his snack and cleaned his teeth with a claw. He would have to relieve himself soon, but he was too well bred to do it on Jean Baptiste's shoulder. Now, a gull would not hesitate – even that self-proclaimed king of all birds would probably unload himself anywhere, but Odin's ravens had standards.

“I would not go there when the eagles have young ones. But even eagles have to hunt, and I could tell you when this one is away and the coast is clear.”

Jean Baptiste thought it would be interesting to have an attack eagle on the island, but the bird was probably wary of humans and would not care about being trained.

“Excuse me,” Yngvi flapped his wings and flew out of sight. Jean Baptiste moved on; the raven would catch up with him later. He traversed some big boulders with caution. A sprained ankle or a broken bone was not something he could afford right now.

Rocks, yes. He had been wanting to take a closer look at a particularly interesting rock on the other side of Seal Cove. It resembled a small pyramid. Was it natural or man-made? It would make a good landmark if you knew what to look for, like the oak trees the knights had planted at a decoy treasure pit on another island.

He made a mental note about the things he would do. One, learn runes. Two, investigate the pyramid rock. Three, cut his hair and trim his beard. Oh, how he wished for a hot bath ...

The wind was gusting now, and it was time to return to his home for the winter, a cozy dugout in the side of a small hill. The ocean was getting rough, its heaving surface slate grey, its waves menacing. Two black shapes were gliding on the wind: One would be Yngvi, and the other was probably his cousin. They were headed for

the highest place this side of the island, the top of his hill, which Jean Baptiste liked to use as an observatory.

When he climbed it, the ravens were perching on a pine bough swaying in the wind. Yngvi gave a piercing croak and spilled the news:

“The L’nuk are coming. Cousin Alvis has seen them. They are local hunters.”

Jean Baptiste assumed Alvis was the shy raven that had come with Yngvi. *Eyes in the sky*. He had to make sure they would always be his allies.

“I am grateful, Alvis, for this warning,” he said solemnly. “How many are coming? When will they be here?”

Alvis shifted his weight, and Yngvi inclined his head toward him. Some kind of communication passed between them, although no sounds were involved. Jean Baptiste waited patiently for a translation.

“A small band of 30 in eight canoes,” Yngvi pronounced. “They will be here before the snowstorm. They are armed, but they are not expecting to find anyone here.”

“Understood. I do not wish to fight; however, I must be ready to defend myself.” Jean Baptiste was quickly reviewing possible strategies. Alvis’ forewarning gave him the advantage of surprising these L’nuk. He should avoid violence at all costs. He must have looked troubled because Yngvi fluttered down onto his shoulder.

“Our clan will protect you. Do not worry.”

Jean Baptiste’s weathered face cracked into a smile.

“Where is your sword?” he asked the raven.

“I left it at home.”

“I see. Then what do you propose to do?” the knight eyed the raven with interest.

“I will be your ambassador,” Yngvi said modestly. “I believe I have the L’nuwey medicine man’s ear.” *Figuratively speaking*. Should he mention the tribe’s influential grandmothers?

Jean Baptiste was lost in his own thoughts. He was apprehensive but also intrigued. What did the L’nuk look like? Was the medicine man their leader? What would the other knights say if they found out that a raven had saved his hide? No, he should be prepared in case Yngvi’s efforts failed. He tried to picture a band of locals coming to their familiar island, tired and cold. Instead of settling in and getting something to eat, they would have to sort out what to do with this strange man. What if they thought he was a demon? It could go badly for him. He should shift their attention to something else – something that people from a different culture could understand. A symbol, yes ... That might just work.

“Yngvi, call your clan and meet me here before the L’nuk arrive. I am going to need an eagle.”

With bad weather at their heels, the L’nuk were in a rush to cross Seal Cove and spend a night on the island of talking ravens before moving inland for the winter, into the shelter of thick forests. This year they were late, and, what was worse, they were being watched. An eerie silence fell over the band as they paddled closer in their birchbark canoes packed with provisions and all their belongings. They eyed the trees that grew along the coast. They were full of ravens. Without warning, the birds took off and, one by one, fell into a circular formation. Their cries echoed above the cove like an urgent message.

The men reached for their weapons but hesitated when the old medicine man halted them. Huddled in a bear fur, he was frail and blind, none of which diminished

his powers and influence. If anything, the white surface of his eyes indicated he had an insight into unseen worlds. He pointed to the east and all heads turned in that direction.

A young eagle was beating his wings majestically, almost leisurely, as if inclement weather did not hold any sway over him. As he got closer, the ravens dispersed, settling into treetops once again as a captive audience. Would the king of all birds do as he had been instructed? Yngvi fervently hoped so. Wait, wait ...

“Now!” he hissed into Jean Baptiste’s ear. The knight stepped forward to the edge of the hill, making himself visible to the L’nuk below. He was carrying the Beauseant, his order’s battle banner, which showed a crimson cross in a black and white field. He stuck it in the ground and stood next to it, hand on his sword, its length and weight reassuring. Jean Baptiste prayed he would not need it that day. He prayed the eagle would land on the banner and not on top of his head. He wondered if he should have worn his helmet, but it had rusted and he could hardly see anything through the slits.

Rigid in his boat, the medicine man leaned toward a young woman dressed in moosehide in front of him.

“How many men do you see?” he quavered and touched the white streak in his raven-black hair with a bony finger.

“Just one pale demon, Grandfather, with hair growing all over his face,” she replied truthfully.

“No men burning in a fire?” he asked to be sure.

“Not today, Grandfather.”

The medicine man adjusted his temporal vision and refocused his eyes. The girl was right; there was no fire. Yet. He turned his attention on the so-called white demon. Just a man, he could tell, because as black as the

ravens were, Clan Rune would never have sided with a dark spirit. And there was Yngvi, poised on the stranger's shoulder like a bad dream, beak slightly open, ready to whisper secrets into an eager ear.

The wind tore at the fluttering banner that due to either material fatigue or some help with rusty scissors had ripped from the wood and would have been lost had it not been for the intervention by the intrepid eagle who caught it deftly in his talons and carried it back north, presumably to line his nest with it.

Yngvi stared speechlessly, as did Jean Baptiste and the assembled L'nuk, now slightly chilled yet still uncertain whether or not the island was safe or lost to them. The medicine man nodded to himself. An eagle was a good omen, but would it be enough to keep the stranger alive? There was no hope for the others – the ones whose destiny held flames. The stranger would need some help to survive the winter storms – something the L'nuk could teach him how to do.

"I am cold," a woman's voice said from another canoe. It belonged to the Elder Grandmother, also huddled in a fur, her face like a shrivelled gooseberry, her eyes brimming with curiosity. "Let's go!"

The medicine man grinned to himself and gestured to proceed and disembark. Perhaps there was no fire burning yet, but he had a feeling the man in white was skilled at starting it. Where there was a fire there would be delicious food ... and a good tale to go with it.

CHAPTER 2

21st century, Nova Scotia

“ARE we there yet?” I asked for the hundredth time, fidgeting in my seat. The fidgets had started as soon as we crossed the Saskatchewan border and headed east to Nova Scotia. My father, a filmmaker, had been hired to make a documentary about shipbuilders in the Maritimes. We jumped at the opportunity to get out of our hometown of Destiny (population 1,000) and to have epic adventures by the Atlantic Ocean.

I turned around as much as the seat belt allowed, and my eyes met the steady gaze of Sheba. She was one of the five cats we were bringing along. I could tell she was feeling carsick, and I opened the partition window between the cab of our pickup and the shell on the back to pet her. “We’ll be there soon,” I assured her.

Finally, after over 4,000 kilometres, we exited Highway 103 and entered the land of Peggy. Our old pickup truck followed a narrow, windy road along the coast of St. Margaret’s Bay that was dotted with wharves, docks and art galleries. I saw a fleet of small sailboats but no big schooners. Where was the *Bluenose*? I planned on sailing on the replica of the legendary schooner, among other things.

“Honey, I think you missed the turn,” my mom broke it gently to my dad.

“No, I know exactly where we are,” he replied stubbornly.

“What’s the address again?” She turned to me this time. I consulted our map.

“1111 Talon Island Road,” I chirped.

“It should be right here,” Dad frowned, doubt creeping into his so-far-unshaken confidence.

When we passed the Rhubarb Restaurant in Indian Harbour, we knew we had gone too far. Dad turned us around, and we headed back slowly, keeping an eye out for Talon Island Road.

“There it is,” Mom exclaimed. “It’s hiding behind Peggy!”

We stared at the plywood figure of a young girl in a blowing cape whose hinged arm moved in the breeze with a squeak, beckoning at us to visit “Seaboyers’ Emporium, est. 1800.”

“1800? That emporium must be the oldest building on the island. I thought for sure the earliest structure was built in the 1900s,” Mom said as she thumbed through her tourist guide hastily. “This emporium is not even mentioned here ...”

“It’s probably one of those best kept secrets only known to the locals,” Dad commented. “Like the turnoff to Talon Island,” he winked at me and began turning the steering wheel.

“Watch out!” Mom screamed.

An oncoming tourist bus with tinted windows zoomed by, eager to get to Peggy’s Cove and its famous lighthouse, one of the most visited places in Canada. It, too, was on my to-do list – as soon as we were settled in. Back home, I was a part-time correspondent for *The Destiny Observer*; and a photo of me holding a copy of the newspaper in front of the lighthouse would make the front page.

When the road was clear, we turned left onto Talon Island Road, which led us to a causeway that connected the island with the mainland. At Mom's request, we stopped on the causeway and rolled down the windows to let in a blast of fresh air sprinkled with salt. There was a collective inhale and exhale as three humans and five cats took in the glittering expanse of St. Margaret's Bay.

After a four-day drive, we were finally here!

"It's beautiful ..." Mom said reverently.

The soft purring that came from behind me suggested the cats concurred. Now, where was the house?

Dad resumed our course, and we went around the last bend to our destination, 1111 Talon Island Road.

"I can see it; it's the white one on the left," Dad said. All heads swivelled in that direction. Unlike the bay, the sight of the rental house did not uplift our hearts. It was large and old, with a roof colonized by orange lichens. The black decorative shutters on the sides of the windows gave it a watchful look.

"Is it haunted?" Mom wondered. Her voice shook slightly when she added: "It looks haunted to me. I'm not staying there."

"Too late," Dad replied. "We have rented it for two months. You cannot cancel a lease in Nova Scotia."

"I'm just saying," she shook her head and squeezed my hand. "Don't worry, pumpkin, ghosts do not exist."

"Then what is haunting the house?" I asked. She was not making any sense.

"Probably mice in the walls and a squirrel in the attic," Dad stepped in. "These old houses are perfect habitats for nocturnal creatures."

Hmm ... I knew my mother was scared of mice; she would never touch the ones left as gifts on the doormat by our cats. My father had to take them away and bury

them in our backyard. But was that a reason to turn back after driving across Canada for days and days? There was only one course of action: investigate.

Whatever had initially disturbed my mom was quickly forgotten at the sight of a cascade of pink flowers craftily planted around rocks in the front garden. A wooden walk invited us to follow it to the doorstep.

“How quaint!” Mom exclaimed, clapping her hands.

“We are saved,” Dad said, sounding relieved. “Now, can we move in?”

And so we climbed out of our old trusted truck, stretching our legs and backs. Haunted or not haunted, this house was ours for a while. I could not wait to see my room. I hoped it would be in the attic, preferably quiet and not occupied by rodents. I lowered the tailgate and watched the cats pounce on it. They were not in the least afraid or confused by finding themselves in a strange place. I just hoped there were no predators on the island. While my parents busied themselves with luggage and Dad’s video equipment, I walked to the end of the driveway, looking left and right to see how big Talon Island was. The cats fell into a single file behind me, equally curious about their new territory.

“Hi!” came a shout from the road. I turned around to see who it was and saw a slim blond woman walking a poodle. She waved at me vigorously. I waved back cautiously.

“Hello,” I said as she approached. The cats bristled at the sight of the dog, who strained against his leash, no doubt wishing to give them a welcome chase around the island.

“Are you my new neighbours?” the woman asked. “This is Sir Lancelot. He is from Mexico.”

“Um, we are just here for the summer,” I replied shyly, looking around to see where the cats had scattered. “Sorry, I have to go find my cats.”

“See you around!” she said in that cheerful but slightly maniacal tone of one who is determined to feel positively about life every day. “Watch out for eagles! And foxes!” she called over her shoulder.

Taken aback, I forgot to ask the woman her name. Did she really mean what she had said?

“Eagles?” I muttered to myself.

“It is the owl they ought to fear,” a voice said. A disembodied voice, I should say, because there was no one there. In the shadow of the old house, which my mother had pronounced haunted, I stood all alone.

“Hello?” I managed to say, looking around and only seeing my cats, who were slowly coming out of the bushes. “That was strange. Let’s go inside and get you something to eat.”

For once they obeyed and followed me into the house. I hoped I would still be able to pick my own room and that the decision had not already been made for me without me.

“Your room is the one with the balcony,” my mother announced as soon as she saw me.

“It has a telescope,” Dad said and shoved a stack of linens into my unresisting arms. Then he whispered: “Consider yourself lucky. I get to sleep in a four-poster bed with a saggy mattress.”

“We picked the romantic room,” Mom smiled. “A room with a view. Just like the novel.”

I shrugged, not having read any such novel, and deposited the linens on the bottom step of a steep flight of stairs. Mom pointed me in the direction of the utility room, where I opened a can of cat food and divided

its contents among five famished felines. They gulped it down in record time, licking their bowls clean and eyeing my hands for more.

“Maybe later,” I said. “Let’s go check out our room!”

They fell into an easy trot behind me, and together we climbed the stairs. I noted a linen closet with an antique latch on its white door.

“Shall we take a peek inside?” I asked the cats and lifted the black latch with my thumb. The door opened with a creak, revealing a deep, dark and cozy space inside. The cats rushed in, dividing the shelves among themselves according to a pecking order only known to them.

“Come on, little mateys,” I started closing the door, “there is more to see in this house.”

We passed a bathroom with a giant claw-footed tub that must have been lifted with a crane, it looked so heavy. Perhaps it had been placed here before the roof was finished. Seeing that the toilet lid was up, Samilian the tomcat proceeded to drink out of it, cupping his paw to bring the water to his mouth.

“Yuck! Don’t drink out of the toilet!” I scolded him, but he paid me no attention. Poor thing; he must have been dehydrated. While he drank, Toby the cat jumped up on the counter and sniffed at a pair of porcelain sinks complete with tarnished brass taps. Judging by the floral wallpaper that was peeling in the corners and the scent marks currently being decoded by the cats, this room had not been renovated for decades.

“Now, on to our bedroom!” I commanded my minions and led them down the narrow and rather-dark hallway that had two doors at its end. Instinctively I reached for the large round doorknob on the right

and twisted it, giving the old door a little push with my shoulder.

It was a simple, somewhat-small room in the attic with bare, slanted walls and a warped wooden floor. The far corner on the right was occupied by a cast-iron pot-bellied stove whose black chimney disappeared through the ceiling. For reasons unknown, the stove was surrounded with round pebbles. Some of the stones had dainty flowers painted on them.

“Cool, a telescope ... and a sliding door!” I whistled and tossed the linens onto my bed on the way to the balcony. The door was stuck, but I managed to open it on my third try. The cats spilled out, poking their heads between the railing to assess the height.

“Too far to jump, little ninjas,” I said, knowing full well they would try it anyway. There was a hill and a forest behind the house, hiding a small cove from full view. A white rock resembling a pyramid stood at the edge of its dark waters.

“I think we are facing east. That means we will get the early light in the morning, and we will see the moon first too. What do you think? Do you like it?”

There was a thud. I leaned over the railing to see which cat had jumped off the balcony.

“Henrietta ...”

The chubbiest and friendliest cat of all, Henrietta Sinclair had vaulted the obstacle, scaled down the shingled roof and sprung off a rather-loose gutter, eager to embrace her new-found freedom. Before the others could do the same, I pushed them back inside, sliding the glass door shut. It was easier the second time.

“Right. There is an owl outside that might eat you if you are not careful. It came as an anonymous tip.”

The cats were clearly disappointed, assembling at the balcony door and pressing their noses into it, tails swishing. They were scheming, I could tell, which would keep them occupied while I looked for their sister. Hastily, I made my bed and emptied the contents of my suitcase onto it. There was no closet in my room – only an ancient dresser lined with waxed paper and smelling of mothballs. It would do.

After I put my clothes away, I thundered down the stairs, finding Mom in the living room with her head turned up. She was admiring the blackened wooden beams that ran under the ceiling.

“Don’t get any ideas,” Dad warned her.

“What? I was just looking – that’s all. How old do you reckon this house is?” she changed the topic.

“A hundred years, at least. Look at those indentations in the beams; they are from an adze.”

“The house is very stoutly built; it reminds me of a ship,” Mom mused. “Maybe it was built by a sea captain.”

“Or pirates,” Dad said mysteriously. “Did you notice the vicious iron hooks driven into the beams in the kitchen? Who knows what they used to hang there?”

“And the trap door in the floor ... Did you tell him about that?” Mom was getting excited now. “There is probably a dungeon under the house.”

“Seriously?” I asked, feeling a little uneasy.

“No, just some big rocks in the basement,” Dad assured me. “What’s wrong?”

“Um, nothing. Henrietta is at large,” I shuffled my feet. The cats were my responsibility, and within minutes one of them had escaped.

“How?” Dad asked.

“She jumped from the balcony upstairs and dropped straight down, like a Tibetan tree leech,” I said with a flourish.

“Then let’s go get her. Could she have gone to the beach?” Mom asked the world in general.

“Black Cove beach?” Dad frowned. “That’s the only beach I am aware of. It’s quite famous, actually, at least among divers.”

“Dad, can I go diving?” I jumped at a chance to have my first big underwater adventure.

“Not so fast, buster. But you can help me gather some driftwood. We can use the fireplace tonight,” Dad said.

And so we put our shoes on again and headed outside. We did not lock the door behind us – partly because the lock had corroded from salt air but mainly because this was the Maritimes and we believed the islanders to be good people. Moreover, we would not be gone for long ... or so I thought.

The island road took us farther down to a small wooden bridge after which there was only dirt road leading to an old lighthouse. It was not as impressive as the one at Peggy’s Cove, but it shone its light cheerfully and made a pleasant sight.

“Where’s the beach?” I asked, eyeing a group of granite boulders stretching right and left.

“That must be it; there is nowhere else to go.” Mom sounded a little disappointed.

“I bet there is a nice patch of sand hidden from our view,” Dad pointed and led the way over ankle-twisting rocks slick with water and seaweed. We followed him like ducklings. He was right. A crescent of a beach was tucked between two massive boulders that sheltered it from the sharp wind blowing from the bay. We sat

down, and I was surprised at how coarse the sand was. I rolled it between my fingers and realized that each grain was a piece of a rock that had been washed and smashed by the ocean until it turned into sand. It felt like a lot of work.

I took my shoes off and walked to the edge of the Atlantic. A small wave got pushed ashore, closing around my ankles. The water was startlingly cold, taking my breath away. I would have to postpone my plans to swim and dive until I could borrow a wetsuit. Or was it a dry suit? I had forgotten to bring my long underwear from Saskatchewan, not expecting to need it on a summer holiday.

Behind me, my parents were talking. Dad was trying to persuade Mom to take a boat ride to the large island to the north, which she staunchly refused. She was afraid of deep water.

“But you would have a life jacket,” I could hear Dad say. “It’s quite safe.”

“It’s just too deep,” she argued. “I can’t see the bottom of it.”

“That’s why you should try snorkelling,” Dad persisted.

“I am afraid of the seaweed moving in the water,” she said helplessly. “I just know I would drown.”

Dad sighed and tried to approach the subject from another angle. Knowing how the conversation would end – with my mother not budging – I tuned their voices out.

Voices ...

Words that had been spoken, like a prayer on the wind, brushing the edges of my hearing. Drawn and unable to resist its inexplicable pull, I turned to face the island to the north.

Shut in ... Shut In Island.

A shadow passed over my head, and I shielded my eyes to watch as an eagle rose on an updraft, its white head and tail gleaming in the sun, wings outstretched like a condor's. Henrietta ... I remembered with some urgency. But she was safe, if unreachable, lying on top of the biggest boulder on the beach, peering down at my mother with polite interest.

"Come down, kitty kitty ..."

Henrietta purred and tucked her tail around her, obviously planning to stay for a while, secure in her knowledge of being too heavy to be carried away by eagles.

"She looks as if she belongs here," Dad said. "I am astounded she is not afraid of all this water," he gestured toward the swelling ocean.

"I don't think she wants down. What now?" said Mom.

"Well, I did not bring a ladder, so she will have to climb down on her own." Dad shrugged his shoulders. "She will come when she is hungry."

Henrietta's amber eyes met mine. *I will be all right*, they were saying. Well, we had not named her after Henry Sinclair for nothing – Henry Sinclair, Earl of Orkney, who allegedly crossed the Atlantic before Christopher Columbus. Or so the legend goes.

"Okay, let's leave her here. We could check out this Seaboyers' Emporium and pick her up on the way back," I heard Mom say.

"I'd rather take some driftwood home." Dad excused himself from shopping. "Can you find the emporium by yourself?"

"Of course I can! It's on the way to the lighthouse."

How Mom knew where all the stores were was a real mystery. She needed a map to find her way in downtown Saskatoon, but ask her to find a store and she navigated with the confidence of a Canada goose returning from Florida. It must be some kind of instinct that only women possess.

An emporium! I jumped with joy. I had never been to one before, and the prospect of exploring it now was not something I would turn down. I checked my pants pocket for the \$20 I had saved up for my trip. It was still there, crisp and neatly folded.

“Don’t get anything too big. There isn’t much space in the pickup for when we go back to Saskatchewan,” Dad said dryly.

Mom acknowledged him with a nod and took me by the elbow. I glanced at the tabby cat on the rock one more time, but she showed no signs of early cooperation. Dad bent down to pick up small pieces of dry driftwood.

“Seaboyers’ Emporium, here we come!”

In hindsight, I should have stayed on the beach with Dad and Henrietta. But I wanted to visit the emporium and look for hidden treasures. Little did I know that a treasure would find me and that I would never know if it was a blessing or a curse ... or that I would be tied to it for ever and eternity. A boy my age just does not think of such things.

CHAPTER 3

MARGARET Seaboyer stood in front of her emporium with her feet wide apart, her bulging calves resembling those of King Henry VIII. The sound of her cracking knuckles would have unnerved even a road-worn biker. It was an old habit from her previous line of work as a bouncer in a bar in Dartmouth. But all that was an ancient past now. Her career path had been radically altered by one call from the Coast Guard, informing her that her husband, Nelson, was missing at sea, his lobster traps unchecked. She still could not believe it, and neither could her only son, Joel. He still hoped his father was alive, but one look at her brother-in-law, Chester, a professional diver, had told her there was no hope. Forty hours, he said, 40 hours was how long the ocean gave you to survive. Forty hours before the cold took you.

When it rains it pours, and this is especially true in the Maritimes. The bank immediately sent a nasty letter about Nelson's mortgage. It said something about him being presumed dead but not legally dead and that foreclosure was imminent. Margaret suppressed a professional urge to drive up to Upper Tantallon, pick up the loan officer by his skinny ankles and bounce him up and down until he relented. But she was not in a bar, and he was not an unruly patron. Instead, she sat down heavily in the chair he offered her and, for the first time in her life, started to cry. It was so embarrassing that the banker shuffled the mortgage papers in front of him and

offered her an extension. Margaret vowed she would find a way to save Nelson's legacy. It was either that or lose their house and fishing boat.

So what do you do when you live on the southern shore and you have a lot of old stuff in your attic, a boat and a fishing shack? You get into the tourist industry, that's what. On the way home from the bank she conducted some quick market research that consisted of driving slowly up and down Peggy's Cove Road and counting all the various gift shops, art galleries, bed and breakfast places and restaurants. Their number per square kilometre increased as she got closer to Peggy's Cove. Margaret noted with satisfaction that there was a gap between them just before Indian Harbour – a gap that a woman like her could easily fill.

A family conference was duly called and the cards laid out.

"I say we start a gift shop in the fishing shack," Margaret opened the first volley.

"What about Dad's boat?" Joel said, scratching at his latest tattoo. The skin on his forearm was still red, healing from his latest attempts at artistic self-mutilation.

"Do you want to spend the rest of your life getting up at the crack of dawn, catching fish and lobsters?" his mother weighed in on him.

"No. I want to open my own tattoo parlour."

"Then who will run your father's business? Uncle Chester?" Margaret pointed at Exhibit B.

Chester Seaboyer shook his head slowly. He, too, had dreams that involved water, but they lay many fathoms below the restless surface of the ocean. Big dreams he was not ready to reveal yet ... Unconsciously, he reached for the pendant on a silver chain hidden under his shirt

and mulled over Margaret's proposal. Then he stated the facts.

"I am a diver, not a fisherman," he said. "I think Margaret is right, and if we join forces, we can make this work. It will be easy to transfer all my diving courses here, but I am going to need a place to stay."

"The attic above the gift shop can be yours. And you," Margaret beamed and then turned to Joel, "can turn the back room into a tattoo parlour."

Joel sat up straight. This could be his big break! Then his father's face came back to him, and he slumped back in his chair. Nelson had had little understanding for novel business ideas. His whole life had revolved around his fishing boat, the *Sea Dog*.

As if she had heard her son's thoughts, Margaret announced, "I have big plans for *Sea Dog* too."

The two surviving Seaboyer men exchanged a slightly worried look, their eyes swivelling back to General Margaret. She took a deep breath, her chest heaving and resembling a figurehead on a pitching galleon.

"Remember your father talking about the Seaboyers?" she asked Joel quietly.

"There have always been Seaboyers in Indian Harbour, and they have always lived off the sea. My father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather. And nothing will ever change that," Joel said with reverence.

"And I am going to make sure it stays that way!" Margaret roared and slammed her fist on the Formica table, causing the two men to jump in their chairs.

"He meant fishing," Chester pointed out.

"Subject to interpretation," Margaret waved the objection away like a buzzing fly. "Tourists are a resource just like crustaceans, with the added benefit of giving you money without amputating your fingers first."

Joel put his hands in his pockets. He had already lost one digit on his left hand to a clever lobster and could not afford to lose any more, not if he were to be a tattoo artist.

“*Sea Dog* would make a great tour boat. We can even change the name to *Peggy’s Maiden Voyage* or something like that,” said Margaret.

“It’s bad luck to change a boat’s name,” Joel warned her. “And what is so important about Peggy?” he asked.

“Have you heard of Anne of Green Gables?” his mother pointed in the direction of Prince Edward Island.

“Yes.”

“Then you know that Anne Shirley, the flagship of PEI’s tourism, came from Nova Scotia. Imagine!”

“Mother, are you suggesting that Peggy of Peggy’s Cove could become a second Anne Shirley?”

Margaret nodded sagely. A serene look came over her eyes as she gestured toward the island’s lighthouse outside her kitchen window.

“A young girl, saved from a shipwreck and offered shelter in what is now Peggy’s Cove. A real girl, not a fictional one.”

Chester raised his hand as if he were in school and wanting to be heard by the teacher without drawing attention to himself.

“May I point out that we are well outside of Peggy’s Cove?” he said.

“A mere technicality. We can catch the tourists *before* they reach Peggy’s Cove and offer them a boat tour with Peggy on board.” Margaret’s face cracked into a jack-o’-lantern smile.

“If you mean the actor who had that funny Peggy show in the Old Red School House, he has moved to Ottawa,” Joel said.

“Has the marine fog not lifted from your brain?” Margaret scathed him. “Whoever pilots the boat will dress up as Peggy.”

Chester Seaboyer threw his head back and laughed like an asthmatic hyena. His nephew turned his face away and looked outside the window. Maybe fishing was not such a bad idea after all.

Sensing she was losing their support, Margaret pulled on the string embedded in every Seaboyer’s DNA: greed.

“I guarantee you we will be booked till the end of this tourist season and we will pay off the mortgage with no problem. Next year all the money will go into our pockets, in three equal shares,” she promised, her voice ringing with an echo of a chink of gold coins.

The three Seaboys looked at each other and stood up to shake hands. And that was the birth of Seaboys’ Emporium. It did not take much effort to turn the old fishing shack into a tourist zone. Margaret decided to go with the Maritime atmosphere, and she was surprisingly creative with it. The more weathered and rugged the exterior was, the more believable. She stacked old lobster traps on the side of the building and hung old buoys from trees. An ancient still that great-grandpa Seaboyer had used to make moonshine got dragged out of the forest and proudly displayed on the lawn. Joel was tasked with making the signs, his seven-foot-tall Peggy with a hinged arm a true masterpiece. Chester appropriated the attic above the shop like a hermit crab moving into a new shell, trying not to think of Margaret as a symbiotic anemone.

Initially they were worried they would not have the capital for buying merchandise, but Margaret did

not want to sell plastic lighthouses from China and tea cozies anyway.

“We’ll sell real Maritime treasures. There’s a ton of them in people’s attics, and they will pay us to be rid of the junk. Joel will go to estate auctions and pick up antiques for cheap. Chester, do you still have that loot you brought from the Florida Keys?”

“My ex took all the portable valuables, but the cannon balls and the antique Schrader diving suit would look good on display,” he replied grudgingly.

And so they hung the fifty-pound steampunk brass helmet with a canvas suit from a hook near the door to advertise Chester’s diving classes. Business started trickling in, but it was not the flood of cash Margaret had originally envisioned. She suspected the Peggy’s Cove art gallery and gift shop crowd was waging a secret trade war, although she had no proof. Well, if war was what they wanted, war was what they would get.

But it was hard to be angry on a bright, warm day such as this. Casting one more look at her shop sign, Margaret went inside to forge a new business strategy. While she was at it, she busied herself with polishing some dented silverware supplied by Chester, who had dumped it in the back room. Joel was out there somewhere, tinkering with *Sea Dog* and getting it ready for the first boat tour. If Angus MacPhee, a sailor from Peggy’s Cove, came to complain about their encroaching on his turf, he could kiss her fists. The ocean was big enough for more than one boating outfit. She could hear Chester up in the attic, cussing. He had probably hit his head on a roof beam again. Overall, all was well in the Seaboyer world. She nodded to herself as she closed the door behind her and bent down to work.

Outside, the sun was shining and gulls were gliding on the wind, laughing and calling to each other. Nothing suggested that in a few moments an ancient, almost-forgotten past would converge with the present like two ocean currents that could drag a person under. Some distance from the emporium, two figures crossed a wooden bridge, their shoes kicking up dust on the dirt and gravel road. It was a middle-aged woman and a boy of about 12 years of age who had his mother's cheekbones and his father's red hair. They were in a deep conversation that was being closely followed by a pair of ravens fluttering from tree to tree and rock to rock, giving the appearance of busy and completely normal Maritime birds.

When the woman and her son reached Seaboyers' Emporium, est. 1800, they stopped in their tracks and regarded the ancient diving suit swaying slightly in the breeze.

"I can't decide if it's something from a Jules Verne novel or an early prototype of a spacesuit."

"It's an old diving suit, Mom."

"It creeps me out."

The woman gave it a wide berth in case the suit came alive and tried to grab her. The boy tugged at it and turned it this way and that. The canvas was heavy and durable. He wondered if this item, too, was for sale. There was no price tag on it.

"Mom, wait for me!" he abandoned the ancient aquanaut and hurried after his mother, who had already pushed the door open.

"Hello? Can we come in?" she called.

There was no answer, but a shower of dust coming from above told them someone was moving around in the attic. It must be the shop owner. Mother and son

waited for their eyes to adjust to the gloomy interior, being drawn by instinct to the closest source of light. A green lamp had been lit on the counter, illuminating an old leather-bound ledger.

“Mom, is that a mermaid?” the boy was craning his neck and pointing at a fishing net suspended from the ceiling. A papier-mâché figure of a well-endowed half-woman, half-fish lay in it face down, fixing them with an unblinking stare. The boy’s mother put her hands over his eyes and propelled him forward.

“They should put a shirt on that thing,” she muttered. “There must be something for kids in here.”

“I want that one!” the boy pointed again, this time at a boxy contraption with a handle on the side and a metallic cylinder sticking out the front.

“What *is* that?” his mother wondered, inspecting the curious antique. “Some kind of a camera maybe?”

“There is no lens,” the boy pointed out. “Can I turn the handle and find out what it does? Please?”

The woman shook her head resolutely and then said: “Are you crazy? It’s a foghorn! What if we break it? Then we’ll have to buy it.”

They moved on, carefully studying every object on display and even the building itself. It was a post-and-beam construction, very close to a barn, with a high ceiling and stout wooden beams supporting it. Despite a slightly musty odour that hung in the unmoving air, there was not a single cobweb or an empty wasp’s nest in sight. The owner must be a woman – one with a bit of imagination.

They passed a showcase called *Titanic Treasures* that revealed a motley collection of dented forks and chipped teacups.

“Are these really from the *Titanic*?” the boy asked.

“Hardly. If you want to see real *Titanic* artifacts, I will take you to the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic,” his mother replied.

The boy was disappointed. He was beginning to feel at home in this strange realm of cast-off relics from the past. All they wanted was a new home, just like abandoned animals in a shelter, their pathetic faces staring at you from behind the bars of their cages, transmitting an urgent telepathic message that said “Pick me, pick me!”

He felt there was an antique here just for him, a boy of 12 who had lived the sheltered life of an adored only child – an antique that would thrust him into the whirlpool of an unexpected adventure. A safe unexpected adventure. But where was it hiding?

“Let’s split up,” his mother decided. “I want to see those glass floats hanging in the back window. Why don’t you try on a kilt?” she propelled him forward.

Reluctantly, he obeyed. He had serious doubts about wanting a pleated skirt – especially when the boys back home in Destiny would never let him forget that he had bought one. And then he saw it.

“Wow, a *Braveheart* kilt ...”

On a rack shoved under a movie poster of Mel Gibson with his face painted blue and white was a motley collection of genuine if threadbare Nova Scotia tartans and matching hats. The boy looked for one his size, his heart filling with disappointment when there was none. Maybe he could buy a hat?

He grabbed one and put it on his head, turning around to look for a mirror. There was one in a dark corner, its long oval shape leaning against the wall. A wooden trunk had been placed in front of it to keep it from falling over. It would do. The boy took a step forward and yelped.

“Ouch!”

“Honey, are you okay?” his mother called out with concern.

“Just a stubbed toe,” the boy said, sucking his breath in and bending down to inspect the round and extremely solid object his sandalled foot had collided with. He whistled under his breath and reached for what seemed to be a piece of real history.

“A cannon ball ...” he whispered.

Nobody back home had a cannon ball! He had to buy it before his mother could stop him. What would he do with it, though? Maybe it would make a good doorstep ... or a paperweight. Yes, it was a multi-purpose object of dark and dangerous beauty – one that was about to be wrenched away from him.

“What do you think you are doing?” Margaret Seaboyer’s voice shot across the room with the speed and impact of a fishing harpoon.

The boy looked over his shoulder only to see a woman shaped like a sumo wrestler making a beeline for him. He was in trouble now. He looked down at the ball, which was becoming heavier by the second. Where could he put it?

“Sorry, I just ...” The ball slipped between his suddenly clammy fingers and rushed to meet with gravity. He managed to step back, thus saving his toes from getting crushed, but he could do nothing to save the protruding corner of the old trunk, which happened to be in the way.

Crack!

The brief noise of splintering wood made everyone in the shop wince. Margaret experienced a brief flash of guilt when she realized she did not have insurance

for squished boys' toes. She reacted in the only way she knew, with anger.

"You break it you buy it, young fella!" she pointed her fat finger at him.

"Nicky, what happened? Did you get hurt?" The boy disappeared in his mother's embrace and, to his horror, felt hot tears well up in his eyes.

"I'm okay," he said in a muffled voice and then pulled away. Everyone looked at his toes, which wiggled happily, all 10 of them safe and sound.

The tension in the air dispersed, and heart rates returned to normal.

"We are so sorry ... We'll buy the trunk, of course," the boy's mother turned to Margaret, who was still fuming out of habit.

"How much?"

Margaret narrowed her eyes and did a quick assessment of the wooden trunk with its big ugly gash. It had not been anything special to begin with, but now it was a total ruin. No one else would buy it, so she would have to give these people a good deal, especially if she wanted them to come back. And they would be back, for the cannon ball, for the float ... These customers were keepers.

"Ten bucks should do it," she pronounced her verdict. "Just so we're clear: All sales are final. No returns!"

"What if it's a faulty product?" the boy whispered to his mother. She whispered back, "Nicky, we are past that point now, don't you think?"

He nodded unhappily, turning his head as his mother walked him to the counter, without the coveted cannon ball.

"The hat is on the house," Margaret smiled sweetly.

"What hat?" the boy said and reached for his head.

“That hat,” Margaret gestured with her chin. “It suits your red hair.”

“It does,” his mother confirmed. “Wait till the boys in Saskatchewan see it.”

Nicky smiled weakly. His mother did not know that “the boys” were not really his friends. So far they had left him alone and he would make sure it stayed that way. The hat would be buried at the bottom of the wretched trunk he had to pay \$10 for.

The money was handed over with some reluctance.

“No receipt?” his mother asked.

“I am out of blank receipts, dear. But I will give one to you when you come back for one of them glass floats,” Margaret said, hefting the trunk as if it were a crate of tangerines.

“I kind of like that mirror too – the one my son was looking at earlier. The frame has such an intriguing design.”

“It’s a scrying mirror. Or so I was told,” Margaret leaned forward. “It belonged to my great-grandmother, who was psychic.”

“What’s a scrying mirror?” Nicky asked, looking from one woman to the other.

“A divination tool,” a male voice answered, and all three turned toward it. Chester Seaboyer stood with his arms crossed on his chest, chewing on a match sticking out from the corner of his thin mouth. He had a slightly dangerous aura about him – give him an eye patch and a bandana and he could pass for a pirate.

“Ah, Chester, right on time. Please help this lady with the trunk,” Margaret gestured for him to come closer. She would give him an earful about those cannon balls later on.

Chester ambled across the room, slowly unfolding his arms, his eyes assessing the financial worth of the mother and son in front of him.

“Which house do you live in?” he asked. “I did not see a car parked outside.”

Suddenly feeling uncomfortable, Nicky’s mother gave Chester a polite smile that said “Thank you, but no thank you” and urged her son to take the other handle of the trunk.

“No worries, we will take care of it. Thank you very much!”

“I will get the door,” Chester insisted. He watched them leave the emporium, his eyes unblinking like the glass visor of the Schrader diving suit.

When they were out of earshot, Nicky and his mother looked at each other over the brown polished surface of the \$10 trunk.

“That guy gave me the creeps!” she rolled her eyes.

“Mom, everything is giving you the creeps today.”

“That’s because you scared me to death. I already saw you with prosthetic toes. What will your father say?”

“That I am grounded,” the boy sighed. The charges were piling up today. A runaway cat, a damaged antique ... What did life have in store for him next?

“Well, it was an accident,” his mother ruled. Incensed, she added, “What were they thinking, having cannon balls lying around where anybody can trip on them?”

“I didn’t know they could be so heavy! Do you think the one I held was from the French-English wars?”

“Maybe that Chester guy knows. I am not sure I believe the baloney about a scrying mirror, but the frame was lovely, all tangled roots and spirals.”

“Maybe you should get it then,” Nicky suggested.

“But where would I put it? There is no space in the pickup, and that goes for your trunk too.”

“Dad will think of something.”

They walked in silence the rest of the way, changing sides occasionally to give their hands a break. They did not stop until they reached the old white house with a fat tabby cat sunning herself on the front porch.

“Henrietta! She’s come back,” Nicky exclaimed happily. Finally, something had gone right. But the cat ran for it as soon as she saw them and scooted around the corner, diving into the thicket.

“I’ll go find her,” he sighed.