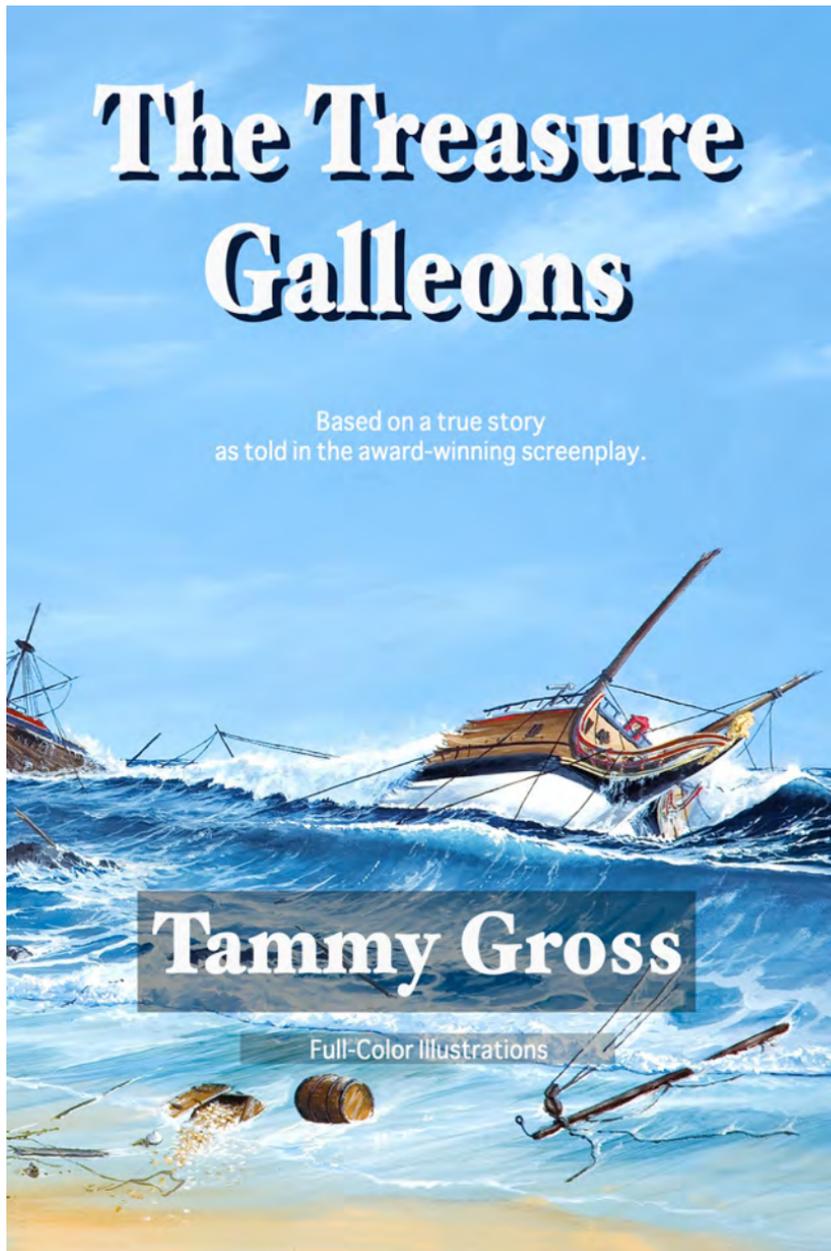


# The Treasure Galleons

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## CHARACTER GLOSSARY

### **ECHEVERZ clan (Spanish-Basque):**

DON ANTONIO ~ Captain-General of the *Tierra Firme*  
Galleons

FERMIN ~ misfit youngest pre-teen son, aspiring artist

PEDRO ~ eldest son, Captain of *Rosario*

MANUEL ~ 2<sup>nd</sup> son, Captain of *Concepcion*, married to Josefa

JOSEFA ~ married to Manuel

TORO ~ blacksheep 3<sup>rd</sup> son

MICO ~ simple-minded teenage son

### **POPA clan (Dutch):**

XANDER ~ Captain of *Holandesa*

JULIA ~ neglected daughter

LUDOLF ~ son

### **Spanish secondaries:**

MARQUIS DE TORRES ~ Governor of Cuba

SOLORZANO ~ Garrison Commander for Cuba

UBILLA ~ Captain-General of the *Nueva España Flota*

SALMON ~ Admiral of the *Nueva España Flota*

ZALEME ~ Captain of *Holandesa*

BERNARDO ~ officer on *Holandesa*

MENDEZ ~ ranking officer of *Holandesa*

FRANCISCO ~ officer on Don Antonio's *capitana* (*Carmen*)

CORCOLES ~ Governor of St. Augustine

LIMA ~ owner of the Flota ship that beached to the south

### **Other secondaries:**

HENRY JENNINGS ~ Welsh privateer Captain of *Barsheba*

D'AIRE ~ French Captain of *Grifon*

KING PHILIP V ~ Young French king on the Spanish throne





## PREFACE

Like a bird soaring out of a cloud, the anvil-shaped cliff jutted out of the layer of mist. On a clear day, it was the perfect lookout point with the Atlantic Ocean to the east and Portobelo Bay to the southwest. But whenever mist rose over Portobelo, as on that day in 1709, the dreamlike haze blanketed everything—harbor, fortress, village and surrounding jungle.

Sixty feet below the cliff ceiling, the crosswinds unveiled a cozy beach, its sand still wet from the receding high tide.

Still under construction, a complex sand castle rose at least three feet from the hidden cove.

Behind the sand castle, red locks bobbed up and down.

In the jungle, beautiful redheaded Dona Maria ran toward a clearing in frenzied search of her young son.

*“Ferminito!?”*

She ran out onto a smooth rock where she skidded to a tipsy stop near the jutting cliff’s ledge. A pebble rolled toward the edge.

## The Treasure Galleons

“FERMIN!” she cried out, panicked.

Her shout echoed into the mist.

Under the jugged cliff, five-year-old Fermin, with flaming red hair to match his mother’s, was digging a moat with clam shells for his splendid sand castle.

“Mama! Come see what I made!”

Maria, somewhat relieved, strained to see over the ledge.

“You’re too young, *mi tesoro*, to go off on your own like this!”

Her foot moved toward the edge.

Unaware of the concern in his mother’s voice, Fermin stood and stepped back to admire his masterpiece.

Water flowed into the moat’s trench.

“Fermin! Do you hear me?”

The pebble dropped from the cliff above.

Fermin finally looked up.

Maria hazarded her way to the very tip of the cliff.

“You must come home at once before your father returns—”

Her foot slipped on the smooth rock.

Through the mist, Fermin watched Maria fall until she landed on the rocky shore by the sand. Face up. Dead.

Horrified, Fermin ran to her side and dropped to his knees. “Mamaíta!”

His eyes moved to the oyster shells in his hands.

As the fog lifted under noon sun, a horse in full run received a whip to the rump by its rider.

Don Antonio, cloaked in shadow, dismounted and emerged from the foliage, horsewhip in hand. His angry eyes took in the tragic scene before him.

Blood was streaming into the sand castle’s moat.

“Fermin!”

Still hovering over Maria, Fermin turned his tear-filled gaze to the ominous, threatening outline of Don Antonio.

“I can’t wake her, Papa.”

Don Antonio’s boots bounded forward, crushing through the sand masterpiece. “What have you done?”

The whip’s lash dangled from his white-knuckled hand.



## CHAPTER ONE

“Fire!”

*Boom!* The 3-pounder’s warning shot splashed alongside the fifty-foot Dutch galley.

At the helm of his 150-foot flagship, Don Antonio de Echeverz’s trademark stoicism masked the pride he felt. Each of his three sons, even young Toro, had displayed masterful coordination in their chase of the little Dutch merchant.

From the crow’s nest above Don Antonio, Toro had been first to spot the Dutchman off the starboard bow. She had been a speck to the naked eye, but there was no mistaking the jib of her brigantine rigging through the spyglass. And there was no mistaking that she did not belong in these Spanish waters. Not on the day when Don Antonio’s treasure-laden Galleon flota was headed for Portobelo.

“Port to port,” Don Antonio ordered his helmsman, who then relayed the order to the men in the pilot room below.

## The Treasure Galleons

After an hour in pursuit, Don Antonio's two eldest sons, Pedro and Manuel, had driven the Dutchman directly into the path of Don Antonio's waiting warship. Larger and more cumbersome than their smaller ships, his *capitana* must have been quite a menacing sight to the Dutchmen who realized too late that they were caught in a trap.

With the other five ships of the Galleon fleet already surrounding the Dutchman, Don Antonio's ship glided up to and aside the little two-masted galley. His impressive Neptune figurehead pointed his triton past the unadorned bow of the now anchored Dutchman until the ships were parallel. Don Antonio's warship overshadowed the Dutchman's twentyfold.

The crews of the Spanish fleet were in a frenzy by now, anxious to board the Dutchman, but Don Antonio would only allow a dozen of his best militiamen, led by his sons, to make sure it was a fair fight, should the Dutchmen be foolish enough to put up a fight. Judging by their stance, they were itching for a fight.

As Pedro, Manuel and Toro leapt to the Dutchman's deck, followed by their chosen twelve, the hundreds of men on the surrounding ships vied for the best views amidst the riggings, rails and decks.

Young Ludolf looked at the hulking warship with contempt, then at the young men who'd just boarded his father's vessel without cause or permission. He and the rest of the crew stood ready, swords drawn. This ambush was just another show of overreach by the brazen Spanish. By taking the Spanish throne, Louis XIV's French grandson had already caused fourteen years of war and bloodshed from the North Sea to the Indian Ocean and everywhere in between.

When the young one in charge raised his sword, Ludolf didn't wait for his demand of surrender. He rushed at the wall of Spaniards with a defiant roar, his silver-blond hair gleaming like a bullet under the mid-morning sun.

And it was on! A lively sword fight sprawled across the deck.

Pedro gripped the hilt of his sword with the steady hand that had defeated every foe during his years from cabin boy to captain throughout the war. Only once had any opponent ever managed to force a sword from this hand, and that had been while sparring with his father.

Never having encountered Dutchmen before, Pedro was impressed that they seemed to fight as if three times their small number. This only further invigorated his d'Artagnan-esque bravado.

"I've heard the Dutch are a hearty people," Pedro yelled to his brothers over the din of swords and shouts.

"And brave!" Manuel, a fervent Aramis type, defended his corner with more heart than skill.

Toro, the robust Porthos of the trio, sidestepped like a matador as the angry silver-blond Dutchman charged him like a bull. Considering his nickname, which meant "bull," Toro found this amusingly ironic, especially when the young man missed Toro, driving his sword into the rail and disarming him.

The young man turned and landed his fist on Toro's unfazed chin.

"Feisty too." Toro grinned, then moved on to others while the frustrated young man worked to free his impaled sword.

Their audience cheered from their perches aboard the surrounding warships.

Don Antonio's eyes gleamed to watch his eldest son in action. The perfect *caballero*, Pedro was a better version of himself, except for his puzzling obsession with the English Bard. It had always been Pedro's ambition to one day be the royal captain of horse. Just recently, the king had hinted that Pedro's promotion was imminent upon completion of their current mission.

If Pedro was the perfect warrior, Manuel was the perfect peacemaker. Though adequate in skill at arms, Manuel was more at ease praying than fighting. But his willingness to do both had prompted Don Antonio to agree to help Manuel and his young wife build a convent in Portobelo at the end of their mission.

Don Antonio's eyes moved to Toro. Too stubborn to learn the finer skills of swordsmanship, Toro used his size and strength to

## **The Treasure Galleons**

mow down his opponents. Toro's christened name was Antonio, and there were times Don Antonio was thankful for the nickname, but this day he was proud to share his name. Wherever Toro went he seemed to make friends and enemies in equal measure by his bullish behavior. Though his ambition was lacking, he was young, and Don Antonio trusted that someday Toro would find his calling.

While away for so many months at the king's bidding, it was not the sons who were with him that Don Antonio agonized over in prayer each night. It was his two youngest boys that weighed heavy on his heart. As his mind wandered, the clash of swords seemed to intensify, bringing Don Antonio back from his troubled thoughts of his most brilliant and most simple-minded sons awaiting their return in Portobelo.



## CHAPTER TWO

Crumbling cannon parapets, most without cannons, extended hundreds of feet from the old customs house situated along the shore of Portobelo's bay.

Except perhaps for the heavy guard visible in doorways, no one would ever guess from looking at the plain, white two-story building that millions of pesos in silver mined in Potosi was housed behind those walls, all belonging to King Philip V of Spain. Fortunately, most of the villagers were either military assigned to protect it, or native Panamanians who found no practical use for monetary currency.

"When the Fair closes, can we help Papa take the treasure to Spain?" Two dirty feet danced along the mossy ruins.

Below, in noble attire, Fermin, a twelve-year-old prodigy with intellect of scholars twice his age, strolled alongside the parapets, drawing in a sketchbook. His thick red curls bounced as he shook

## The Treasure Galleons

his head. “Don’t be *absurdo*. Father has plenty of other sons to do his bidding.”

Barefoot, dark-haired Miguel, a fifteen-year-old with all the sweetness and mental capacity of a six-year-old, and whom everyone called Mico for his monkey-like playfulness, hopped down before Fermin in an en garde stance using a tree branch for a sword.

Fermin stepped around him, too lost in his drawing to look up.

Disappointed, Mico peeked at the sketchbook and grimaced at the drawing of an evil man with a whip. It looked suspiciously like Don Antonio. “What’s that?”

Fermin shut the book with a reprimanding look. Like everyone in the Echeverz clan, Fermin loved Mico, but his nosy enthusiasm did wear on the nerves sometimes.

Mico shrugged it off and jumped back up to the parapets.

Annoyed by Mico’s indifference to heights, and a little jealous of his athletic ease, Fermin absently rubbed his chest.

Though of simple mind, Mico recognized Fermin’s nervous tic. “Why don’t you like heights?”

“Why don’t you go in the water?” Fermin snapped back.

“*El capitan de mar* goes *on* the water, not in it.”

“A sea captain? I thought you wanted to be a soldier.”

“If you can be an artist and a scholar, then I’ll be a sailor and a soldier.... Just like Pedro.”

Mico wielded his branch-sword as if in a great battle.



Pedro disarmed man after man in the spirited sword fight, working his way toward the helm where...

Blond Captain Xander Popa’s steely blue eyes watched the battle with a building rage, which he unleashed on Pedro with his sword the moment they were face to face.

An intense duel between youth and experience ensued until...

Pedro stunned Xander with a circular disarming maneuver and raised his sword tip to the elder Dutchman’s throat.

“SURRENDER OR YOUR CAPTAIN’S LIFE!” he shouted to all.

Ludolf saw and threw his sword down. He shouted orders in Dutch until every Dutchman backed down. Their weapons dropped.

Ludolf glanced down to the hold where their barrels of wines and ales—and other valuable cargo—were stacked.

From somewhere above he heard, “What is your name, *verspieder*?”

Xander looked around. “Who calls me a spy?”

Ludolf looked up to see the weathered patriarchal Athos of the clan step past men who cleared a path to the large warship’s rail.

The Greek cross of knighthood on the captain’s coat confirmed that this was the man in charge.

Xander said, “I assure you, capitan, we are not—”

“Your Excellency’ to you, *Holandes*,” the swashbuckling young Spaniard said.

His brother added, “You’re addressing Portobelo’s *Royal Audiencia de Plata*, Don Antonio de Echeverz y Subiza de Navarra.”

The string of incomprehensible words mystified Ludolf and Xander.

Their bear-sized brother chimed in, “Most would bow—”

“Portobelo?” Ludolf scoffed. “We must be a hundred leagues east of there.”

The big oaf smirked at him. “Portobelo rules all of New Spain when the Great Fair comes to port.”

Xander and Ludolf exchanged a look of heightened intrigue.

Don Antonio reprimanded his son with a heated glare for his blunder before turning his attention to the Dutch captain. “Show me your papers, *Holandes*.”

Xander reached into his vest.

A trio of swords whipped up to his face.

Xander slowly pulled out papers.

The swords withdrew.

The elder son took the papers to Don Antonio.

## The Treasure Galleons

Desperate to get out of this with his men and his ship intact, Xander explained, "I was invited to trade my wines with the governor of Cartagena."

Don Antonio frowned as he scanned the papers. "I see here only the signature of Don Juan del Hoyo Solorzano, whose authority is questionable at best."

Xander clammed up as Toro took him roughly by the arm. "Only a pirate or a spy would turn to the likes of Solorzano."

Don Antonio turned to Pedro. "Put these men in chains belowdecks." Then to his own crew he said, "Señor Zaleme, take the men you need and secure this vessel."

Loyal, unquestioning Juan Baptista Zaleme did as told while Pedro ushered the prize crew across a boarding plank to the warship.

Obviously feeling gypped, Toro shoved Xander to Manuel's custody and went to the rail to beg of his father, "Zaleme? Papa, both Pedro and Manuel have already laid claim to the other prizes. You promised—"

Don Antonio put his hand up to stop Toro. "Señor Zaleme is your ship's master. You will be el capitan—"

"Gracias, Papa!"

"—until you do something foolish."

Toro seemed to consider, then nodded: *fair enough*. He beamed a toothy smile and headed toward the Dutch ship's two aft cabins.



### CHAPTER THREE

Long shadows stretched across the quiet village behind Fermin. His nose in a book, he walked toward the fancy iron gate adorned by the simple Echeverz family crest: two crossed swords in an X over the shield.

Before he was through the gate, a dusty Mexican oxcart approached from the main road.

Hearing the squeaky wheels, Fermin turned just as the driver halted his cart.

“Mail for the audiencia.”

Hopeful, Fermin asked, “From *Mejico*?”

Minutes later, Fermin ran up the private road to the Echeverz estate, waving the letter that held his future in it. He sprinted into the magnificent Spanish villa and headed for the sitting room where he knew he’d find his sisters at the end of a long day of...whatever it was sisters did during the day.

## The Treasure Galleons

Since his mother's death when Fermin was only five, eldest sister Izzy had been Fermin's biggest supporter. Before his father sent him away to Jesuit school in Peru, Fermin had relied on Izzy to assure him that their mother's death wasn't his fault. It was a comforting notion, though the whole family knew it was untrue.

Fermin did cause his mother's death. And his chest bore the scars of Don Antonio's wrath afterward to prove it. No one in the family ever spoke of it.

Fermin only had small flashes of memory, but they painted a mosaic of condemnation. The youngest of Don Antonio and Maria's eleven children, five-year-old Fermin had often wandered off the estate when older eyes weren't upon him. He'd loved to explore and discover new things, finding wonderment in every plant, animal or rock he found. And he was obsessed with the glistening waves of the ocean.

It was his independent fearlessness that had prompted his mother to make sure he could swim. No one else in the family could swim except for Toro, who did so without his father's knowledge. It was considered beneath the dignity of a noble family. The only people who swam were natives or other islanders whose livelihood came from diving for food and pearls.

For his own safety, his mother had gone behind Don Antonio's back to ensure Fermin would never drown. But she worried over him nevertheless. In those days, his adventurous spirit was insatiable. His thirst for adventure was slated forever on that fateful day, turning him into the twelve-year-old coward he was now.

At age five, always curious about the high cliff across the bay that jutted out over the ocean, Fermin had wandered off in the early morning while everyone was asleep. He'd been told many times not to, but at five, much like at twelve, his selfishness often made him reckless.

The next thing Fermin remembered, and would remember his entire life, was the horsewhip in his father's hand as he knelt over his dead wife's body, weeping. Then Fermin looked down at his chest, and it was covered in bloody welts.

From that day forward, his father could barely look at Fermin.

When Don Antonia finally sent Fermin off to Jesuit school, it sealed Fermin's fate as an outcast in his own family. When he returned home each season, Izzy mothered him, keeping their mother's memory alive for him by encouraging his artistic and scholastic pursuits. Usually Don Antonio was either gone or so busy running financial affairs at the customs house, Fermin rarely saw him, which seemed to suit them both fine.

So it was only natural that the first person Fermin wanted to see upon receiving good news was Izzy.

In the sitting room, red-haired Izzy played a lively tune on the harpsichord for their dark-haired sisters—all five of them—who listened with varying levels of interest.

In the corner, their sweet, beautiful sister-in-law Josefa embroidered a man's neck cloth, no doubt for her beloved Manuel, whom she'd married only a few weeks before Don Antonio had whisked him and his brothers off to Madrid to receive the king's commission.

Fermin burst into the room holding the letter high. The music halted and all eyes went to him.

"It came. The master artist has accepted me!"

Josefa put her embroidery down. "Accepted...for what?"

"The apprenticeship in Mexico City."

Their blank stares frustrated Fermin a moment. Even Izzy didn't seem to know what he was talking about.

"I'm going to be an artist!"

As understanding overtook them, Josefa, Izzy and all the girls flocked to him with accolades.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER FOUR

With the sun low in the sky, Don Antonio's flota was still at anchor in a cluster. There was much activity aboard their Dutch prize ship where Zaleme and Toro's new crew refitted the lines and familiarized themselves with Dutch-made instruments and rigging. Most peculiar was the knobbed wheel that seemed to replace the lower-deck tiller they were all used to. Rather than a team of men shouting and signaling to steer from unseen depths below the helm, it apparently would only require one man at the wheel to control the rudder. A sign of the changing times.

Don Antonio's ships were leftovers from the war, built and rebuilt before wheels had become commonplace at Europe's shipyards. Don Antonio's own ship, a seventy-two-gun English-built third rate, had seen much action. In 1707, she'd been lost to legendary French Commander Claude de Fourbin in the bloody

## The Treasure Galleons

battle that had occurred in the English Channel just one day after Great Britain's declared union. Several years later, Spain's uneasy alliance with France had brought Don Antonio to an auction in Dunkirk where he purchased the former *HMS Hampton Court* from Fourbin, who was in every way Don Antonio's military and chivalric equal...except that he was French.

After a Welshman named Jennings had sunk Pedro's first ship in a battle near Jamaica, he had also purchased an English ship of the line from the French. Renamed the *Rosario*, she was practically identical to Don Antonio's *Carmen*, though half the size, holding only forty guns, with a crew of about 175 men compared to Don Antonio's three hundred.

With Don Antonio's capitana (flagship) and Pedro's *almiranta* (rear admiral) cruising the Canary Islands they soon "acquired" Manuel's cargo ship from the turncoat Portuguese during the war in an action that had earned Manuel the title of captain of his renamed *Concepción*.

It was with these three ships and the family's impressive service that King Philip V had commissioned Don Antonio as Military Captain-General of *los Galeones*. The Treasure Galleons, also known as *Tierra Firme* for their route along the Spanish Main, sailed throughout the West Indies collecting treasures and goods both to trade at the Great Fair in Portobelo and to carry back to Old Spain where the royal coffers were depleted from fourteen years of war. It was Don Antonio's sacred duty to protect his own fleet and that of the sister fleet he would meet up with in Cuba.

A year before Don Antonio's appointment, Don Juan Esteban de Ubilla had been assigned Sea Captain-General of *la Flota*. His New Spain fleet tarried at Veracruz to await overland delivery of goods from the Orient brought across the Pacific by the Manila Galleons. Though the sea captain's route was ironically much simpler to navigate than Military Captain Don Antonio's, Ubilla had been assigned Captain-General of the combined flotilla merely because he was first. This might have caused jealousy for some, but for Don Antonio, it was one less weight on his shoulders. And Ubilla had plenty to worry about, because the late queen had commissioned a new set of jewels from the Orient just before her unexpected death. And now the king's new bride from Italy eagerly awaited what everyone referred to as the Queen's Jewels, which she viewed as

symbolic of her legitimate claim on the Spanish throne. Failure to deliver these could mean a punishment of death.

Unlike Don Antonio who was constantly on the move with the many responsibilities that rested on his shoulders, Ubilla quietly awaited the arrival of the Queen's Jewels in Veracruz, a village similar to Don Antonio's home port of Portobelo.

The sun set over what Don Antonio imagined to be Portobelo, though he could only see water in the expanse that separated him from the family he had not seen in the many months since his commission. His thoughts were clouded with a longing to see his other children contrasted with a dread that overcame him every time he sailed into port to see the cliff where his beloved Maria had fallen to her death seven years earlier.

Manuel and Pedro set a heavy wine barrel down behind Don Antonio, drawing him from his faraway thoughts back to reality.

Manuel said, "*La Holandesa* is weighted down by similar barrels, no doubt the reason she was so slow in the chase."

The barrel before them was branded "Tuscany." Pedro pried the lid open then lapped up a palmful of its contents. "Ah! La prima!" He swooned at the sweet taste. "These wines will make a fine trade at the Fair!"

Don Antonio drank a cupped handful and nodded his approval.

Manuel glanced down at the heavily loaded Dutchman. "You sure you want Toro in charge of a vessel that carries nothing but wine in its hold?"

In the *Holandesa's* main cabin, Toro slurped from a tin cup as he painted the family crest onto the exterior of the open door. He backed up for a good look.

It was bad.

"I should have Fermin do this—"

"TORO!" Pedro shouted from Don Antonio's ship. "Don't dawdle!"

Startled, Toro tripped backward into a large portrait frame that creaked away from the wall. He peeked behind it...

## The Treasure Galleons

What he saw at first puzzled him, then brought a grin.

He went to the doorway and stuck his head out.

“Pedro! Manuel! Bring Papa. I’m about to become his favorite son!”

Don Antonio and his sons faced the painting: a morose King Philip V.

Pedro shook his head. “The King of Spain...on a Dutchman?”

“Perhaps,” Manuel offered, “the captain is loyal to *España* after all?”

Toro smirked then tapped the frame, which triggered it to open on hinges.

Behind the painting was a huge map of the entire Caribbean.

Pedro took it all in. “*El Holandes* doth protest too much.”

Toro pointed to the markings. Labeled route lines. “They’ve tracked our movements.”

“Not just our movements. Look... *Carrera de Indias*.” Pedro traced a line from South America to Panama to Cuba to Florida up toward Spain. “They know our treasure route!”

Toro pointed to another line drawn from Mexico to Cuba. “General Ubilla’s route as well.”

Manuel noticed the tin cup still in Toro’s hand. “And judging by their cargo, they’re friendly with every rival nation.”

Don Antonio focused on two tiny islands east of Florida. The Biminis. Over them, the initials “H.J.” were written.

Pedro saw where he was looking and became incensed with the realization. “They’re planning an ambush with that pirate Henry Jennings!”

Don Antonio nodded. “This, my sons, is why we trust no one who sails the Spanish Main without royal invitation.”

They all stared at the map that clearly marked their very next move...

In the morning, Don Antonio’s flota sailed west, away from Cartagena toward Panama.



Belowdecks on Don Antonio's capitana, all the Dutchmen were encaged in animal stalls full of hay.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER FIVE

Shirtless with a canvas bag draped over his shoulder, Fermin swam along the colorful reef, whose jagged edges sailors referred to as “dragon’s teeth.” But to Fermin, the reef was a wonderment.

Had anyone been around, they would have seen the severe scars across Fermin’s chest. But of course this was why he swam alone.

Fermin had always felt at home in the water. His mother had recruited the locals to teach him at an early age. Over the years, they had also taught each other their native languages. Had she lived, his mother would have seen the many treasures he brought up from the sea...and the safety wall he built with them on the cliff she’d fallen from.

With his lungs full of a fresh gulp of air, Fermin dolphin kicked his way down to a bed of starfish he’d spotted from the surface.

Sensing something, Fermin rubbed his scarred chest and glanced up at neglected fortress ruins where a rusty cannon, green from corrosion, jutted out above the surface.

## The Treasure Galleons

Nothing but calm, blue sky up there.

Fermin resumed his quest for sea treasures—starfish, sand dollars, broken coral. Anything that caught his eye as special he placed in the bag.

Fermin swam to a big conch shell perched on a rock. Just as he reached for it, a huge shadow overtook the reef.

Suddenly everything in the water shook with a muffled *boom!*

The conch fell and disappeared down into the stirred-up sand.

Puzzled, Fermin swam up to the surface to see Don Antonio's fleet of now seven ships sail past into the harbor.

Another *boom!* As if fired by the flagship's Neptune himself.



Mico ran through the streets of Portobelo. "*Los galeones! They're here! Tierra Firme!*" His shouts spurred curious villagers to life. A crowd gathered at water's edge.

In the bay, men rowed a longboat filled with officers toward shore where Mico and enthusiastic villagers waited to greet them.

Nearby, Fermin stepped out of the customs house entrance in his noble garb, his hair still wet. He took a deep breath and rehearsed aloud with confidence... "*Hola, Father. While you've been terrorizing the Caribbean, I've been accepted to apprentice—*"

A horse-drawn cart sped past, nearly hitting him.

Fermin stepped back and caught his breath...

He looked out at the harbor full of ships, and his courage waned. Dispirited, he melted into a bundle of self-doubt.

Don Antonio, Manuel, Toro and Mico led an impromptu parade of singing, dancing celebrants through the village toward the customs house.

Surrounded by the throng, Don Antonio headed for Fermin.

Fermin swallowed hard and timidly approached his father. Awkward, yet hopeful, he extended his hand for a shake. “*Bienvenido, señor.*”

Don Antonio studied his hand a moment, then noticed his wet hair. “The water makes your hands soft.”

Any hope Fermin had drained from his countenance.

“Even a silver master must work with his hands, *hijo mio.*”

Fermin frowned as Don Antonio tousled his wet red hair, leaving Fermin’s hand untouched, and his ego crushed.

Mico showed his rough hands to Don Antonio. “Look, Papa. I climb trees.”

Don Antonio nodded his approval and led Mico inside the customs house. Several guards bowed to him reverently as he passed.

Fermin looked to Toro and Manuel. “Silver master?”

Toro shrugged. “Better you than me, *companero.*”

Toro mussed Fermin’s hair with a quick hug, then went inside.

Manuel lagged behind and handed a long, flat box to Fermin. “Art supplies from Cadiz.”

Elated, Fermin accepted the gift with a hug and Manuel’s obligatory tousle of his hair.

Fermin looked around. “Where is Pedro?”

“Firstborn takes first watch.”



Pedro supervised the flurry of activity from the *Rosario*’s helm.

A rigger above him pointed and shouted, “SAIL! SAIL!”

Pedro looked out to sea. A Spanish frigate approached.

Disgusted, Pedro muttered, “Solorzano.”

Moored nearby, the Dutch ship was being emptied of her cargo, overseen by Zaleme. Dozens of barrels were lifted by a pulley system.

Through the hole in a hoisted barrel, a wide eye peered out.

Inside the barrel, the stowaway suffered a violent thump when the barrel landed. A crowbar pried open the lid— Blinding daylight flooded in.

## The Treasure Galleons

Zaleme's silhouette blocked the sun. He looked down, surprised.

Pedro was monitoring the now closer frigate through a spyglass when he heard...

"Take your hands off me, *je beast!*"

Zaleme tried to control a fiery young Dutch woman who put up a significant struggle.

"We've a stowaway, Don Pedro!"

The young woman calmed upon sighting handsome Pedro, but stayed defiant. "What have you done with my father?"

Pedro shrugged. *Who?*

"Kapitein Alexander Popa. Owner and captain of this vessel."

Pedro realized who she meant, then leaned on the rail for a closer look at the woman. "And why is such a lovely señorita—"

"I am ship's cooper, you pirate. My brother safely hid me from lecherous fiends like you."

Pedro liked this girl's spirit. "Hear that, Zaleme? Pirates and fiends. We are arrant knaves all—"

The ship's bell rang, reminding Pedro of the time. He looked out to where the sun sank low behind Solorzano's approaching ship.

"Let the señorita see her *familia*, then place her under guard on Manuel's ship. I'm sure the Sisters of *la Concepcion* will be happy to keep her company."

Pedro hurried off while a deckhand helped Zaleme subdue the furious young woman.



## CHAPTER SIX

Portobelo's town center was alive with dance, song and drink. The public house was filled to capacity with sailors, officers and locals.

Don Antonio headed a long table. The entire family was present. Males at one end. Females at the other.

Pleased with how things were coming together, Don Antonio raised his glass to all his boys, Fermin and Mico included. "By the time we sail for Havana every ship will be weighted to the boards with treasure and goods."

Next to Josefa near the middle of the table, Manuel—wearing the cravat she'd embroidered for him—put his arm around Josefa. "As long as there's room for a very important passenger." He kissed Josefa's cheek. "I'll forsake victuals and starve before I make another voyage without my señora."

As Toro scarfed down his food like an animal, Pedro watched Fermin pick at his half-eaten plate with a fork.

## The Treasure Galleons

“Ferminito, you know not what it is to be hungry when stores run empty.”

More interested in the men’s conversation than that of Izzy and her sisters, Josefa boldly chimed in. “And let’s pray he never does.”

The brothers all toasted on it.

Mico raised his glass. “To Fermin’s hunger.”

The brothers laughed.

Don Antonio glanced at Fermin. “Our Fermin only hungers for knowledge, isn’t that right?”

Fermin shrugged, then took a defiant bite of food.

Toro tried to impress everyone with his own bit of banter. “And what of my quest for knowledge?”

Dubious looks all around.

He leaned in, gossipy. “I’ve knowledge about the new queen.”

Manuel joked, “I heard she’s an ugly princess from Italy.”

Josefa jabbed him in the ribs.

Toro grew serious. “The queen awaits a dowry of gems from the Orient. General Ubilla loads them in Veracruz as we speak.” He lowered his voice. “And...the queen will not consummate until the jewels arrive in Madrid!”

The others groaned in disbelief and dismissal.

“Tell them, Papa. Did the king not tell you this himself?”

Reluctant, Don Antonio said, “There may be some truth to it.”

Manuel did the math in his head. “But they’ll have been married for months by the time we reach Madrid.”

Josefa, trying to be delicate with Mico and Fermin listening, said, “Won’t that...irritate the king?”

Toro snorted. “It would certainly “irritate” me!”

Mico pondered for a moment. “I hope Manuel’s right.”

Manuel asked, “About what?”

“If she’s ugly, the king won’t care if he has to wait to consume her.”

Toro and Pedro broke out in uproarious laughter.

Don Antonio threw down his napkin. “*¡Basta!* That’s only partly why this voyage is so important.”

Don Antonio stood, commanding the whole table’s attention. “I’ll need every one of my sons to do his part.”

Mico perked up. “All of us?”

Don Antonio nodded.

Fermin became suspicious. “What do you mean...we must ‘do our part’?”

Don Antonio spread his arms to all his boys. “As soon as I close the Great Fair, you shall all voyage to Spain with me to present the king’s treasure.”

Fermin dropped his fork.

The brothers all toasted each other while Josefa and the sisters fell into a frenzy of chatter amongst themselves.

“All except for me, you mean,” Fermin said.

Don Antonio raised his cup to Fermin and smiled as he sat back down. “It’s time you find your sea legs with the rest of your brothers.”

Fermin stood and banged his fist on the table. “But...you said if I completed my language studies with high marks, I could apply for an apprenticeship anywhere I want. I’m for Mexico.

Don Antonio grit his teeth. “A better course has been chosen. Our king has called you to train under the royal *Maestre de Plata*.”

“I don’t want to be a silver master!”

Don Antonio stood again, drawing the eyes of surrounding patrons this time. “The king wishes it!”

“What about my wishes?”

An intense standoff ensued until...

Don Antonio turned to all present, cup raised. “Long live the king. And his new queen!”

“*¡Viva el rey!*” All toasted each other.

Fermin’s eyes filled with emotion. Seeing no one would defend his position, he ran toward the entrance.

Manuel, ready to go after him, caught Don Antonio’s forbidding head shake and reluctantly stayed put.

At the entrance Fermin slammed into a cross of knighthood just like Don Antonio’s. This symbol was emblazoned on the coat of shady military commander Don Juan del Hoyo Solorzano. A hard, calculating man, he glared down at Fermin.

Fermin looked up at Solorzano, intimidated, then ran off to sulk.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER SEVEN

Don Antonio's moored ship glistened under moonlight. Her Neptune figurehead pointed his trident out toward sea.

Belowdecks, Zaleme waited, arms crossed, for the young Dutch woman, whose name was Julia. Now dressed in a novice nun's frock, she hugged Xander and Ludolf goodbye through the bars of their stall.

Julia ended the embrace. Solemn, she followed Zaleme to the stairs. On her way, she primped her mussed hair, which was held up by a single pin.

Over her shoulder, she gave Ludolf a conspiratorial smile.

Ludolf opened his palm to show Xander Julia's matching metal hairpin.



## The Treasure Galleons

Outside the public house, Mico and his sisters exited and went to a waiting coach.

At the door, Josefa and Manuel kissed before he went back in.

Inside, Manuel joined Pedro and Toro who sat across from Commander Solorzano with Don Antonio at the end of the table.

Solorzano placed papers on the table. “Why have you detained an innocent merchant?”

Don Antonio said, “If you mean the Dutch spy vessel, she is now legally mine. Condemned and paid for.”

“War’s over, Antonio. Not every foreign ship is a spy—”

Pedro slammed the table. “You will address my father properly, commander!”

Don Antonio motioned for Pedro to calm himself.

“Forgive my familiarity, general. I thought as a fellow knight, you—”

“Commander Solorzano,” Don Antonio said with restrained impatience, “please state your business. I have a Fair to organize.

Solorzano pushed the papers toward Don Antonio. “The king’s new list of attendees for the Fair. I thought you should know that Henry Jennings is among them. At the request of Jamaica’s governor.”

Pedro stood, furious.

Don Antonio’s fierce gaze told all his sons to leave.

As they exited, Don Antonio leaned in, menacing. “You sail into my harbor and dare speak the name of Henry Jennings in my son’s presence?”

Outside the public house, Pedro stormed out in a rage, growling at the air.

Toro and Manuel emerged and went to try to calm him.

“I knew that son of a—”

“Who is Henry Jennings?”

The brothers all turned to see Mico hiding by the door.

Pedro’s countenance immediately softened.

“Mico, you little snoop!”

Manuel, explained, “During the war, Jennings was an English privateer—”

“More like a pirate,” Toro said.

Pedro nodded. “He sunk my first warship. He was in collusion with Solorzano, just like these cursed Dutchmen.”

Mico was confused. “Where is Collusion?”

All laughed. Pedro threw an arm around Mico. “Come. Papa can handle Solorzano. Tell us about your adventures while we were gone.”

Toro turned in the opposite direction. “This is where I leave you, *hermanos*. The night is young, as are the dancing señoritas in town!”

Pedro called after him, “Do not forget to relieve Zaleme at midnight, Toro.”

Manuel added, “And stay out of trouble.”

Toro waved them off.

Pedro, Mico and Manuel walked arm in arm down the street past the customs house where a small figure sat under a sconce with his sketchbook, unnoticed.

Fermin’s lonely eyes watched them all disappear into the night.

In the customs house, Solorzano, indignant, stared at Don Antonio, then rose to his feet. “I’ll do as you command, General Echeverz. But uninviting an English ship from the Fair goes against the treaty with—”

“Just find Jennings and send him back to Jamaica. If he sails within one mile of this harbor, his salvo will be met by our twelve pounders.”

Solorzano nodded, then hesitated. With mock forgetfulness, he pulled a letter from his coat and handed it to Don Antonio. “From the king. Good news...I hope?”

Don Antonio stared at the royal seal with some apprehension. He knew things had been going too smoothly thus far. A letter from the king at this late juncture could not be a good thing.

Solorzano grinned, bowed and went to join his men who had become entranced by a beautiful painted female African dancer.

## The Treasure Galleons



Outside the customs house, Fermin was fast asleep on the bench. Pedro marched toward him. “Fermin, it’s after midnight—”

A shout drew his attention from somewhere around the corner. Pedro followed the sound to a back alley where...

Toro held his own in fisticuffs against five of Solorzano’s brutes. When Toro saw Pedro he smiled to reveal a missing tooth and nodded an invitation for Pedro to join in the fray.

This was Toro’s element. Not Pedro’s.

Pedro pulled out his pistol—

A sucker punch from the side knocked him senseless for a moment, and the pistol fell from his hand.

More disoriented than hurt, Pedro retaliated with his fists as two more ganged up on him until Toro freed himself to help.

The brutes overwhelm them with a pile-on until a pistol shot scattered the brutes off.

Toro looked around stunned, then disappointed.

Eyes closed and one finger in his ear, Fermin stood with the smoking pistol aimed skyward. He opened his eyes and lowered the pistol.

Pedro drew his sword on the brutes. “We’re done here, señores. Go back to your ship before we arrest you.”

Their leader protested, “Señor, if anyone’s arrested it should be him.”

All but Pedro looked to see Toro’s *Who, me?* expression.

“He’ll be dealt with. Now go.”

The brutes gathered their pride and shuffled off.

In one motion, Pedro sheathed his sword and reached to pry the pistol from Fermin, whose shock was evident.

Fermin looked at both of them and asked, “What happened?”

With mild shame, Toro glanced toward a shadowed doorway from which emerged the half-dressed African dancer Solorzano’s men had admired.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Native servants watched and listened from doorways to the parlor.

Toro, bruised and hungover, sat amidst the entire Echeverz clan. All stood and sat throughout the room, audience to a fired-up, pacing Don Antonio.

“The magnitude of our king’s mission seems lost on some of you.”

He looked at Fermin who sulked below the colorful family crest.

“I am responsible for the entire treasury of España.”

Toro nodded off.

“As commander of the Tierra Firme treasure galleons...” Don Antonio kicked Toro’s boot, startling him awake with a grimace that revealed his missing tooth. “...I expect every member of this familia to remember... this house represents the king.”

In a gentler, though measured tone, Don Antonio turned to his daughters and Josefa. “Now I must speak with *mis hijos* alone.”

## The Treasure Galleons

Josefa and the sisters all exited obediently along with the servants.

Don Antonio paced some more. “One of you may not be going to Madrid.”

Fermin perked up, finally interested.

But Don Antonio directed his comments at Toro. “What have you to say in defense of your behavior last night...when you were supposed to be on watch?”

Toro mumbled, “I was ‘irritated.’”

The brothers all snickered under their breath.

Don Antonio stopped pacing, ready to explode. “You *muchachos* find humor in too many things!” He turned back to Toro. “It’s clear you’re not ready to command a ship.”

Toro was ready to argue, then nodded with humiliated resolve.

Fermin, incredulous, stepped forward with raised voice. “So whenever one of your sons TRULY WANTS SOMETHING, you see it as your duty to TAKE IT AWAY?”

Fermin stormed out.

Don Antonio started to go after him, then stopped himself.

The brothers all exchanged looks.

Pedro spoke up. “Papa, shouldn’t you go and—”

Don Antonio waved him off. He pulled the king’s letter from his pocket, contemplating it before coming to a conclusion.

“Toro, if you do well, and watch over Fermin on our voyage to Cuba...I may reconsider whether you complete the voyage to Spain.”

Humbled, Toro smiled his thanks...and his apology.



Ships from all nations filled the harbor, moored near the fleet whose sails were stripped from the masts.

The village was now a city of tents made from sails.

A train of two hundred pack mules led by native guides and militia made their way from the jungle into town.

This was the end of their arduous journey across the isthmus from Panama City, where ships had delivered tons of Potosi silver from the mint in Lima.

Even during war, the mining and mint operations had not ceased. The mule trains had trekked overland every year, filling the customs house floor to ceiling with the king's accumulation of wealth, and further burdening Don Antonio with more responsibility than any one man should ever have to shoulder. If Spain's enemies were to learn of the wealth stored there, Portobelo would be at risk of obliteration.

However, bureaucracy was Don Antonio's worst enemy. His latest push to build a shipyard in Portobelo's excellent bay was turned down flat by the House of Trade in Spain. And for nearly two decades he had petitioned the vice-royalty to let him construct a canal across the isthmus. Not only would it increase the speed and safety of silver transportation from Lima, it would also open trade between the East and West. But it was seen as an unnecessary expense since Spain had been running the mule trains for two hundred years with only a few incidents, most infamous that of the ambush by English pirate Captain Morgan half a century earlier.

From atop the smooth rock at the tip of the cliff, Fermin had a panoramic view of the world. Preferring the view of the ocean, he barely glanced at the mule trains. So wrapped in his own adolescent hurt and angst, he could never see the world through his father's eyes.

To his eye, the mule train was a symbol of greed and oppression. Unlike Mico and their sisters, Fermin and the older brothers had all been to the Lima mines while at Jesuit school. And it was a terrible sight to behold. A greedy soul could see past the misery perhaps, but anyone with a heart would have to make more justifications than Fermin could to ignore the inhumane conditions of that place.

Having seen the same things both in Lima and in their own family, the loyalty Pedro, Manuel and Toro displayed to both their father and their king had always disturbed Fermin. He had never understood them, and they most certainly showed no sign of understanding him.

## The Treasure Galleons

Whenever Fermin ran off, which was all he could think to do when confronted with his father's faulty logic, he came to this spot, not for the view, but to breathe the air where his mother had taken her last breath.

He sat on the smooth rock with his sketchbook and supplies, safely separated from the edge by his carefully placed rocks, coral and shells arranged as a shrine-like wall at the edge.

"Those won't bring her back."

Fermin didn't turn around when Manuel approached.

Manuel looked over Fermin's shoulder to see a sketch of a beautiful windswept woman standing at the cliff's edge, heedlessly reaching out to a pelican as it flies by.

Fermin pointed across the bay to the busy fair in full swing. "Shouldn't you be helping Father?"

"You're more important."

Fermin snorted his skepticism.

"You should talk with Papa."

"I've talked about being an artist since I can remember."

"Part of talking is listening."

Fermin fake-laughed as he gathered his things and stood. "Was he listening when you told him you wanted to be a priest?"

"If it weren't for pilot school I'd never have met Josefa. Now I'm a good pilot, and a good husband... I would have been a terrible priest."

Manuel pulled out a ruby heart set in silver on a neck chain. "Recognize this?"

Tears formed in Fermin's eyes.

"Josefa says I should give it to the poor. It could feed a family for a year... But I'm too selfish. Mama gave this to me. I could never part with it."

Fermin looked away, choked with emotion.

"We have a duty to family, Fermin. Silver from the mines of Potosi runs through Echeverz veins."

"The only treasures I care about are what I find in the sea."

Fermin pushed past Manuel. His foot slipped.

Manuel instinctively grabbed Fermin. Their feet knocked a shell over the ledge. It shattered on the rocks far below.

They shared a moment of poignant torment as Manuel led Fermin to more solid ground, then poked Fermin in the heart. “Where your treasure is, hermano, there will your heart be also.”

Manuel kept walking while that stopped Fermin in his tracks. “Manuel...”

Manuel turned.

“You’d have made a good priest.”

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER NINE

Don Antonio stood in front of the cathedral, unsure whether to go in or not. He looked at the king's letter in his hand.

As if it weren't enough to run a village five thousand miles from the homeland, oversee Lima trade operations, adjudicate all financial disputes throughout the region, lead a militia guarding no less than five million pesos in valuable cargo, coordinate a treasure fair, ward off pirates, and lead a large family without the help of a wife, now Don Antonio had to deal with the latest threat made by a young French king whose very presence on the throne had caused a global war with over a hundred thousand casualties. And on top of it all, this king's volatility rendered every move Don Antonio made subject to unreasonable scrutiny.

Only those who spent enough time in the royal court were privy to the truth about King Philip's ailment. Not of body, but of mind. One day he would be happy and generous to all, but the next he

## The Treasure Galleons

would come to court in his sleeping gown, slouch in his throne and ignore everyone present.

The king had shown signs of remarkable mental health through most of the war with his young queen's healing touch, but when she had grown ill, Philip had slumped.

Don Antonio had shown himself a loyal subject and friend to the king during the king's darkest hour. Don Antonio opened the doors to the Echeverz family estate in the Basque hills of Pamplona and hired 'round-the-clock staff to tend to the ailing queen. And it worked.

The queen had returned to Madrid in the early spring in very good health. But by late spring, she had deteriorated fast and passed from this life before summer.

The devastated king withdrew to his depressed state of mind for months until his courtiers had found him a suitable match in a princess from Parma, Italy, who, by all accounts, was overly ambitious. The latest rumor about her refusal to warm the king's bed until the late Queen's Jewels arrived by the treasure fleet had put more pressure on Don Antonio than ever.

And now, with this letter from the king, Don Antonio was at a breaking point.

Like most things in Portobelo, the cathedral's facade was simple, yet of distinct Spanish architecture, which made it comforting to a man who had grown up in Basque.

Don Antonio entered the more ornate, empty sanctuary, clutching the gold rosary given him by the nuns whose convent he had funded years earlier.

As he slid into a forward pew, he noticed a new painting behind the altar. It was a familiar work by the very artist Fermin had hoped to apprentice under in Mexico.

Seeing that painting, Don Antonio's burden grew heavier. It was a reminder of a broken promise made to a son who already hated him. Now he had even more to pray about.

He sat and prayed in agony over the rosary. The king's letter was by his side, its seal broken.

“What troubles you, my son?” At first the echoey voice seemed that of God, but Don Antonio realized it was the elderly priest he had not seen since his last time in port.

Without looking up, Don Antonio shook his head. “He asks too much of me.”

The priest approached the end of the pew. “Perhaps he is testing you.”

It was an ironic thought. “That he is.”

“Pray for his strength.”

Don Antonio finally looked up at the priest. “I’d rather have God’s.”

Confusion clouded the priest’s face.

Don Antonio picked up the letter, kissed his rosary, and stood to exit the other end of the pew.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER TEN

Guarded stacks of silver ingots lined the cramped streets of Portobelo. No longer a sleepy little village, every inch of land seemed covered in people, animals, tents and treasures of every imaginable description. The sights were only outdone by the smells and sounds. Some were wonderful. Most were very bad.

Pedro roamed through the crowds with a keen eye out for trouble. As captain of the guard while in port, and with no more room to store the latest intake of silver, it was his responsibility to keep thieves at bay to allow for a happy, celebratory atmosphere free from fear.

Manuel was on watch over the fleet from his *Concepción* where the Dutch girl, Julia, was allowed to roam on deck as long as Josefa was around to help keep an eye on her and keep her from going mad Belowdecks with the nuns. More tolerant of Mico's antics than his brothers, Manuel allowed Mico to climb the naked masts to burn off energy before taking him to the village to experience the Great Fair.

## The Treasure Galleons

On the *Carmen*, Don Antonio's loyal pilot Francisco de Medina and Toro, no longer captain of his own vessel, stood watch over the Dutchmen who seemed always to be whispering and scheming their escape, though no attempts were made...so far.

Fermin moped his way through the various sections of the busy fair. He and Mico had heard about the fairs their whole lives, but Mico was too young to remember the last fair, and Fermin was born during the war that had brought them to a halt.

But even Fermin could not stifle a feeling of awe. Never in his life had he seen so many people in Portobelo...or anywhere in one place. And the people were as exotic as their wares. Foreign music competed for the ears of patrons, sometimes overlapping. Songs from Europe, the New World, and even the ancient Orient all filled the air at once.

Down an aisle where dark-skinned hawkers displayed exotic wares of a Middle Eastern flavor, Fermin ventured to ask a man where these people came from. He claimed they were from Egypt and Ethiopia, but Toro would later confirm that they were a playhouse troupe from Cartagena. But even Toro could not explain the old lady he was about to meet. No one ever would.

Two gnarled hands dangled a Persian rug to block Fermin's way. A toothless hag placed her face where the rug was, her breath nearly bowling Fermin over.

"A gift fit for a king..." She gestured to the shiny junk behind her.

But all Fermin noticed was an exotic teenage girl covered by colorful veils. Covered except her beautiful, painted eyes.

Fermin was mesmerized.

"It from Constantinople... An ancient bestiary."

Fermin tore his eyes from the girl to look at the hag. "It?"

"Surely señor know the holy pelican."

Fermin looked back at the girl who held up a small trinket. "Pelican? That is no pelican."

It was solid gold. The raptor-like bird's long neck curved to allow its sharp beak to pierce its breast. It hung by its spread wings from a gold chain. Beautiful. Mystical.

"In piety. The Pelican in Her Piety."

Something about the trinket beckoned Fermin to reach for it...

"She speak to you, no?"

Fermin walked up the road to the estate, trance-like with the golden pelican in his hands. The hag's voice echoed in his mind.

"The mother pelican, like the Christ of your God..."

Fermin reached the villa and stumbled up the staircase toward his room, still in a daze.

"...She give blood from her own breast and bring back life to her dead babies."

He involuntarily scratched at his chest as he entered his private room. It was set up like an artist's studio with a canopied bed seemingly out of place.

Fermin rummaged through a trunk full of old sketchbooks until he found a particular book. He opened it and flipped through pages...

Childlike watercolor scenes of a pelican feeding blood to her dead babies. The pictures were awash in a lot of angry blood-red paint on every page.

Mystified, Fermin sat on the bed where the gold trinket lay. He compared it to his drawings. The same, yet different. His drawings looked like actual pelicans.

A solemn Toro drew his attention as he stepped in the room. "You know, the greatest artists aren't in Mexico."

"I know. They're in Europe. But the master painter in Mexico, he's so—"

"Dead."

Stunned, Fermin accepted a message Toro handed to him. He read it with growing disappointment. Indeed, it was true. The man whose hands Fermin had placed his future in had died only days after his acceptance letter was written.

"He was old. Old men die." Toro picked up the trinket. Examined it with reverence.

Fermin sighed. He saw the trinket in Toro's hand. "Some old woman insisted it's—"

## The Treasure Galleons

“The Pelican in Her Piety.” Toro handed Fermin the bird as if it was too sacred for him. “You’re so much like Mama.”

Fermin wondered at the abrupt change in subject, but realized that she had been heavy on his mind as well. “I barely remember her anymore.”

Wistful and a bit jealous, Toro said, “She gave you her hair, her art. Her stubbornness. She wouldn’t want you to go on this voyage just because some old artist in Mexico died. Don’t let your dream die too. Go show those European artists—and Papa—that you belong there.”

“When did you become such a fountain of wisdom?”

“I suppose if you dig deep enough, you’re bound to strike water...” He added with whimsy, “Even in a desert.”

Toro sat next to Fermin and lowered his voice. “Don’t tell anyone, but I wish I didn’t have to go to Spain. That loco, gloomy king scares me.”

Don Antonio’s voice cut through the air from somewhere on the main floor. “TORO! FERMIN! Time to load the king’s treasure!”

“Even more than Father?” Fermin asked.

Toro crossed himself with an emphatic nod of his head.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Resolved to join the voyage with no better prospects than to hope for an apprenticeship in Europe instead of with the silver master, Fermin was given no choice but to join his father's crew where Don Antonio could keep an eye on both him and Toro.

As soon as the treasure ships were loaded with the king's treasury, passengers and their treasures—and the combined crews of about twelve hundred men and boys—Izzy and all of her sisters joined the villagers in sending the ships off. The entire village and people from the surrounding regions came out. They lined the entire southern border of Portobelo's bay, standing on the parapets of the two crumbling fortresses that pointed the seven-ship fleet out to sea.

Always in the front, Don Antonio's capitana the *Carmen* led the way, Neptune pointing forward. Always in the rear, Pedro's almiranta the *Rosario* gave Pedro a wonderful view from the poopdeck to wave the final farewell to his sisters and home port.

## The Treasure Galleons

Don Antonio spent his days shouting orders while Fermin spent his leaning over the rail, seasick.

Fermin, green with sickness, tried numerous times to learn knots from Toro, but in his woozy state kept tying up his own hands.

While on watch one night, weak and dehydrated, Fermin turned over the hourglass when directed, but was so weak he fell into the glass, sending it spinning, then fell into the ship's bell, drawing everyone's angry attention because it was the wrong number of chimes.

Toro often found Fermin face-down in a swinging hammock when he was supposed to be on deck, but didn't have the heart to wake him, so without Fermin's knowledge, he suffered through many a lecture from their stressed-out father.

Finally, the fleet entered Havana's bay fortified by castles on both sides and a busy port with docks beyond the fortress on the right.



With Castle Morro across the harbor bay in the backdrop, Don Antonio's fleet was moored with four other large ships. It had been a long time since the Cubans had seen so many large ships there. And it was a welcome sight indeed. Treasure fleets had always brought commerce to the hub of New Spain, injecting new life into an island long dejected by the ills of war.

Sailors, officials and militia busily offloaded as Don Antonio and gaunt Fermin stepped from a skiff to find an entourage of officers waiting, egomaniacal General Ubilla among them. "General Echeverz?"

They all bowed slightly to each other while Fermin worked to regain his balance on firm land.

Don Antonio had never met the man, but his reputation had preceded him. "At your service, General Ubilla."

Ubilla turned on his heel and straightaway led Don Antonio and Fermin toward town. "We've little time and much to do..."

Don Antonio looked out at the four moored ships. He had heard the New Spain Flota had boasted eight ships upon the king's commission. Truth be told, Don Antonio had wanted to equal his fleet not just to provide balanced protection, but to ensure there would be no need for one-upmanship. "Is this the whole of your flota?"

As Fermin followed his father and Ubilla into the gritty, bureaucratic-looking House of Trade, Ubilla explained with a tone of dismissiveness, "We lost two ships at Veracruz. Another two in passage to Havana."

Inside the inner office, piles of red-ribbon-bound sheaves of documents filled two tables that consumed the entire room.

Thinking aloud, Fermin said, "How does a capitan de mar "lose" four ships?"

Irate, Ubilla turned to Don Antonio. "Who is this ill-mannered urchin?"

Don Antonio placed a firm hand on Fermin's tense shoulder. "Fermin is my...clerk."

Hurt and angry, Fermin shook off his father's hand and flipped through some of the paper stacks to distract him from the betrayal of Don Antonio's "introduction."

Don Antonio gave Fermin a look meant to remind him that they had already discussed this. Fermin was to spend his time in Havana clerking under the Galleon *escrivano*, who was royally appointed to oversee and record all cargo, in hopes that this would better prepare Fermin for their arrival in Madrid.

Don Antonio surprised Fermin when he said, "The boy asks a valid question, general. How did you 'lose' these ships?"

"The hurricanes came early. They were sunk. But due to my superior seamanship, all were not lost."

Again, letting his thoughts slip from his tongue, Fermin said, "These are cargo manifests. You can't possibly get all this..." pointing his finger down a long set of lists, "...onto just four ships, along with the queen's jewels, passengers, supplies—"

"No one is asking your opinion, boy."

Don Antonio said, "The fact remains, general, that while you've been sinking your own ships, I've been busy acquiring new ones from our enemies."

That struck a nerve with Ubilla, which brought a slight grin to Fermin's lips. Fermin shrugged and suggested, "Maybe General

## The Treasure Galleons

Ubilla should just buy one of your ships... You could use the money to hire more crewmen.”

Both generals looked at each other, impressed.

Fermin later found himself almost literally buried in paperwork while he awaited the *escrivano*'s arrival.

While Don Antonio and General Ubilla argued over the terms, all they could see was Fermin's red hair sticking up from behind the stacks where he worked to write out a bill of sale for the transaction.

Don Antonio was incredulous. “A thousand pesos? That's piracy!”

Fermin ripped away a red ribbon from a bundle of papers.

Ubilla acquiesced with, “Two thousand for the English prize?”

After an unexpected silence, Fermin peeked over to see Ubilla and Don Antonio shaking hands.

Don Antonio looked over at Fermin and said, “Fermin, draw up the bill of sale.”

Fermin sighed and disappeared behind the stacks again while chiding himself... “Keep your ideas to yourself, *imbecil*.”



The next day Manuel and Pedro oversaw loading, offloading and inventory activities from atop their respective poop decks.

Toro swabbed Don Antonio's main deck.

From Manuel's crow's nest above, Mico shouted and pointed...

Solorzano's frigate and a French warship sailed toward them.



Three decks below where Toro mopped, Xander listened to guards chatting nearby. He turned to Ludolf and whispered in

Dutch, “Solorzano’s brought a Frenchman into port. I wonder if he’s the Frenchman in Jennings’ armada.”

“Let’s get out of here and ask him.” Ludolf showed Xander the hairpin reshaped into a crude key. He used it to pick the lock on his ankle. It clicked open, a bit too loud for Xander’s liking.

“Shh! Not now! We’ll have to wait for the midnight guards.”

“But...why?”

“The marquis is famous for his weekly banquets...and distilled drink.”

Indeed, Laureano de Torres y Ayala, the Marquis de Casa Torres, did love to host lavish balls, and with the arrival of the treasure fleet, this would be the grandest in quite some time.

Already, a line of aristocratic coaches with wigged footmen were delivering their wealthy patrons to the mainland entrance.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER TWELVE

Morro Castle's grand banquet hall was filled with wigged noblemen and women, plumed military officers and other well-to-dos in attendance.

Pedro and Toro were partnered with two smitten young señoritas in a group dance alongside Manuel and Josefa.

Next to Don Antonio in the wings, Mico watched in amazement.

Cuba's jovial, colorful governor, the elderly Marquis de Torres, in a very tall and long wig, watched the dance from a crowded table of sycophants. "Ah, if only I were young again."

He leaned to his wife next to him romantically until he was startled by her aged ugliness.

Across the room, Fermin wove through the pressing crowd.

The dance ended and the entire room shifted like a kaleidoscope as dancers left the floor and all moved to their tables to enjoy a bountiful feast.

## The Treasure Galleons

Fermin, tired from a long day under the very boring escrivano's tutelage, was swept up by the crowd, and ended up near the marquis. Disoriented, he bumped the marquis' ugly wife. "My apologies, señora."

The marquis noticed him standing there. "Have you lost your seat, young man?"

"I'm looking for my father, the captain-general."

"Captain-general of Cuba you have found, but I am not your father." The marquis looked quizzically to the pretty señoritas seated nearby. "Am I?"

Those in hearing laughed.

The marquis beckoned Fermin to lean close, which he did. "Perhaps you really are my son..." The marquis lifted his wig by the ear to reveal a mix of gray and red hair. He gave Fermin's head a playful rub.

Embarrassed, Fermin fumbled his words a bit. "My apologies, Your Excellency. I meant to find General Echeverez...of the *Tierra Firme Galleons*."

The marquis looked around until he spotted Don Antonio's family taking their seats at a long table. "But they all have such dark hair."

"Our mother had red hair, but only saw fit to pass it to me and one of my sisters."

"I get mine from some distant relation of the past..." The marquis indicated red-haired Judas Iscariot in a huge knock-off of da Vinci's *The Last Supper* painting on the wall. "We do not like to speak of him!"

Fermin chuckled at the Marquis' sense of humor.

"Come sit with me. Tell me of your travels. I tire of these toadies." He waved his wife to yield her seat.

Indignant, she stood and went off in a snit.

Again embarrassed, Fermin said, "I don't wish to impose—"

"Nonsense. She needs her beauty sleep. And I need to hear the adventures of a young man."

Fermin slinked into the vacant seat. "I'm afraid I've had no adventures to speak of."

"The young never appreciate their youth..."

At their table on the side, Don Antonio and his sons watched in wonderment as Fermin laughed with the marquis like old friends.

Pedro remarked, "There is hope perhaps that our Fermin will come around to the life of an officer after all."

Toro guzzled his wine as Manuel said, "He certainly has mastered the language of courtier prattle."

"Fermin knows a lot of languages," Mico said.

Toro spit out his wine with laughter.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Belowdecks on the *Carmen*, Xander, Ludolf and their crew creaked the stall doors open.

Three drunk guards sat around a game of cards, but only one of them was awake. The other two snored where they sat.

The awake guard pivoted his head at the sound of the escaping men just as Xander's fist came down on his face. The man was out.

Ludolf led everyone up the steps.

From the hatch bay, Ludolf spotted a cluster of alert guards in front of the captain's cabin marked by the Echeverz crest. "That's where the royal treasury is kept."

Xander poked his head up. "We could use your sister to pull off a ruse to get past them."

They both looked at Manuel's ship nearby.

They ducked as an ornate carriage rolled past on the street, then snuck off toward the gangplank, where Xander was first to jump

## The Treasure Galleons

down to street level. As he stood up straight a sword tip greeted his face.

Mico, sporting a fierce expression, trained his sword on Xander who didn't dare move.

Behind him, Pedro piped up. "Captain Popa. I don't believe you've met our brother Miguel."

Xander and his men all looked to see that Pedro, Toro and Manuel stood with swords drawn behind Mico.

Toro grinned. "We call him Mico."

Mico's countenance softened. He lowered his sword and extended a friendly hand to a thoroughly confused Xander. "*¡Hola!*"

Pedro shouted to the guards near the cabins on board, "SEÑOR FRANCISCO! Come take charge of your prisoners!"

Chief Pilot Francisco and the others turned, mortified to see the Dutchmen crowded along the gangplank. The Spanish crewmen drew their swords and rushed to the scene.

"Before they can eat us out of another night's rations," Pedro ordered, "take them to the marquis' jail. Let them at last be someone else's problem."

Francisco and his men ushered the Dutchmen to the dock.

"Your fate will be up to the viceroy when he arrives in the fall," Pedro said.

"What of my daughter?"

Pedro spotted the hairpin-key in Ludolf's belt as he passed. He grabbed it before Ludolf could react. "I think the marquis can make room for another conspirator."

Ludolf protested, "You can't put her in jail!"

Pedro indicated the parked carriage. "Worry not, señores. I shall see to it she arrives in grand fashion."



Pedro had nearly forgotten about the Dutch girl. She was somewhat plain to his eye to begin with, but with that novice frock

from the nunnery, and her hair up in a loose bun, she looked like a church mouse.

Her shy eyes avoided his gaze, though they sat facing each other in the carriage's cabin. Pedro's mind was on the señorita he'd been dancing with earlier. He spent the entire ride trying to remember her name.

"My name is Julia." Julia broke the silence, pronouncing her name with a "Y" instead of a "J" in her Dutch dialect.

Pedro looked at her confused for a moment, then said, "I hope the nuns were nicer to you than I remember them being to me in my youth."

"I never understood a word they said, and I believe one of them has taken a vow of silence."

Pedro chuckled and looked at her more closely. "Did you say that you were ship's cooper?"

Julia nodded.

"I've never heard of a woman serving on a ship, let alone with such an esteemed duty." He looked at her hands in her lap. "Shouldn't your hands be more rough?"

Indignant, she said, "They would be had you not kept me locked up for the past...how many months now?"

Pedro shrugged and knocked on the roof of the cab. "You'll be happy to know that you won't be returning to the ship."

The carriage stopped in front of the jail.

Pedro stepped out and turned to help Julia step down.

"Thank you, sir, for allowing me see them."

"Familia must support each other."

She accepted Pedro's hand for assistance, then stepped away, but Pedro gripped her hand until she was forced to turn and face him.

He let go and turned his hand over, palm up, expectant.

Her expression moved from bafflement to alarm as Pedro then reached to her face and...

Pulled the remaining hairpin from behind her head.

Her hair fell around her face and shoulders.

Pedro admired this new look a moment. "*Muy bien*. Though I'm not sure your brother will agree."

## **The Treasure Galleons**

He placed the pin inside a pocket then patted it for safekeeping. Julia huffed off toward a waiting guard at the entrance.

Inside, Xander and Ludolf stood when they saw Julia approach their crowded cell full of Dutchmen. Ludolf exclaimed, “Julia!” also pronouncing it with a “Y” instead of a “J.”

Pedro nodded to a guard who let them both out of the cell.

Julia turned to Pedro. “May I have a few moments?”

Pedro smirked. “As long as you wish...[H]ulia la Hooper.”

She scoffed at the name and followed Xander and Ludolf into another cell where they all fell into a family hug.

The guard locked the cell behind them.

When the embrace ended, Julia looked around for the guard and Pedro... Both gone. Anger flushed her face.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In the House of Trade office, Mico swept up red ribbons. More ribbons littered the table still stacked high with more papers than before.

Manuel argued with Toro and Pedro about coordinates over a large map and charts spread across another table.

Don Antonio walked in and took in the sight. “Where is Fermin?”

His sons all looked up and shrugged.



## The Treasure Galleons

In the mostly empty banquet hall, amid remnants of yet another party from the night before, Fermin put the finishing touches on his smaller painting of *The Last Supper* hanging above.

In Fermin's version everyone was redheaded except Judas.

The marquis enjoyed a manicure by two pretty señoritas behind Fermin. From his vantage, he compared the two paintings with approval. "You are quite the renaissance man!"

Fermin stepped back to size up his work, unsure if he liked it.

With two officers following, Don Antonio entered and approached the marquis, hat in hand while Fermin pretended to be too wrapped up in his work to notice him.

The marquis sat up straight. "General! Come see your talented son's work. You must be very proud."

Don Antonio scanned the two paintings. Unimpressed, he turned his back to Fermin to address the marquis. "Please forgive my interruption, Your Excellency. Might I have a word with my...talented son?"

Once they were out in the castle corridor, Don Antonio paced, agitated. "The escrivano at the House of Trade tells me you have not shown your face since the day we arrived. And now I find you making a mockery of our Savior, pestering the marquis—"

"It is not a mockery! And, unlike you, the marquis enjoys my company."

Don Antonio stopped and clenched his fist in frustration.

Fermin instinctively cowered.

This stopped Don Antonio cold. His anger turned to puzzlement. He reached for Fermin, who angrily evaded him. Don Antonio unsuccessfully tried to soften his tone. "If I had not wanted your company, I wouldn't have made you come... But I see now that it was a mistake."

Fermin's fear and anger turned to concern.

"Like Toro, you're not ready for this voyage. So now you can have all the time you want to do your...scribbling." Don Antonio put his hat back on, ready to leave. "You'll sail home after the flotilla has departed."

"Home? To Panama?"

Don Antonio walked away down the long, echoey hall.

After a moment of shock, Fermin ran after Don Antonio. “You can’t leave me here! I must go to España! You said so yourself! The king ‘wishes’ it.”

“My decision is made.” Don Antonio kept walking.

“But, Father, why can’t—”

Don Antonio stopped and turned abruptly.

Again, Fermin cowered.

Don Antonio’s anger turned to deep hurt. Never realizing how afraid his own son was of him until now, he said, “*That* is why.” Don Antonio turned and walked away, leaving Fermin stupefied.

Fermin burst back into the banquet hall and ran to his easel.

The marquis watched Fermin take his paintbrush, make hasty changes to the canvas, then step back to look at it.

Satisfied, Fermin dropped his brush and looked at the marquis as if he wanted to tell him what happened. Too choked with emotion, he rubbed his chest absently then ran from the room.

The marquis peeked at and mulled over the painting: Judas Iscariot was now an evil Don Antonio.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Despite the urgency everyone felt to beat the summer storms, stay a step ahead of any pirates who may have planted spies in Cuba, and most importantly deliver the king's treasury and the Queen's Jewels as soon as possible, the red tape continued to cause delay after delay.

And despite that everyone wanted to please their king, many of the delays seemed to come from the crown.

Over the past few months, Don Antonio had learned from good sources that Ubilla's temper and ill treatment of others had given the king pause about his appointment. In fact, it was rumored that before arriving in Cuba, King Philip had penned a devastating letter to Ubilla, stating that he had "lost all confidence" in the commander's ability to accomplish this all-important mission.

The marquis had suggested to Don Antonio that he make a bid to the king to take charge of the flotilla, but Don Antonio had no desire to take on any more responsibility.

## The Treasure Galleons

He had enough headaches with a mutinous son and over a thousand mouths to keep fed while the fleets languished well into the summer months.

The ships were originally meant to arrive in early spring, yet now it was July, and still no sailing orders had come from Madrid. And men were beginning to abandon the fleets in droves.

Manuel's ship took the biggest hit from desertions. His crew of nearly 150 men was nearly cut in half. Any further delays would only make it dwindle more.

At his wit's end, Don Antonio asked the marquis to use whatever pull he had with both vice royalty and the king. At long last, it seemed that progress was being made when the marquis called a meeting of captains from all eleven of the ships.



The House of Trade was well lit from within. The shadows of several men moved about inside. Outside a feathery figure hurried toward the building followed by another who could not catch up.

Inside, the marquis signed a document for a wigged official, then turned to Don Antonio and Ubilla. "There you are, generals. You're cleared to sail next week. I'm only sorry that you'll have to put up with that wretched Frenchman—"

Wigged, powdered, feathered and all-around French Frenchman Capitaine Antoine d'Aire burst in with a such a flurry that several candles went out. "First someone steals my dog and now I'm told my departure is delayed... again!"

Flustered, Solorzano followed d'Aire in. "Capitaine d'Aire, you must wait until I have expelled the pirates who lurk in the Bimini Islands—"

"Ah!" the Frenchman put his indignant finger in the air. "And why do Dutchmen 'lurk' near my ship? Honestly...Dutchmen!?"

Confused but alarmed, Don Antonio turned to the marquis. "Dutch? Has there been a jailbreak I've not been told about?"

The marquis took a deep breath. "My apologies, general. I was about to tell you... With all the desertions due to the delays, I've a

solution to man your ships. But you may not like it very much.” His eyes went to Zaleme who stood quietly in the corner.



Later, at the public house in Havana, Zaleme and several officers ate in heavy silence.

Pedro rushed toward them, grabbed a chair from another table and sat to face Zaleme. He slapped a document on the table. “A *reprieve* for the Dutchmen?”

Zaleme sighed. He had already gone over this with Don Antonio, who had eventually agreed. “It’s only for the voyage.”

Pedro shook his head in denial. “In all of Havana there are no others who can crew a fifty-ton rowboat?”

“The only qualified crewman I’ve found on this island is a salty old stray dog.”

Though there was indisputable evidence that could send the Dutchmen straight to the gallows once the viceroy arrived in the fall, the delays had taken their toll on Don Antonio’s fleet, and if there was to be any hope of having a functional signal ship, the little Dutch galley was the perfect vessel. Manuel’s ship was now too heavy for the job. And crews had become too thin while the passenger lists had grown. There simply were no men or ships to spare.

Pedro knew that they could have forced the Dutchmen as a prize crew from the start, but there had been no need for such a risk. He didn’t like the idea of bitter, possibly vengeful men who’d been locked up all winter crewing any of the ships.

It was a matter of last resort.

Pedro slumped in defeat. He had no better ideas. “You will be well armed? Mendez and Bernardo too?”

Zaleme nodded. “Never more than six of their men on deck at a time. Six men in the galley. The rest in their hammocks.”

Pedro grinned. “Even with good wind, make them row. Keep them too weary to raise their arms...or to raise arms against you.”

Zaleme smiled. “There is a benefit, you know. No payroll. And once we’re in Spain, they’ll become the king’s burden.

Pedro warmed to that.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

July was nearly spent, and no one in the Echeverz clan, not even Manuel, had noticed that the running of the bulls in Pamplona had come and gone.

Fermin had never been to his family's estate there, but he knew all about it. After all, he was named for St. Fermin, whom the entire event was centered around. The day of his christening in Portobelo had been at the end of the sacred week.

No one in his family had given it a thought. He was now thirteen. A man in the eyes of many cultures, including the Basques. Yet, here he was, ignored and left behind as a child to be sent back to his nowhere life in Panama. No apprenticeship. Nothing but another five years of Jesuit school to mold him into the perfect nobleman to please a family who could not even remember his christening day.

When the marquis had made the connection with Fermin's name, he had arranged a special "*toro de fuego*"—a mock running

## The Treasure Galleons

of the bulls—in Fermin’s honor to add to the festivities of the final gala before the flotilla’s departure.

The masquerade ball was the marquis’ greatest soiree ever. Men dressed as matadors and señoritas came in full Spanish costume, all wearing or carrying eye masks. But for Fermin it served only as a reminder that he was forgotten by his family. Too busy with the final preparations for the morning launch, even Toro could not be there to enjoy the “crazy cow,” where a performer with an oversized bull’s head mask comically chased a pack of children, fireworks spewing sparks from the mask’s horns.

Still wearing their masquerade masks, Fermin and the marquis stepped out onto the castle balcony to watch a display of fireworks over the bay.

Fermin was clearly a bit tipsy.

The marquis, with a cigar and goblet in hand, held his cigar out to Fermin to take a puff. “Life’s only regrets are of things never tried.”

Fermin nearly turned green just looking at it.

“Worried *su padre* would not approve?”

This motivated Fermin. He swiped the cigar and took a deep drag.

For a moment he was fine, then turned green and dashed to the rail high above the stony shore...and heaved.

When he was able to focus, Fermin noticed the marquis’ colorful ship bobbing in the water. “It feels like I’m back on the ship.”

“Ah... The novice sailor’s torment.” The marquis walked to the rail and snagged his cigar from Fermin. Heedless of Fermin’s anguish, he took a puff. “You know the secret to never be sick at sea?”

Fermin stood up straight just as the Marquis exhaled smoke at him. Choking and waving away the smoke, Fermin answered, “Never smoke *la cohiba*?”

“La cohiba comes from Mother Earth. Only she can save you from—”

Fermin turned and heaved some more over the rail.

“—Father Neptune’s wrath.”

Fermin looked out to the ship-filled harbor lit up by the fireworks.

“You must pay homage, the marquis said. “Keep always your eyes upon Mother Earth.

“But...if we’re at sea, how can—”

“Even at sea there’s a horizon. Let her steady your eyes so that your legs know the balance of things.”

Fermin looked beyond the harbor to town. He stood up straight, took a deep breath... Already he felt healthier.

“And...you must take her with you.”

“Who? Mother Earth?”

“A pinch of dirt beneath the nostrils soothes a dizzy head.” The marquis toasted the air. “A few drops of gin and bitters never hurts either.”

Fermin was skeptical. His eyes moved to the treasure fleet, which hummed with activity under lamplight. He grew melancholy. “I was going to ask Señor Melendez why all the maestros paint Judas Iscariot with red hair.”

“Do you mean Miguel Jacinto Melendez? The royal artist?”

Fermin nodded, dejected. He removed his mask.

The marquis studied Fermin with empathy. “When I was your age, I went on a great adventure...”

Fermin’s drunken eyes glazed over as he watched the ships.

“They deemed me too young for the army, so do you know what I did?”

Fermin shrugged.

“I liberated a knife from my brother...” The marquis detached a sheathed knife from his belt. “...and I joined the Spanish army.”

Fermin nodded, not fully listening.

“But I suppose I could have stayed in *Sevilla*...as my father wished.”

That got Fermin’s attention.

The marquis handed him the sheathed knife. “This has protected me through three governorships, four wars, five hostile tribes in *la Florida* and a hundred pirate attacks.”

“But...I just want to be an artist.” Fermin offered the knife back.

The marquis refused it. “I am old. But a young man must have always a strong, sharp knife at his belt... Even a young artist.”

## **The Treasure Galleons**

Fermin's eyes followed the marquis' masked gaze out to the ships.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Two tiny islands just east of lower Florida came into scope's view of Solorzano's frigate. Nestled in a small cove of the southernmost island, several mostly English men-of-war were moored.

Solorzano lowered his glass and took a deep breath, aware that he had danced on the political edge between warring nations perhaps too long. During war, it served a good purpose both for himself and Cuba, which he was sworn to protect as garrison commander.

But with war officially ceased for over a year now, he had gone too far with Henry Jennings. Solorzano was not afraid of the brazen Welshman, but he did worry that his own greed may have jeopardized his rightful inheritance as the next governor of Cuba. His actions this day would seal his fate forever, forced to betray either his own nation or his enemy's. Neither would earn him any future peace.

## The Treasure Galleons

Larger than life in voice, countenance and stature, Welshman Henry Jennings stood by as Solorzano came aboard. Every bit the pirate some whispered him to be, he still held himself to be the gentleman farmer from pre-war days in Jamaica.

“I was beginning to think you’d never arrive, commander,” Jennings said. “I was hoping it meant I could keep your share.”

Solorzano could see he was not joking. “Captain Jennings, with over fourteen million pesos in registered treasure, I think the delays in Cuba were well worth the wait.”

Jennings grinned while his pirates whooped and cheered.

“But your rendezvous with the Dutchmen has been found out,” Solorzano added.

All fell silent. Jennings went nose to nose with Solorzano. “Don’t test my patience, commander.”

Unintimidated, and now convinced that he was doing the right thing, Solorzano handed a roughly drawn chart to Jennings. “They’ve changed their course. If you leave today, you’ll find Puerto Rico Bay is ideal for an ambush.”



Under early morning light on the castle balcony, Fermin’s sketchbook lay on a table open to a drawing of a realistic pelican vulning her breast to feed her reborn babies.

With one hand absently rubbing the trinket hanging from his neck, Fermin watched through a spyglass the loading of treasure and passengers onto the ships across the bay.

A team of Africans struggled to keep a canopied sedan chair bearing a fussy, obese wealthy man from tipping as they carried him across the gangplank onto one of Ubilla’s ships.

Fermin scoped the little Dutch ship. No passengers. No treasure. Just a few busy crewmen preparing to sail.

Fermin’s thoughts spun until he arrived at a clear decision.

Tammy Gross

He removed a page from the sketchbook, scrawled a note, folded it, and addressed it in calligraphy: “Marquis de Casa-Torres”  
He second-guessed himself briefly, then rushed off.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The morning of July 24<sup>th</sup>, 1715 was beautiful, calm and sunny. All of Havana had come out to cheer for the departing flotilla of twelve treasure-laden ships. Ladies waved their lace kerchiefs, men rattled their noisemakers, and joyous music filled the streets.

The castle fortress fired two booming guns in salutation.

Wealthy passengers waved from the rails of nearly all the ships, whose foresails bore the majestic emblems of Spain's empire.

In the lead, Ubilla's flagship fired two guns in return salute to the castle, and the procession was under weigh.

Ubilla, who soaked in the accolades from atop the poop deck, was followed by the small ship purchased from Don Antonio.

Three more heavily burdened ships followed in tight formation, the last a classic galleon bearing the obese rich man. Of all the ships in the flotilla, Ubilla's almiranta—commanded by the distinguished, elderly Admiral Francisco Salmon—was the only genuine galleon-built vessel.

## The Treasure Galleons

The sixth ship, a French frigate, stood out for its gaudy patriotic display of France's crown. Capitaine d'Aire stood at the helm, impatient with all the fanfare.

Next, Don Antonio helmed his warship *Carmen* led by the figurehead Neptune's onward motion toward the sea. Larger and better armed than the others, she commanded the admiration of all. Toro, still paying penance for his misdeeds in Portobelo, worked the lines with the crew.

Behind them, Manuel issued orders from the helm of the *Concepción*. Mico waved to all from high in the rigging, loving the attention. Josefa waved from the poop deck, which loomed high above the *Holandesa*.

Julia waved from the bow of the little Dutch merchant, pretending to be a luxury passenger, now wearing her own dress. The crew worked the main sail under Zaleme's watchful eye.

Two more ships behind them were followed at last by Pedro's forty-gun *Rosario*, no less impressive than Don Antonio's larger version. Pedro stepped to the poop deck for one last wave to the people of Havana who cheered to a deafening pitch.



By dusk, the ships sailed in peaceful consort on calm seas away from a brilliant sunset .

On the *Holandesa*'s quarterdeck, a lowly cabin boy in a shabby wool cap painted detail over the sloppy job Toro had done on the door's family crest.

The door whipped opened from inside. Zaleme nearly ran into the boy on his way out. "What are you doing..." Zaleme did a double-take. "Don Fermin?"

The cabin boy shushed him and looked around. Indeed it *was* Fermin!

Above his lip he wore a thick mustache of dirt that looked like a comical disguise. Before anyone would notice, Fermin pushed Zaleme back inside and shut the door.

Zaleme, in hushed anger, paced before Fermin who wiped the dirt from below his nose, smearing his face.

“We’ll have to flag down the capitana, drop anchor... Your father will be—”

“No! Please, señor. No one has to know. I promise, if you get me to Spain without my family knowing...” Fermin showed him the gold pelican necklace. “...I’ll pay you the worth of this.”

“You think you can buy my loyalty? Put that away before these cutthroats see it!”

Fermin stuffed the pelican back in his shirt. “I just... Please don’t tell. I’ll do whatever you say. I’ll work. I’ll earn my bunk.”

Zaleme stared at him. “Bunk? If you stay, Don Fermin, it’s a hammock belowdecks for you...” He stopped pacing to consider a moment. “These men are dangerous. Should anything happen, I keep a *pistola* under my bed. Do you know how to fire a weapon?”

Fermin nodded. “There’s nothing to it. And, I have this...” He showed Zaleme the marquis’ knife.

“*Bueno*... I’ll introduce you as...”

“...my apprentice, Fermin Gonzalez.”

Zaleme and Fermin stood before Julia and half the crew on the quarterdeck.

Zaleme’s only two Spanish officers, seasoned Chief Pilot Sebastian Mendez and young pilot Mateo Bernardo, looked on with confused recognition of Fermin.

Ludolf was bored with the Spaniards. “Welcome aboard, *bisoño* Gonzo.”

The Dutch crew laughed.

Xander pulled Fermin’s cap off to reveal his red locks.

“Hey! Give that back.”

Xander told his men in Dutch, “Say your prayers, lads. We have a Judas Hair aboard.”

Several crewmen crossed themselves, genuinely concerned.

Xander threw the cap back at Fermin with disgust.

A huge, matted, gray dog rubbed up against Fermin. It reeked of dead fish and greasy tallow.

Ludolf snickered without any humor. “We’ve named him Capitana. Even he outranks you.”

## **The Treasure Galleons**

Fermin tried not to tremble as he put his cap back on.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The darkness of night came early over the bay at Puerto Rico.

Dark clouds, torrential rain, wind and waves pummeled the island.

Jennings' fleet of pirates, moored far inland for protection, took a terrible beating from a severe tropical storm that had crept up on them from the southeast. While it hovered, it was clearly escalating into a hurricane.

Hail stones smashed through Jennings' cabin window.

Jennings stuck his head out and cursed the violent sky.



## The Treasure Galleons

The treasure fleet moved slowly through the Florida Straits throughout the calm night.

Stars were brushed across the clear sky. The crescent moon shone over serene waters.

Lit by huge lanterns astern, Don Antonio's Galleons lagged behind d'Aire and Ubilla's forward Flota.

From the poopdeck of his capitana, Don Antonio could barely feel any breeze at all. The sails luffed weakly overhead.

Under lamplight, Don Antonio sat with a pipe and recorded the conditions in his log.

Sensing something, he eyed a clear jar of oil hung from the rail. A milky swirl of sediment had risen from the bottom toward the top. It looked like an upside-down tornado inside the glass.

The image grew distorted when Chief Pilot Francisco's reflection filled the jar.

"Shark's oil never lies, señor," Don Antonio commented, then looked to the horizon. "Let's obtain a full report from Ubilla's pilot in the morning."

His faithful pilot nodded and left Don Antonio to his thoughts.

Seated with Josefa at his side, Manuel made notes on his charts while studying the brilliant stars from the bow.

Josefa nuzzled Manuel's arm. "I never imagined how romantic this could be. It's so peaceful."

"Too peaceful..."

Mico lay face-up on the deck nearby, humming to himself.

Manuel voiced his thoughts. "I'm not so sure General Ubilla was right about the early season."

"I thought the delays saved us from the summer storms. No?"

Mico uttered the sing-song words Manuel had taught him as a child. "June too soon. July stand by. August come they must. September remember. October all over. In this the mariner trusts."

Josefa smiled, but Manuel frowned and mumbled to himself... "July stand by..."

At the rail of the poop deck, Don Antonio lifted the shark oil against the starry backdrop. “August come they must...”

Dead last to the south of the rest of the flotilla, Pedro stepped to the balcony of his aft cabin, puffed his pipe and eyed the vastness to the south. “In this the mariner trusts.”

A brilliant lightning strike drew his eyes to the east.



At daylight, Zaleme had the men row the *Holandesa* to catch up to Manuel’s ship, which had finally caught a nice wind.

Fermin mopped the deck with his back to Manuel as the galley continued past.

They soon came upon Don Antonio’s flagship. Fermin stayed turned around as they pulled into the warship’s shadow.

With a trumpet (megaphone), Don Antonio shouted to Zaleme... “FOR THE CHIEF PILOT!”

One of Don Antonio’s sailors pitched a tethered package that landed on the Dutch ship’s deck at Fermin’s feet.

Fermin did his best to grab the package, remove the tethered line and keep his back to Don Antonio, who shouted, “GODSPEED!”

Zaleme saluted Don Antonio and continued ahead, now in the wind.

From the poop deck of his frigate, impatient Capitaine d’Aire watched the exchange.

With little effort from her galley rowers, the *Holandesa* easily sailed up to and past d’Aire with an acknowledging salute.

Fed up, d’Aire shouted orders down to his men. “Harness the Spaniard’s wind!”

The French crew hurried to change the main sail, but just as they caught up the wind died and the sails sagged.

## The Treasure Galleons

Capitaine d'Aire went ballistic. "I hate this New World! Even her wind does not cooperate! Long live France!"

The French crew chimed in unison, "*Vive la France!*"

Aboard the *Holandesa*, Fermin brought his bucket to the rail just as the rowers stopped and the wind died, bringing the ship to an abrupt halt.

The dog, ever by his side, got underfoot as Fermin tried to catch his balance. He tumbled over the dog, bucket in hand, and the entire contents went flying, drenching...

Julia...just as she stepped out from the forecastle quarters.

In shock, Julia just stood there for a moment before she went into an incoherent rant in Dutch.

At the same time behind Fermin, Zaleme shouted orders to those in the riggings to regain the wind, while Mendez screamed in Spanish at the rowers belowdecks.

Bernardo whistled.

The French ship now came alongside. D'Aire saw the dog and yelled out in French, "That's my dog! You thief! First you take my wind. Now you take my dog!"

The dog growled then barked incessantly back at d'Aire.

Fermin stood in a stupor watching the multi-lingual chaos unfold like a circus.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

The flotilla sailed under a quarter moon with clear skies and calm waters. Divided into three sections, Ubilla's five ships sailed northward far past Florida's Bay of Biscay while d'Aire's frigate gained speed into open waters...to the east.

Don Antonio's six ships lagged far south of Ubilla's ships.

In the captain's cabin of the *Holandesa*, Zaleme, Bernardo and Mendez enjoyed tea with Julia, all seated before the life-size painting of King Philip V.

Fermin entered with a tray full of food. He kicked the door closed behind him to keep the dog from following him in, then stopped cold upon sighting Julia.

She glanced at him, and turned to Zaleme with an air befitting a lady of high station. "You dare allow this buffoon to serve me food after today? Am I to wear the gravy and the wine on my dress now?"

Fermin steadied the tray and crossed to Zaleme's end of the table to avoid her, making Zaleme very uneasy.

## The Treasure Galleons

Fermin managed to put the tray down with Mendez's assistance. "Alright, lad, begone now. We'll serve ourselves."

Fermin nods, bows and backs out.

A loud *boom!* outside caused Julia to drop her teacup all over her skirt.

Through a ring of smoke from one of his fired cannons, Don Antonio watched d'Aire's aft lantern head to the right.

"Another warning shot... FIRE!"

Toro lit a starboard cannon at the bow... Another *boom!* rang out.

Don Antonio seethed. "That arrogant Frenchman..."

Having been summoned, Pilot Francisco emerged in his night clothes.

"Record this in the log," Don Antonio ordered. "Precise time, heading...every meticulous detail for the king to see this treachery."

Francisco rubbed his eyes and yawned, then turned it all into a sloppy salute with a nod. He fumbled his way to the captain's cabin.

Don Antonio took out his spyglass and searched. His lens found the feather-capped captain on the poop deck, facing him as if he knew he was being spied.

D'Aire stepped to the rail and thumbed his nose at Don Antonio before whipping back to bark orders to his men.



Under the blazing Cuban sun, a violent bullfight played out before a packed crowd in the marquis' stadium.

Solorzano made his way through the cheering crowd until he reached the private box where the marquis sat with his homely wife.

Solorzano stood, blocking the wife's view of the bull fight.

The marquis continued to watch the action in the arena while he addressed Solorzano. "Did Jennings believe our ruse?"

Solorzano nodded. "The armada is assured safe passage."

“Very good. Have a seat.”

The marquis’ wife shot him a death glare.

Not noticing, Solorzano shook his head. “You’re too kind, Excellency. But I’ve news of foreigners cruising the Tortugas. I must take leave.” Solorzano bowed, retreated and left.

The marquis leaned to his wife. “It takes a pirate to stop a pirate. Am I not brilliant for appointing the commander, *mi amor?*”

His wife grinned and looped the marquis’ offered arm.



The light of the rising sun illuminated San Juan Bay in Puerto Rico. The devastation from the now dwindling storm was evident everywhere.

Jennings’ ships were all battered, broken, beached or sunk.

Furious, Jennings stepped out from his cabin to join his men and survey the storm’s toll. It was going to take weeks to make the ships seaworthy again.

“I hope those bloody Spaniards are rotting at the bottom of the sea.”

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Xander winced in pain and flexed his knuckles as his hands pushed on the spar.

Behind him, Fermin helped push the spokes of the capstan around in a circle with other crew, Ludolf behind him.

The dog walked in step alongside Fermin.

Ludolf and Xander spoke cryptically in Dutch.

Ludolf asked, “Shouldn’t we have seen Captain Jen—”

“Don’t speak his name aloud, fool!” Xander glanced back at Fermin who pretended not to understand them. “We’ve already passed the islands. Something’s wrong. It’s in the air.

They both looked out to the cloudy sunrise.

“He’s not coming,” Xander said.

Ludolf turned his frustration on Fermin and tripped him up.

Fermin went down hard.

## The Treasure Galleons

The dog stood over him protectively and growled at Ludolf, who growled at Fermin in English. “You know why Pyrenees are bred?”

Fermin brushed himself off and got up, ignoring Ludolf.

“To protect the smallest, weakest, most pathetic creatures on Earth.”

Fermin waited for the capstan to go around a full revolution while he stared at the cruel father and son, then found his place back on the wheel and pushed with defiant strength...to little effect.



A beautiful lightning storm crept across the southeastern horizon in backdrop to the majestic treasure ships sailing under a half moon.

Huge waves rocked Don Antonio’s capitana. The wind whined against the creaking hull.

Don Antonio looked out at the approaching massive storm. He called over the din to Toro, “Hail the *patache!*”

Toro ran for a signalman who immediately went to the poop deck and ran through a series of flag signals.

Zaleme saw the signal and shouted to Mendez, “Sail forward!”

In the rigging above, Ludolf moved carefully toward the boom of the main mast. He saw Fermin coiling a line below. “Gonzol!”

Fermin, used to his nickname, looked up.

Ludolf motioned for him to climb up.

Fermin shook his head, no.

Ludolf made a closed-fist threat at Fermin, and motioned for him to come up...or else.

Fermin reluctantly scaled the ropes of the shroud.

Once he was quite high, they maneuvered the lines to fill the appropriate sail and give speed to the ship.

Ludolf climbed down and motioned for Fermin to follow.

Fermin, afraid to move, reached for the nearby crow's nest and climbed on. He clung to the mast, eyes tightly shut in fear.

Furious when he realized Fermin was not with him on deck, Ludolf went to Xander and pointed upward.



Miles above the Atlantic Ocean, the eye of a massive hurricane looked down on the southern half of Florida. In its 150-mile-per-hour winds, the infinite ocean tossed the eleven ships like miniscule flotsam.

One by one the lanterns on each stern were doused by waves until only Don Antonio's ship was alight.

With a loud crash, a crushing wave smashed the lantern glass while pushing the vessel toward shore.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

On the *Concepción*, under a barrage of sideways rain and hail, Josefa kissed her rosary as she huddled with Mico near Manuel who struggled with his crew to keep the ship aright.

Nearly ramming into Manuel's hull, Zaleme tried to shout over the wind and rain from the *Holandesa*, but Manuel couldn't hear.

Zaleme gave a poignant salute to Manuel before steering for the ships to the south.

Manuel watched the ship pass by. Under several flashes of lightning he spotted Fermin in the crow's nest. Shocked, Manuel crossed himself.

In total despair, Fermin hugged the mast, helpless as he watched Manuel get swept off his feet by a taut line attached to a boom that

## The Treasure Galleons

fell and smashed the longboat his crew had been trying to ready for the nuns, women and children congregated there.

The storm carried their ships apart, but Fermin could see Manuel regain his footing and valiantly go to the aid of those trapped.

Under shredded sails on broken masts Don Antonio's flagship drifted somewhere north of the others at the wind's mercy.

Amidst the chaos, Don Antonio shouted to any who could hear, "Dispatch the chests! We are too heavy for the reef!"

Toro rushed down the hatch to the gun deck past the tightly lashed cannons down to the lower deck where chests and barrels served as a double layer of ballast.

Toro recruited every man in sight to form an assembly line. With super-human strength, he heaved one square chest at a time up the line from man to man back to the upper deck where the chests were then dumped overboard.

All the while Belowdecks the water rose until it reached Toro's knees. He remained indomitable until the hull turned to its side at the mercy of the waves.

At nearly ninety degrees several chests fell from their stacks, crashing open to reveal silver coins in most, gold coins in others, and a mix of gems in others.

A rush of sea water flooded the deck in a violent torrent, sweeping Toro off his feet and into the murky depths.

The side of the ship, now at the bottom, ripped open to reveal the reef where the loose treasures poured from the cracked hull to blanket the seabed below.

With her last shred of sail cloth clinging to the foremast, the *Holandesa* approached Pedro's *Rosario*. Pedro shouted through a trumpet to Zaleme, but a wind gust ripped it from his hand, smashing him in the face. Undaunted, he shouted through cupped hands, "What is our course?"

Zaleme used the trumpet and pointed northeast. “*San Augustin!* Stay offshore!”

Pedro nodded his understanding.

*Crack!* Pedro’s main mast fell with all its riggings.

From his perch, Fermin saw a rigger on Pedro’s ship fall to his death against the rail. Others were crushed. Others tossed into the churning sea.

“Pedro! Up here!” Fermin’s cries went unheard.

He watched Pedro help passengers and crew to the longboats until the heavy ship lurched violently to a halt, snagged by a reef.

All aboard were tossed like dice across the decks. Many rolled into the water; others got tangled in ropes.

Fermin searched for Pedro. He couldn’t find him anywhere as his own ship took him farther away.

A fire flared up on Pedro’s main deck when—

*Kaboom!* Powder kegs near Pedro’s gunports exploded, sending fireballs into the stormy night sky.

“PEDRO! PEDRO!” Fermin forced himself to climb the slippery ropes down toward the deck. But halfway down he froze, shocked to see Bernardo and Mendez bound by ropes to the mast, gagged, helpless as they watched Xander and his men corner Zaleme on the quarterdeck.

Xander brandished a large knife at Zaleme, shouting over the storm. “This ship must be beached. We’re not going to Saint Augustine to face your gallows.”

Xander lunged at Zaleme who evaded the knife. “You fool! The dragon’s teeth will eat us alive!”

When Xander could not get the upper hand, Ludolf grabbed Zaleme by surprise from behind.

As Fermin watched in horror, Xander stabbed Zaleme in the heart and let his lifeless body fall to the deck.

Xander turned to his men. “Where is that red-feathered albatross?”

Remembering, he looked up, sneering when he spotted Fermin.

## The Treasure Galleons

Fermin shook his head in disbelief of what he'd witnessed.

Xander headed up the shroud.

Fermin tried to climb back up but his pelican trinket got caught in the line, nearly choking him. He fumbled with it until its wing broke off and its body dropped to the waves below.

Xander's eyes went wild when he spotted the chain's glimmer of gold. He grabbed Fermin's leg, pulled him down and yanked the chain from Fermin as he slipped down the ropes past him.

Below, Ludolf and the others were there to catch Fermin.

In one smooth motion they carried Fermin to the rail. Ludolf yelled, "Take a deep breath, Judas Hair," then heaved Fermin over the side.

Ludolf smacked his hands clean and spit where Fermin went in.

He turned to face the crew to find the dog rushing right at him. Ludolf sidestepped at the last moment.

The dog leapt high into the air and disappeared over the rail.

"Good riddance to you both!"

Tammy Gross

## The Treasure Galleons



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A drizzly, gray morning revealed the extent of devastation.

Hundreds of bodies littered the endless miles of Florida's razor-straight eastern coastline. Every few miles, masts or hulls protruded offshore, ensnared in the reef's monstrous teeth.

Face up, shirtless and shoeless, Fermin half-awoke under the hovering shadow of what appeared to be a large, fierce native.

Fermin's eyes lost focus, and he was out again.

He tried again to come into consciousness. The native morphed into a beautiful woman with red hair. "*Fermin. Wake up, sleepy boy.*" Her voice came from the air, not her lips.

"Mama?" he muttered, then was out again, until...

He fully awoke to the drenched, whining dog licking his face.

Aside from the several long-healed scars across his chest, Fermin was covered head to toe in fresh cuts, bruises and gashes.

Disoriented, he could barely sit up at first. Nothing but the sound of water—ocean waves and drizzle.

He stood and looked around.

Bodies everywhere. No signs of life...other than the dog.

Capitana was barely recognizable. The matted gray fur was now white, though damp. It seemed the sea and rain had washed away years of neglect...and pungent odors.

## The Treasure Galleons

Knowing that most of the ships had been to the north, Fermin headed up the beach, but the dog barked and ran south. At first he didn't care and kept walking. But then it occurred to him that he may very well have owed his life to this giant ball of fur. Besides, Fermin didn't want to be alone. He turned and ran south after the dog.

It wasn't long before they came upon a strange, ominous mound of refuse along the berm. The dog arrived first and barked at the heap, which stood as tall as a palm tree.

Once Fermin caught up, he could see that among shards of pottery, rotted fronds and other debris, the pile was mostly made of white-washed bones—animal...and human.

“Cannibals.” Trembling, Fermin drew the marquis' knife from his belt.

Instinctively, the dog stopped barking and investigated the heap with its nose, then disappeared behind the mountain of bones. Fermin waited, tense, until he heard a frantic bark.

At first Fermin wanted to run, a faint moan compelled him to take a tentative peek.

Twisted up in charred ropes and seaweed, Pedro lay unconscious, his face and body mangled and barely recognizable from burns, breaks and contusions. His lower leg was shredded, the broken bone exposed.

“Pedro!” Fermin rushed to his side.

Seagulls and vultures pecked at the dead. Under the scorching sun, Fermin trudged north, ready to pass out from thirst and despair. The dog dragged a makeshift litter with delirious Pedro aboard. Pedro's leg was ironically splinted by two human femurs.

After what seemed miles but was likely only two or three, Fermin faltered, then collapsed at the surf's edge. Even the lapping water couldn't revive him.

He heard vague voices and could make out a blur of several feet running toward him before all went black.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Fermin slowly awakened as Julia forced him to drink water. “Wake up. Señor Gonzalez...”

Fermin sputtered the water. He managed to sit up. He swooned. The familiar room was pitched at a slight angle. A wave of nausea overcame him. “I feel seasick.”

“Nonsense,” Julia scoffed. “You’re just thirsty.”

She let him drink the water under his own power.

He scanned the room. “Is this *la Holandesa*? How did—”

The door to the cabin swung open. Xander poked his head in.

Fermin recoiled when Xander’s eyes found him. “Get out here,” the Dutchman ordered Fermin.

“Papa, he’s only just come to.”

“He looks able enough—”

The dog’s frenetic howl drew Fermin’s attention.

Out on deck, behind Xander, Ludolf wrestled the dog whose protests turned into vicious snarls.

## The Treasure Galleons

Beyond them all, the ocean served as a backdrop. But something was strange.

Confused, Fermin stood on shaky feet and started for the door. He stopped short, fearful to get too close to Xander. “What are you doing to that dog?”

“We must corral the animals, unless you want to starve.” Xander stepped away from the open doorway to go help Ludolf.

Perplexed, Fermin went to the door, awed by what he saw. “How is this possible?”

From the doorway, Fermin tried to make sense of it all...

To his right, down the beach, about thirty Spanish survivors made camp. They were half naked, bedraggled men, women and children from all classes and stations.

Up the beach, the unscathed Dutchmen buried naked dead in mass graves along the berm. Clothes and belongings piled nearby.

Fermin stepped out onto the deck to fully take it in...

The ship’s aft staterooms rested on shore, butted up against the berm. The main deck faced the water like a stage, splintered off midships.

“The reef took the hull,” Julia said from the doorway. “We rode the deck ashore. It was a terrifying—”

“Miracle,” Fermin marveled.

Julia stepped out next to him and handed him a shirt. “Ludolf pulled this off a dead lad.”

Fermin studied her. She was completely intact. Not a mark on her.

“GONZO! Get this horse of a dog under control!” Xander tried to push the dog from the deck to the sand as Ludolf dragged the dog by the rope.

Fermin stayed put, scanning the survivors. “Where’s my brother?”

Julia said, “You have a brother?”

Xander rushed Fermin and backhanded him in the face, smashing Fermin into the door jamb. “Follow orders, or I’ll tie you like a dog as well.”

“*Pappje!*” Julia protested.

“Stay out of this! Go check if that Spaniard is dead yet. I want my cabin back.”

Julia obediently retreated to the captain’s cabin next door.

Xander grabbed Fermin by the back of his neck and shoved him toward Ludolf and the dog.

The dog broke from Ludolf and growled protectively in front of Fermin, who was stunned and bleeding from the mouth.

Ludolf, disgusted, shook his head. “Just the weak and the small, Gonzo.”

Fermin, shaken, knelt next to the dog for protection.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

In the captain's cabin, under the watchful eye of King Philip V's portrait, Pedro lay unconscious on the bed under a thin blanket, his heavy, wet clothes discarded in a pile. His leg was wrapped in a new, less macabre wood splint.

Fermin sat in a bedside chair, the now fluffy white dog at his feet. "Pedro, I don't know what to do—"

Muffled voices outside drew Fermin's attention.

He got up and moved to the door. With his ear against the door, the voices grew clearer. They spoke in Dutch.

"The scout said they found Lima's wreck to the south. Both of Ubilla's flagships are north," Ludolf reported. "General Ubilla is dead."

"And Echeverz?" Xander asked with sinister hope.

"His capitana sank a mile north."

Distraught, Fermin backed away from the door.

## The Treasure Galleons

“What of Zaleme’s officers?”

“Probably drowned.”

The door swung open. The dog sat up, alert.

Ludolf looked in at Pedro then spoke in English to Fermin. “Still breathing?”

Fermin nodded to Ludolf’s obvious disappointment.

“Let me know when he dies.” Ludolf moved to close the door—

“What’s become of General Echeverz?”

Ludolf shrugged. “Probably waiting in hell for this one to join him.”

The door slammed back shut.

Fermin heard Xander tell his men in Dutch, “If he doesn’t die by morning, I’ll take care of him and that becursed cabin boy myself.”

In a panic, Fermin searched the cabin, then remembered... He looked under the bed. Spotted something.

He sprawled himself out and slipped under, reaching far back. He pulled out a flat box and opened it, elated at what he saw.

Fermin withdrew a flintlock pocket pistola from the chest. He found a powder horn and ammunition pouch.

Fermin opened the pistola’s mechanism, but couldn’t figure out how to load it. He fumbled with it, frantic. He looked to Pedro. “Wake up! They’re going to kill us. Please...open your eyes. How do you load this stupid thing?”

“It’s a muzzle loader.”

Fermin looked up.

Xander filled the doorway. “Want me to show you?”

Fermin stood and pointed the pistola at Xander. His hand shook. “I figured it out.”

Xander saw the powdery mess on Fermin’s hands. “Pull that trigger and you’ll lose a finger. Maybe your hand.”

“You’ll lose much more if you try to harm me or my brother.”

Xander stepped in. “Brother?”

Fermin cocked the pistola.

“You seem to forget I’ve given up my cabin for Don—your brother.”

“You seem to forget these cabins are no longer yours to give up.”

Infuriated, Xander appeared ready to charge.

“Pappje...” Ludolf stepped in the doorway behind Xander. In Dutch, Ludolf said, “Let them have the ship. There's nothing left for us here. The men are anxious to dive for treasure.”

Xander reconsidered. He looked up at the painting.

Fermin watched him open the painting and tear the hidden map away. He crumpled it up and sneered in English as he left, “This pile of splinters is all yours, Judas Hair.”

Ludolf followed Xander who spoke to him in Dutch. “We go south... Where's your sister?”

“Praying over the dead.”

“That girl is getting soft.”

Trembling, Fermin lowered the pistola and looked in his other hand. The ball was still in it.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Julia, frantic, ran through the camp of weary survivors. “Pappje? Ludolf?”

Those with strength to do so looked up and shrugged.

Inside the cabin, Fermin and the dog sat with unconscious Pedro. Fermin dabbed water over Pedro’s burns.

The door opened and Julia rushed to the open painting. Emotions swirled as she stared at the remnants of the map. “They’ll come back for me.”

“Um...until they return, will you still help my brother?”

Julia turned to him. “Don Pedro is your brother?”

“I snuck aboard.”

“A stowaway?”

Fermin grew defensive. “It was the only way—”

“You’ll hear no reprimand from me.” Julia examined Pedro’s wounds. Concern clouded her face.

Fermin’s eyes teared up as the gravity of it all hit him.

## The Treasure Galleons



Fermin, forlorn, looked out at the makeshift camp from the splintered main deck.

He heard a man barking orders and sought out the source. The obese wealthy man from the admiral's ship, nursing a severe case of gout, sat by the berm under the canopy of his broken sedan chair.

A very young African boy fanned him sideways with a palm frond.

"Was I not clear, boy? Up and down!"

The child cowered in fear as the man waved his cane at him.

A sturdy noble woman in torn clothing went to the boy's aid. "Who put you in charge?"

Fermin watched her comfort the boy and lead him away.

He stepped back to take it all in. He looked back at the captain's cabin, then back to the bedraggled camp.

For all he knew, his father and brothers were all dead. He knew Ubilla was dead, having heard and understood every word between the Dutchmen. By longboat, it would take at least a week to reach Havana, perhaps two...if they had a longboat. And St. Augustine was 175 miles north; probably two days to row there. On foot in the scorching sun, most of these people would never make it alive. He knew there were ships wrecked to the north. Help would come eventually, but when? Would it be too late?

Fermin again looked back at the captain's door where he'd repainted the family crest on the door. He wondered if anyone even knew that Pedro was in there.

Fermin looked back at the hopeless survivors and said a silent prayer, then mustered his courage and shouted to all through cupped hands, "This camp is under the authority of Don Pedro de Echeverz..."

A few looked up, most too tired to bother.

"...*el capitan* of *la Rosario*, *almiranta* of the galleons."

The noble woman led the child toward him. "Where is this capitan?"

“He’s...recovering from his wounds. I’m his brother. Fermin... Don Fermin de Echeverz.” To all he said, “We must work together—”

“Ha! Easy for you to say up there with your high and mighty shelter from this wretched heat and these blood-sucking mosquitos. You don’t even have to suffer the sand fleas!”

Fermin hadn’t thought of that. He looked at her angry face. “You’re right. You should move out of the sun into the officer’s cabin.”

“Now you mock us?”

She turned to lead the boy away—

“I’m serious! All the women and children... You must have shelter.”

She stopped and turned back to Fermin. Tears formed in her eyes when she realized he meant it.

Within the hour, several men had removed the captain’s table to the main deck along with chairs and other bulky items from the cabins.



Inside the dark captain’s cabin, Julia wrung water from a cloth. She went to sit by Pedro on the only remaining chair in the otherwise empty cabin.

He was pale and unmoving.

Panicked, she laid her head on his chest to listen. Finally, she saw his chest rise.

Relieved, she tried to sit up, but instead broke down in tears.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The noble woman led a parade of weary women and children into the cramped officers' quarters under Fermin's supervision.

The wealthy man shouted from his perch under his canopy, "And who'll bring me my water now?"

Fermin took a deep breath and mused to himself, "If only there was water to bring."

An old man passing Fermin heard and commiserated, "Water everywhere, yet a desert."

Fermin nodded...then remembered something... "How deep would we have to dig to find fresh water?"

"With shovels, you could dig *casimbas* tall and wide as a man."

Fermin looked to the graves where palm fronds lay scattered. He smiled at Toro's words: *I suppose if you dig deep enough, you're bound to strike water... Even in a desert.*

## The Treasure Galleons

Under beating sunrays, Fermin supervised a team of weary men who dug six-foot holes using the wide palm-frond stems as shovels.

At his feet, a digger stood to wipe his brow. He shook his head and looked up. "It's hopeless, señor. We—" The digger looked down inside the hole where he stood.

Fermin tried to see as the man bent to dig with his hands.

The digger stood and lifted his cupped hands to his lips. He drank and made an indiscernible face... "*Sabe dulce el agua!* Is good! *AGUA!!*"

Those in hearing erupted in cheers.

Fermin handed a tin to the digger who went down and came up with it full.

Fermin took a sip and smiled. He ran across the sand to the wreckage deck where the old man sat in the shade of the table.

Fermin handed him the cup but the old man lacked the strength to take it, so Fermin knelt and put the rim to his lips to help him drink.

"Your father would be proud, young man." The old man smiled, then slumped.

Fermin stared at him. "Señor?" He tried to waken the man.

He was dead.

Fermin devolved into a bundle of emotions.

Red-eyed and exhausted, Fermin stood over a fresh mound at the end of the shallow graves. He crossed himself.



When dusk fell, survivors prepared for a long night battling mosquitos, heat and other myriad discomforts of la Florida.

Fermin, loath to go so high, cautiously followed the dog up to the quarterdeck above the cabins to get a view of things.

In all directions...nothing but water, sand and endless jungle. The sound of crickets rose, drowning out everything else.



Julia slept where she sat, her head still on Pedro's chest.

The crickets grew louder and she startled awake. Aware of the position she was in, she sat up.

She looked at Pedro, who watched her with intense eyes. "Am I in earth, heaven or hell?"

Flustered, Julia backed her chair away. "More like Purgatory."

Pedro's eyes blinked closed. He was out.

Disarmed, Julia stared at him.



The next morning, curled up with the dog on the quarterdeck, Fermin awoke to a shout from one of the survivors. "Rider!"

Fermin stumbled to his feet and looked around.

A scout on horseback trotted up the beach, packed with supplies in several large sacks.

All the survivors stirred. They rushed to greet the scout.

Fermin watched the scout ask something. They all pointed up at Fermin and made a path for the rider to get closer.

Fermin rushed down the steps to the main deck just as Julia came out of the captain's cabin.

"You are in charge?" the puzzled scout asked.

Fermin looked around and realized...he was. He nodded.

The scout dismounted and untied two burlap sacks, which some of the healthier men took up to the decks.

"It's all Señor Lima can spare right now. Ration it wisely."

"Gracias," Fermin said. "Has anyone seen a group of Dutchmen?"

## The Treasure Galleons

The scout scowled as he handed Fermin a musket and ammunition.

The half-empty supply sacks rested against a corner wall opposite Pedro's bed.

While Fermin applied a cool cloth to Pedro's fevered head, Julia paced and chewed on a piece of jerky.

"That scout has it all wrong," Julia muttered.

"They were there just one day before twenty bags of silver, a box of weapons and a longboat disappeared. And now they're missing too."

"No... My father was trying to help recover victuals, that's all."

Fermin mumbled to Pedro, "And I thought *you* were in a dream world."

"My brother and father are no saints, but they're not—"

Fermin stood, enraged. "They're murderers, señorita. I saw them kill a man, then they threw me overboard to my certain death!"

Julia huffed in disbelief. "Yet here you stand."

"And so do you. Where they left you, without even an adios or an adieu."

That hit her like a shot to the gut.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The jerky from Señor Lima's camp was welcome, but Fermin hoped to snag some fish. With a makeshift trident he stood in the surf ready to dive in. First, he looked back at the camp to make sure he would not lose his bearings. Even from so close it looked tiny on the otherwise barren shore. Nothing else was visible for miles in any direction—

The dog barked and drew his attention to a ruckus on shore.

Fermin ran toward the beach where he retrieved his shirt and threw it on while he rushed to where survivors gathered around the distressed wealthy man.

"I saw them! Savages!! Right there!" The wealthy man pointed to the thick tree line of the nearby berm.

Fermin noticed a glint of something. He went and picked up a shiny clam shell. He turned it over to reveal a crude native painting of a galleon.

## The Treasure Galleons

The noble woman gasped at the sight. "If those wicked Dutchmen don't kill us, the savage devils will!"

Survivors crossed themselves and kissed their rosaries. The men helped the wealthy man move his litter closer to the wreckage.



Under a misty night sky with a three-quarter moon, men hovered close to fires to escape swarms of mosquitos that plagued the camp. The wealthy man was especially miserable.

A man on the quarterdeck kept watch for natives...and Dutchmen, musket in hand.

The women and children huddled in the darkness of the officers' cabin, terrified, murmuring prayers. The noble woman wedged a chair under the doorknob.

In the captain's cabin Julia held a lamp above Pedro's leg. His foot was black.

Behind her Fermin paced, absently rubbing his chest.

He stopped to check the door's lock. It was secure.

He unsheathed the marquis' knife and held it up as if whispering to the marquis himself. "I don't want to fight anyone."

Outside the crickets suddenly went silent.

Fermin held his breath, knife at the ready.

Julia traded the lamp for the pre-loaded pistola.

A commotion burst through the silence outside.

The door shook with a violent pounding.

"Pedro! Are you there?"

Fermin recognized the voice—

The doorknob rattled. More pounding.

"Open this door at once!"

Astonished, Fermin said, "Father?"

The rattling stopped. Silence.

"Fermin? Is that you?"

More pounding. More urgent. Don Antonio spoke to someone outside. "Help me break this door down."

Fermin lunged for the door. “No! Wait...” He unlocked it and the door swung open.

Unkempt hair. No shoes. His cross-emblazoned coat torn and tattered... Don Antonio stood in the misty doorway backlit by campfires, appearing more like a ghost than a man.

He faltered a moment at the sight of Fermin, then grabbed him, squeezing him in a tight embrace. “How is it you’re here? They told me Pedro was—”

He pulled away when he spotted Pedro in the bed. He pushed past Fermin to Pedro’s side. “Pedro! My son.”

Over his shoulder he yelled, “MEDICO! VEN AQUI, RAPIDO!” He looked at Fermin, almost accusatory. “Why is he in this condition?”

Fermin opened his mouth to explain—

A physician with a sizeable bag pushed past Fermin and went to work examining Pedro.

Don Antonio hovered, impatient.

The physician looked up, solemn. He whispered out of Fermin’s hearing to Don Antonio whose face dropped. “But...he’s a military man. There must be another way—”

“There is no time to waste,” the physician said. “He may die even if we do this... He will certainly die if we don’t.”

Don Antonio agonized for a moment. He finally nodded to the physician who wasted no time setting up...

Horried, Fermin watched the physician pull what appeared to be sharp torture devices from his bag.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The survivors loitered in clusters throughout the camp, mumbling their concern.

Julia sat on the rail with Fermin.

A *scream* of agony from within the officer's cabin rang out.

Julia grabbed Fermin's arm to comfort him.

Another scream from the cabin made them both flinch.

Haggard, Don Antonio stepped out. He looked at Fermin. "The physician can only stay until daybreak. Go in. Be ready to help."

Fermin nodded and headed for the cabin. He hesitated at the door. "Father, I'm sorry. I—"

"I couldn't save Toro. The waves took him."

"Toro's...? No. He can't be—"

"You could have died too. Do you have any idea how thoughtless you—" Don Antonio took a deep breath to calm himself.

"We'll talk in the morning."

Fermin nodded and slipped into the cabin.

## The Treasure Galleons



Hot rays of sunlight pushed through the captain's cabin's window. Julia held a tin to Pedro's lips. He was barely conscious. Whether he was fevered or not was hard to say. She was perspiring as much as he was.

She looked down to his bandaged leg, amputated below the knee. It was a surreal sight.

From outside, Fermin's angry voice rang out. "What does it matter? I'm here now. Pedro would be dead if I weren't!"

Don Antonio's voice was quieter, but rivaled Fermin's anger. "What if your ship had gone missing like Manuel's? I'd have never known your fate!"

"But you do know!"

Their voices grew distant.

Fermin stormed down the beach away from the wreck. "I can't please you whether I'm dead or alive."

Don Antonio followed him to the edge of camp.

Some survivors looked on while others pretended not to.

"From now on, as far as you're concerned, I *am* dead." Fermin walked off. He whistled for the dog who bounded toward him.

Don Antonio shouted after him, "And now you run away. As usual! No sense of duty or purpose... You forget this is not about you. It's about the king's treasure!" He turned and went back up to the deck.

Fermin whipped around to face him. "You speak of duty and treasure even now? With two sons missing, one dead, another dying—"

Don Antonio slammed the door from inside the cabin.

"Your precious treasure is on the ocean floor... I HOPE IT STAYS THERE THROUGH ALL ETERNITY!" Fermin turned away. Before he could take another step in the sand, he heard a rustle

in the foliage nearby. He looked... Did he see something? He couldn't be sure.

An eerie sound came from the brush—a dove cooing? It sounded almost human.

The dog whined as if scared.

Fermin absently rubbed his chest. His hand touched the painted clam shell under his shirt. He pulled it out and looked at it. At first he'd thought it might show the unseen natives that he respected it.

Unsure what to think, he backed away toward the beach and made a wide circle back toward the wreckage.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER THIRTY

A calm, clear night sky hung over the camp.

Two musicians played a mellow tune. Survivors sang along around a bonfire.

Julia sat on a hammock. Alone. Melancholy.

Pedro slept in the cabin with the alert, protective dog next to him.

A man stood guard with the musket above the cabins.

Fermin tired of looking at the rolling black waves and stepped back up to the deck. He spotted Don Antonio's coat on the rail. He retrieved it and looked out into the darkness—

A letter fell from the inside pocket.

Fermin picked it up. He saw the king's broken seal.

## The Treasure Galleons

Up the beach barely within earshot of the singing, Don Antonio faced the water. He turned down the flame in the lamp he carried and surveyed the black waters. "Where are you, Manuel? My angel Mico? Toro, my *gamberro*."

He looked skyward through tearful eyes. "My sweet Maria, watch over our boys..."

Don Antonio turned and walked the shoreline. Not another soul in sight.

His lamp was a tiny dot against the huge ocean.

Fermin sat next to Pedro. He turned up the lamp light.

He hesitated a moment, then went for it... He unfolded the letter and read...

*Don Antonio, my faithful warrior, on this, the eve of my wedding, I place in your hands not only my future happiness, but the future of Spain...*

Fermin looked up at the king's looming portrait, imagining the king's French accent in his mind.

He scanned the letter and resumed in the middle of the page.

*...Your timely, quick return to Madrid will earn you great accolade and praise from my lips, and great reward from my coffers...*

Fermin shook his head with disdain.

Don Antonio sat on the sand facing the water.

*But should you fail in your mission, the penalty will be swift and severe...*

A light on the water drew Don Antonio's attention. It was a small rowboat with a makeshift sail carrying several men.

Don Antonio stood and picked up the lantern. He swung it to signal the rowers.

Fermin's face filled with dread as he read on...

*There is no punishment beyond my reach or  
my inclination should that treasure fail to  
arrive by winter.*

The boat emerged from the darkness. Zaleme's officer Bernardo, bruised and unshaven, but alive, was at the helm.

Don Antonio lifted the lantern to his own face to identify himself.

The boat's five able-bodied men hopped out to pull it ashore.

The look on Bernardo's face was grim as he approached. Without a word, he handed a bulky message to Don Antonio.

Don Antonio warily accepted and unfolded the message with shaking hands. From it, something dropped into his palm.

He held it to the light. It was Manuel's ruby necklace.

*And for such a failure, death is the penalty  
of my choosing.*

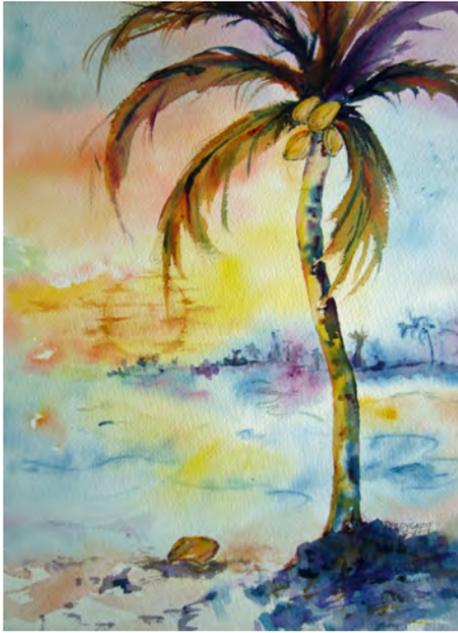
Don Antonio looked at the message, afraid to read it. He skimmed the page with increasing angst.

Manuel, Josefa and Mico...all were confirmed dead.

Devastated, he dropped the lantern and fell to his knees. "NOOO!!!"

Fermin dropped the letter and could only mouth "No!"

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Yet another sweltering morning beckoned the camp to life.

Despondent, Don Antonio slumped in a chair at the captain's table staring out to sea. He grappled the ruby heart in his hand.

Bernardo stood, waiting. "Sir? Should I—"

Don Antonio waved him off with a "go away" gesture.

Bernardo stepped away and up to the quarterdeck where Fermin stood with a spyglass looking northeast.

"Don Fermin, I'm afraid your father... He is not himself."

More to himself than to Bernard, Fermin said, "She can't be too far from shore. I'll need about ten men."

"All due respect, Don Fermin—"

Fermin lowered the spyglass and gave him a stern look, reminiscent of Don Antonio.

"Respect my words. Not my title. I need men. Do you swim?"

## The Treasure Galleons

Bernardo, his men and a few men from camp dragged the rowboat filled with ropes and other gear up the beach, trying to keep up with Fermin who walked with determination, the dog at his side.

“I owe my life to Señor Mendez,” Bernardo told Fermin. “I was only good for holding onto the flotsam he found for us.”

Fermin stopped and removed his shirt, his back to the men. “If you can’t swim, you can run the lines on land when the time comes. All who can swim, follow me.”

He stepped toward the water and looked back.

No one had moved.

Heedless of his scars, Fermin turned to them, miffed. “I know I’m not my father. And I’m young. But it’s imperative that we find the king’s treasure. I only ask that you—”

“Don Fermin,” Bernardo said, “we want to help. It’s just...none of us can swim.”

Fermin was surprised, then nodded as he sadly recalled Mico’s words that a sea captain “*goes on the water, not in it.*”

The men looked down, embarrassed.

About three hundred yards offshore, Bernardo and a couple of other men secured the end of a rope to the oarlock.

Next to them, in the water, Fermin dove down attached to the other end of the rope.

He made his way through the murky water to the bottom. No sign of wreckage until...

A capstan drum. Lots of lines. He saw it all clearly when—

The rope around him jolted him upward...fast.

Fermin popped out of the water about to ask why when he saw a shark fin headed for him.

Bernardo and the others pulled him into the boat fast.

Bernardo pointed to a circle of fins a few yards away. “They have too many fresh carcasses to feed on. We should wait another day...or two”

Fermin nodded, grateful, but before Bernardo and the others began rowing, Fermin stopped them. The fins were not as big as the reef sharks he’d seen in Panama. “Did we bring any hooks?”



Pedro sat propped up in the bed. His heavy eyes watched Julia as she poured water into a tin cup.

She sat next to him and handed him the tin, but he seemed too weak. So she put the cup's rim to his mouth.

Pedro took a long drink with his eyes glued on her.

From his perspective, light from the cabin windows formed an angelic halo around her.

Julia took the cup from him and stood to put it away—

Pedro grabbed her hand so that she faced him. “Gracias, [H]ulia la Hooper.”

“It's Yoo-lee-ah. Besides, my brother is the hooper. I told you, I'm a cooper.” She turned away, but his grip tightened.

“What's in a name? That which we call a rose...”

Impressed, Julia put the cup down and sat. She finished the quote with him “...by any other name would smell as sweet.”

He lifted her hand to his lips with a soft kiss. “My mother left me with a love for Shakespeare.”

Agitated, Julia pulled her hand away. “My mother simply...left me.” She stood and turned her back to busy herself tidying. “My father was hard on her. And me. He never wanted a daughter. I wanted to show him I was useful... Worthy. Pappje could never find a cooper who did things his way. I wanted to prove I could. And I did.”

Julia turned to Pedro to see that he'd fallen asleep sitting up. She sighed and went to move him to a reclined position.

The door opened. Don Antonio, a broken man, stepped inside.

Julia glanced to see it was him, grateful for potential assistance. “Can you help me—”

“Get out.”

Julia turned to Don Antonio, offended. But when she saw how distraught he was, she immediately backed off and ran out.

Don Antonio went to Pedro and broke down in despair over him.

## **The Treasure Galleons**

Outside, Fermin ran up to the open cabin door. “Father! We haven’t found the ship yet, but we did find this—” At the door, Fermin held a small shark fin in his hand.

He dropped it when he saw his father sobbing over Pedro.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Fermin sat on the sand, head down in defeat, alone after a night full of dark thoughts.

He hadn't slept all night after seeing his father weeping over Pedro. At first he'd thought Pedro was dead, then when he realized his brother was still alive, he understood all the better.

Seemingly unaware that Fermin was even there, Don Antonio had whispered a prayer over Pedro, "Why him, God? Why not..."

When his father looked up at him with red, wet eyes, Fermin knew the truth in his father's heart: Don Antonio wished his sons could trade places.

In his mind, Pedro deserved to be the one standing in the door, while his discarded, misfit son belonged dying in a bed, or better yet buried on the ocean floor so that at least one of his other sons could still be alive.

## The Treasure Galleons

It had never been clearer to Fermin that Don Antonio's biggest regret was Fermin. If it weren't for him everything would be different.

And Fermin's mother would still be alive.

Fermin looked out at the water, wishing more than anything that his mother was there. *Why couldn't it have been me, Mamaíta? Why didn't you call me to be with you and let Papa have his other sons?*

A ray of sunlight beamed over the horizon, illuminating Fermin's becursed red hair.

He squeezed tears from his eyes and looked skyward, ready to pray. No words came, but he found himself wishing...what? For guidance? A second chance with his father? For Pedro?

He shook his head and looked back at the water where more sunrays spread across the glassy water.

A wayward beam shone to the northeast. It appeared to land somewhere over the spot where his father's ship was likely lost, though it could take months to find—

A glint of light caught Fermin's eye. He stood. *What is that?*

Fermin's heart raced. Something appeared to jut out from the water. He ran up the shore, eyes fixed.

Bernardo stood watch on the quarterdeck with the dog tied up at his feet.

Capitana whined when Fermin ran off.

After a mile or so, still running at full speed, Fermin pulled his shirt off and went to the rowboat they'd tied to a tree the day before, too exhausted to row or carry it back. Eyes fixed on the water, he grabbed a coil of rope from the boat, put it over his shoulder and tied the ring of a small empty powder keg to the rope's end.

He ran for the water and dove in. The moment his head came up he swam a straight line through the waveless water, towing the keg behind.

Fermin swam until he realized what drew him to the spot:  
A pelican floated on the surface.

He watched it fly off, then swam to where it had been and dove straight down with the coiled end of rope.

The keg drifted over him. Ripples gradually dissipated. The surface smoothed over.

Until...

Finally, the keg bobbed. Bobbed some more—

Fermin broke the surface with his fist followed by his whole body and a huge gasp. He shouted, triumphant, to the ocean, “I FOUND YOU, NEPTUNE!”

Under where he was treading, the rope from the barrel stretched down twenty feet to where it was now tied to Neptune’s trident.

The figurehead lay on its right side, still attached to the bow of the warship whose hull was torn open over the reef.

Broken chests of spilled treasure lay across the sea floor, some in a dotted line leading to deeper water, exactly as Toro had thrown them overboard.



Fermin swam toward shore where a blurry image of movement formed. He stopped swimming for a better look.

Three natives rummaged through the gear on the beach.

Then, Fermin heard barking. The dog charged them.

One panicked native took out his bow and shot an arrow.

The dog squealed and howled in pain.

Fermin swam as fast as he could as the natives ran off.

He ran from the surf to the dog who lay in a heap, whining. An arrow protruded through the dog’s hind leg.

Bernardo caught up, out of breath. “You’re both too fast for me.”

Relieved the dog was alive, Fermin broke the arrow, removed it and wrapped his discarded shirt around the wound.

Assured the dog would be okay, he looked up at Bernardo, beaming. He pointed out to the keg buoy. “I found her!”

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Survivors crowded around the injured dog on the wreckage deck, coddling and ministering. The dog enjoyed the attention.

Fermin, animated with excitement, relayed all to Don Antonio. “I marked it with a boyar. There’s treasure everywhere!”

Don Antonio eyed the distracted survivors. He ushered Fermin into the captain’s cabin where Pedro lay half aware.

Don Antonio closed the door behind Fermin. “Never speak of treasure in the open like that...” His reprimand turned to pride. “You’ve done well, Fermin.”

The compliment stunned Fermin for a moment. Then it emboldened him. “It won’t be easy. It’s over four fathoms down, but I have an idea how we can use the capstan to—”

“*We*’ won’t do anything, hijo mio.”

Still pumped on adrenaline, Fermin didn’t understand.

## The Treasure Galleons

“You’ve done more than I could ask, but those Indians could have killed you. And when word of your find reaches greedy ears, it will be unsafe for you.”

“But the Dutchmen are probably already out of la Florida by now.”

“It’s not just the Dutch. The treasure we carry can drive good men to villainy. You’re not safe here.”

Fermin’s shoulders sagged in disappointment.

“Word came this morning from the admiral in the northern camp. He’s ordered all women, children, elderly and infirmed to be transported to San Agustin.”

“I’m not a child. I can help—”

“You’re more needed elsewhere... You care for Pedro in *San Agustin*. Once we’re well defended, perhaps you can return. But until then—”

Crushed, Fermin’s hand went impulsively to his scarred chest. “Why are you forever sending me away?”

Don Antonio grabbed Fermin’s wrist and pulled his hand away from his chest. “I almost lost you once. I’ll not lose you again.”

Don Antonio tried to pull Fermin in for a hug, but Fermin wrenched from his grasp and shuffled out, leaving Don Antonio alone with the harsh image of the king staring at him.



Fermin hugged his goodbye to the dog who was tied to the wreckage. He then moped his way to the waiting single-sail boat.

Pedro, somewhat alert, sat in the hull, propped up next to Julia who sat with her back to the bow.

Fermin took his place facing them, surprised to see Pedro reach for Julia’s hand when she touched his shoulder.

Behind them, from the bow, Bernardo eyed Julia with suspicion.

Some of the surviving men remaining behind shoved the boat off to help the rowers gain momentum across the breakers.

Don Antonio watched, stoic as ever while the dog whimpered.

From the boat that picked up momentum whenever a wind caught its jury-rigged sail, Fermin could see the extent of devastation the storm had done. They passed a few camps with flimsy shelters, mostly abandoned now. Their several hundreds of survivors trekked up the beach to Admiral Salmon's camp, or to keep going to St. Augustine if they had the strength. On foot it would take many days while by boat it would be fewer than two.

Before reaching Salmon's camp, Fermin spotted no less than two scouts on horseback galloping in opposite directions. There had been four horses to survive from his father's ship until one was injured, slaughtered and used for food in the harsh reality of the circumstance.

Drawing nearer to the camp, a storm-battered longboat was being loaded with elderly and injured people to be evacuated behind Fermin's boat. Women and children stood by hoping for a spot on the best way to escape the hell they were in.

A reminder of that hell came into view where mounds of endless graves, ten times the size of that at the *Holandesa* camp, reminded all of the human toll.

Bernardo informed them, "Admiral Salmon estimates well over eight hundred have perished. But scores die each day. It may well be a thousand by now."

Fermin was stunned at the number. "How many were aboard in Havana?"

"Not counting stowaways?" He smirked at Fermin who hung his head in shame. "Twenty-five hundred souls in all."

The heaviness of their situation weighed heavy on Fermin as he looked back to shore.

At the south end of the camp, much like the *Holandesa*, Salmon also had the luxury of cabins. A broken portion of the quarter deck had washed ashore from General Ubilla's, only it had not fared quite as well as what were now Don Antonio's headquarters. Sail cloth covered damaged corners of the cabins. On the small bit of decking still attached, Fermin saw the elderly yet regal Admiral Salmon step out from a cabin. He acknowledged the passing boat with a tip of his head, to which Bernardo saluted with a tip of his battered tricorne hat.

## The Treasure Galleons

The camp itself was alive with activity. Men stood in the surf fishing, women busied themselves turning what little they had into edible and wearable victuals, and already Admiral Salmon had many men diving to Fermin's right where a mast protruded, marking the spot of Ubilla's capitana.

Likewise, a mast with a crow's nest had washed ashore and was erected as a lookout post in the center of camp, higher than the palms behind it. Men waved to Fermin and the others.

Fermin was the only one to wave back.

Julia had searched the beach with her eyes intently, but somewhere along the way had given up and moved her vacant stare out toward the southeastern horizon.

The trip took its toll on Pedro.

After passing Salmon's camp, an exodus of women and children, flanked by men for protection, trekked on foot up the soft sand beach.

Fermin wondered how many of them could possibly make it alive over 150 miles under the harsh Florida sun. He looked down at Pedro, who lay with increasing fever in the hull. Fermin fanned him with the dried shark fin he'd saved, then fanned himself.

Sensing something, Julia turned to find Bernardo's angry, accusing eyes upon her. He leaned in for only her to hear. "Your father will be brought to justice for his misdeeds, Miss Popa. And I'll see to it you hang with him when I prove that you've aided him. Woman or no."

Her gaze moved back out to sea. Anger and fear welling.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

*Castillo de San Marcos*, a fully functioning fortress on the water's edge of a natural harbor formed by small barrier islands, stood tall in the only clearing Fermin had seen since he was washed up on Florida's shores. A quaint cobblestone town of simple, sturdy houses surrounded the fortress's square walls, which served as the only protection from the hurricane that had pummeled them a week earlier.

To the cadence of beating drums that echoed throughout the region, weary survivors migrated from the shore through a drawbridge entrance to an inner courtyard.

Curious townspeople of every race, age and status watched from all around and some above along the ramparts and parapets.

From his perch over the drawbridge, where his voice was sure to be heard by the most people possible, Governor Corcoles proclaimed to all: "Good people of Spain and beyond, we, the people of San Agustin, mourn with you your losses..."

## The Treasure Galleons

His voice reverberated in the entrance tunnel below where nuns and clergy rushed in and out of side barracks. Here is where Bernardo and others carried Pedro before leaving to help other survivors.

Pedro lay in a bunk at the far end of the long barracks trough below a high window that allowed Fermin and Julia to sit out of the way of busy nuns tending the wounded while they listened to the governor directly above them.

“As governor, I’ve ordered the royal treasurer to open the warehouse containing maize and corn meal to help survivors both here and at the wreck sites along the Barra de Ayz.”

A nun briefly checked on Pedro with a shake of her head.

The governor continued, “The good people of *San Agustin* have all surrendered any seaworthy vessels to ensure both safe passage along the intercoastal as well as to prevent any temptations for pillaging the wrecks, which I assure will be prosecuted with extreme haste and severity.”

Overcome, Julia ran out of the room.

Someone out in the courtyard shouted, “What of Indians, governor? Aren’t they hostile?”

“We live peacefully here among the Yamasee and Guale, but there is concern over the Ayz to the south. They are...volatile.”

A murmur arose throughout the fortress.

Fermin looked at Pedro who seemed oblivious to it all.



With nighttime blanketing the nearly empty camp, the wealthy man snored on a bunk in the officers’ cabin. Others slept on the floor for the promise that they would be rewarded for their sacrifice upon rescue.

Above them one man stood guard on the quarterdeck with the sole musket.

The dog whined at the closed door of the captain’s cabin.

Wide awake in the darkness of the cabin, Don Antonio ignored the whines until he heard paw scratching.

“Go away before I turn you into dinner.”

The whining and scratching grew more incessant.

Annoyed, Don Antonio stood and whipped the door open.

“Even if you did save my sons...”

The dog looked up with big puppy eyes.

Don Antonio wavered. He stepped out past the sleeping dog and looked around the serene, eerie camp.

A noise drew his attention to the woods. Another noise in another direction.

His hand went to the pistola at his belt... Silence.

He looked up at the guard who shrugged that he saw nothing.

Don Antonio pulled the dog inside, then closed the door.



Under a beam of moonlight from the high window, Julia sat alone with Pedro, holding his hand.

His eyes tightly shut, he endured a wave of pain.

Julia let him squeeze her hand until the pain subsided. “I’m here, Don Pedro.”

His eyes fluttered open. He smiled at the sight of her.

Julia smiled back. “Fermin and I have asked a few people... No one here seems to have anything by Shakespeare on hand.”

Pedro’s voice was weak, but he mused in good humor, “Spaniards don’t yet know what they are missing. They reject the bard for his Englishness.” He sighed to chastise himself. “Just as I dismissed you for your Dutchness.”

“I think I was unaware you’d ‘dismissed’ me.”

“If I did, I was a fool.” Pedro turned serious and reached for her face. “Gracias. Before death comes to grin on me, there’s something I must...” He pulled her in and surprised her with a kiss on the lips.

Overcome with a fear that he was saying goodbye, Julia pulled away and assured him, “I won’t let you die, Don Pedro. I promise.”

With more strength than he’d shown the entire week, he propped himself on his elbow and kissed her again, longer, more deeply.

This time she returned the kiss.

## **The Treasure Galleons**

“A ministering angel my lady be.”  
They smiled at each other.

Fermin stood in the aisle of bunks. He'd seen everything.

Did Pedro know what her father and brother had done? Did she even know? He couldn't wrap his head around his brother kissing the daughter of Zaleme's murderer.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Fermin knelt on the empty bed across from Pedro, etching a detail of Pedro's warship into the soft shell-stone wall so Pedro could have a good view of it.

Pedro winced as he awakened with a shot of pain. "Julia?"

Fermin rushed to Pedro's side. "She went to get our food ration."

Pedro pushed himself up to sit, stronger, but still in pain. "The greatest evil is physical pain. Distract me." He looked at the etching. "What are you drawing?"

"You don't recognize it?"

"Your knowledge of riggings could be improved." He endured another surge of pain. "What else? What's in there?" He pointed to Fermin's new sketchbook on the opposite bed.

Fermin retrieved the book and sat by Pedro, but his thoughts were elsewhere. "Do you plan to marry her?"

## The Treasure Galleons

Pedro held back a chuckle. “My only plans are for today. Maybe tomorrow...if it comes.”

Fermin looked at him, horrified by his cavalier attitude.

Pedro swiped the book from him and flipped through it. “I see that you are thinking of tomorrow. You hope to impress the king with these, no? Maybe he’ll introduce you to the artist who painted his portrait on *la Holandesa*?” Pedro slowed through the last few pages: pelican drawings. He stopped on the last page. Stared at it, growing emotional.

It was Fermin’s rendition of the Pelican in Her Piety.

“Fermin, before I die...”

Fermin objected—

“I must say this. Manuel always wanted to, but he waited too long.”

At the other end of the room a covered body was carted off by two clergymen.

With a sense of urgency, Pedro said, “Papa needs you.”

“No. He sent me here to be with you.”

“Yes. But he needs you...here.” Pedro pointed to Fermin’s heart.

Fermin fell into a spiral of emotions, almost as if he’d seen a ghost. “Manuel speaks through you.”

“I pray he does...”

Out on the staircase of the inner courtyard, Julia carried a plate of cornmeal from the ration station above down past the barracks window when Pedro’s voice stopped her cold.

“You imagine Papa hates you, no?”

Fermin rubbed his chest as he scowled at Pedro. “Imagine? Are these scars not real?”

Pedro sighed. “No more real than the scars left by your words.”

Julia leaned back against the wall, listening as Pedro continued, “Since the day Mama was taken from us, the two of you have been more like enemies than familia.”

The words spoke to Julia.

Fermin’s eyes welled with tears. “I know, but... Why do I never feel that I belong? Why can’t the rest of you just...forgive me? Then maybe I could forgive Father.”

“Forgive...him?”

As Fermin rubbed his chest, a revelation appeared to wash over Pedro.

Julia held her breath as Pedro spoke as if directly to her. “You need Papa, and I assure you, he needs you. Especially now.”

Julia, emotional, dropped the cornmeal and ran down the steps.

Fermin’s tears came in a barrage of pent-up emotion. “But...he hates me. Ever since...” He couldn’t speak the words he’d so often thought in private.

“Since Mama fell from the rock?”

Fermin nodded. “She was looking for me. It was my fault. And when Papa found her, he knew it. He became *furioso*.” Fermin opened his shirt to the scars on his chest. “He whipped me.” He fell into sobs. “And I deserved it.”

With the strength of his hand on a sword, Pedro gripped Fermin’s arm. He waited for Fermin to look up at him. “No, Ferminito. Papa never beat you.”

Confused, and a bit angry, Fermin tried to wrest his arm away, surprised that Pedro would not let go. “He did. I remember it...”

Fermin thought back to that terrible day...

## The Treasure Galleons

Below the big rock cliff, their mother's fiery red hair blew around her face as her body lay broken on the wet rock covered by a thin layer rising-tide.

Fermin had run off to the tide pool without telling anyone so he could practice his swimming to impress both his parents. When he saw her there, he ran from the water to her. He knelt by her and pushed on her as if to wake her.

The water around her turned red with her blood.

*"You did that yourself,"* Pedro's voice broke into Fermin's memory.

Fermin recalled picking up a sharp shell and looking at it.

*"The story of the pelican was your favorite. You made her tell it over and over."*

Fermin cut his chest with the broken shell. He cut over and over until he bled enough that Fermin could fill his cupped hands.

He tried desperately to feed his dead mother his blood. When she didn't respond, he cut himself some more until he heard a voice behind him...

Fermin crumpled into a sobbing heap by the bed. "I tried to bring her back to life."

Pedro rubbed Fermin's head.

"How could I remember it so wrong?"

"It wasn't your fault. It wasn't anyone's. You were too young to understand. Or remember."

Fermin pulled away to look up at Pedro. "Father was there. He came up behind me. He had a horsewhip, and..."

Fermin tried to remember and felt greater shame as it slowly came back to him. Don Antonio had ridden his horse there. Of course he had a whip with him. "He pulled me away from her and..." Fermin remembered the horrified expression on his father's face.

"He thought you had fallen with her when he saw all the blood, but then he realized what you'd done." Pedro appeared spent. His voice was barely a whisper. "We were to never speak of it for fear you might hurt yourself again."

"Why did he let me blame him for so long? I thought it was him. I thought he beat me for running off—"

Fermin sat up with a sudden resolve. “I have to go to him...” He looked at Pedro, who was pale. “But I can’t leave you.”

Pedro, with tears in his eyes, smiled his encouragement to Fermin. “I have Julia. It will strengthen me to know you’re with Papa. You must go.”

Conflicted, Fermin finally nodded.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Fermin hurried up the staircase outside the barracks, not noticing Julia's dropped plate. Atop the parapet, he spotted Bernardo at a food line and ran to him. "Señor Bernardo! You must take me back to my father!"

"Señor Bernardo is otherwise engaged, young man," the silver-wigged silver master said.

Fermin, now in a fresh oversized shirt, clean trousers and tricorne hat, waited with Bernardo while the silver master closed up a shop then walked away from them down the cobblestone street with his gilded cane. "I've no time for this. The governor commissioned me to take account at the wrecks, and Señor Bernardo is to lead us—"

Bernardo spoke up. "Could the boy not come as far as Admiral Salmon's camp, señor?"

## The Treasure Galleons

“Why should I give up room in my canoe—”

“It’s my father’s greatest desire that I become a silver master like you,” Fermin said in the most flattering tone possible before adding a lie. “And he wants me to apprentice with only the best...”

Fermin ran in front of the withered man to block his path. He stuck out his hand in the friendliest way possible. “Fermin de Echeverz y Gonzalez, at your service, señor.”

The silver master was ready to dismiss him when he realized, “Did you say Echeverz?”

Fermin smiled and nodded.



A heavy mist covered the serene water of the intercoastal river.

A plumed party of eight dignitaries rode in two canoes near the left shoreline of the expansive waterway, each with a Native-born helmsman and two native paddlers, all in Spanish clothing.

Bernardo and another officer served as military escorts.

Fermin rode backward facing the silver master in the same canoe as Bernardo.

“Why do you think you’d make a good silver master?”

“Um...I never really thought about it.” Why did his father think he would? “I suppose I’m good with numbers...and I have very neat handwriting.”

“That’s a start. Did you do any accounting for your father in Portobelo?”

Fermin thought a moment and realized... “No. I never really did...anything for my father in Portobelo.”

He turned a regretful gaze off toward the surrounding jungle.

A shadow caught his eye. He scanned the trees...

Behind them, Fermin clearly saw a large, war-painted native step from the tree line. It was just as he had imagined when he first awoke after the storm. Or had he imagined it?

The native helmsman saw him too and pointed, frantic. “AYZ!”

The other natives in the party looked around in a panic. They paddled faster.

Bernardo and the other militiaman raised their muskets.

The helmsman in the other boat ran to the back of the boat, nearly tipping it, and used his oar to punt them faster.

Fermin saw more shadows running parallel. "They're cutting us off!"

"They will eat us!" the helmsman cried.

"What do you mean?" the silver master asked.

"*Canibalis!*"

An especially menacing, large tribal chief stood in the water up to his knees, and blocked Fermin's canoe.

Bernardo aimed his musket at the chief whose voice boomed, "*Datiao!*"

The helmsman dove from his perch so that Fermin's boat glided right toward the tribal chief.

Fermin looked at the huge chief with more curiosity than fear.

The frightened silver master turned to the paddlers. "What did he say?"

The helmsman ran through the water to the other canoe. "Only the Devil knows their evil tongue—"

"*Datiao?*" Fermin asked, making eye contact with the chief.

The tribal chief nodded as he caught the drifting boat's bow.

Fermin said, "*Uara...kassequa?*"

Again, the chief nodded.

Fermin turned in time to see the silver master draw his sword. "*Ua!* No! Put down your weapons!" To Bernardo he said, "They are friends." To the chief he said, "*Guaitiao? Han?*"

The chief nodded but kept wary eyes on the Spaniards.

To his astonished audience, Fermin explained, "I know their language, or some of it. It's spoken by the natives where I live."

Finally, the men lowered their weapons.

The chief smiled and said in Arawakan, "You are a young braveheart. You must be the shark boy?"

"What did he say?" asked the shaken silver master.

Fermin wondered how to translate. "Um...he called me shark boy."

Dubious, the silver master asked, "You're sure you speak their language?"

The chief proceeded to rattle off a string of fast words while gesturing down the river and making faces at the silver master.

Fermin sheepishly answered the silver master, "Yes...?"

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Capitana lay at Don Antonio's feet in the shade of the table. The dog growled very low, tense.

"I can't wait to slaughter that dog." Xander paced before Don Antonio at the table where the musket and pistola lay empty of the ammunition next to them. "This jerky tastes like leather."

The rest of the healthy surviving men who'd stayed behind with Don Antonio sat at the rails under the watchful eyes of the armed Dutchmen.

Ludolf emerged from the captain's cabin. "No charts or drawings. I think he's telling the truth."

Xander glared at Don Antonio. "Perhaps you haven't started diving yet, but you certainly know where you wrecked your own ship." He turned to his men and spoke to them in Dutch, still unaware that Don Antonio, like Fermin, could understand every word. "Come, lads. Let's go fishing."

Xander kicked the leg of Don Antonio's chair.

Don Antonio, hands bound, stood and faced Xander.

## The Treasure Galleons

Xander, unflinching, shoved Don Antonio to lead the way. He glanced at the dog as they stepped down from the splintered deck. “Leave that mongrel here. If the heat doesn’t turn his flesh rotten, we’ll eat him when we return.”

Ludolf made sure the dog’s lead was secured to the table leg before they all marched northward up the beach.



With an expansive view of the almost full moon reflecting off the intercoastal water, a tribe of Ayz natives roasted a carved-up baby manatee for the silver master’s plumed party. All around them, natives danced and dazzled them with a fire show to the beating of drums.

Fermin was especially mesmerized by the pretty girls who danced before them wearing skins that left very little to Fermin’s imagination.

Next to Fermin, Bernardo was both captivated and suspicious. “You’re sure they won’t eat us?”

Fermin shook his head as he ripped a fatty, tough piece of meat with his teeth and answered with a full mouth... “They want us away as much as we wish to leave *la Florida*.”

Somewhat assured and equally ravenous, Bernardo ate.

“The chief promises to help us hunt, and he’ll provide men to help dive my father’s wreck until we find enough treasure to take to España.”

“It seems too good to be true.”

“As long as we don’t settle here, he’s our friend.”

“Do you think they know about Menendez and the conquistadors?”

“I’m not going to ask.”

A healthy young man ran from the darkness straight to the chief, and the music came to a halt. He spoke in a frenzy with lots of hand signs and pointed to Fermin.

Fermin rose and went to the chief. He listened for a time, then turned, distressed, to all. “‘White-headed monsters’ have besieged my father’s camp!”

Bernardo gave a questioning look.

“The Dutchmen!”

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Outside the captain's cabin, the formidable, aging Admiral Salmon shook his head at Fermin, the natives and Bernardo. "I can't spare any men until we receive more supplies and arms."

Salmon regarded the tribal chief and the young runner with seeming anthropological interest. "But we'll be happy to put the savages to work on the wrecks immediately."

"Did you not hear me?" Fermin said in frustration. "The Dutchmen will kill my father."

"Let's pray not."

"Pray?" Fermin thought a moment. "And they'll steal the treasure."

"Then they'll be hanged, and we'll have our treasure back."

"Only if you catch them, and by then, they'll have slit my father's throat!"

The native runner asked Fermin in Arawakan, "Is chief from enemy tribe?"

## The Treasure Galleons

Fermin glared at Admiral Salmon. "It's a good question. Whose side are you on, admiral? Why do you not hasten to assemble a rescue party for your highest-ranking officer?"

Salmon gave his full attention to Fermin. "Have you looked around, son? We are great in number, but small in strength. These men are exhausted."

"So you'll just let these villains take the king's treasury and murder my father...because they're tired?"

"There are many harsh realities in this wilderness, young Fermin. However..." Salmon looked over the natives again. "If you can use your language skills to convince the Ayz to dive our wrecks, our men will have time to rest and renew their strength."

"They've already agreed to dive my father's capitana."

"Perfect. Merely a change in coordinates."

"So you'll send a rescue party? Tonight?"

"These men need days, not hours, to renew their strength."

"You can't be serious—"

"Of course, by then we may have received the long-awaited reinforcements from Havana. Divers, equipment, victuals, medicine. And, we hope, many armed men. You simply must be patient."

Fermin was beside himself. "Patience will get my father killed." He stared at the admiral with disbelief. He guffawed and looked off. His eye caught something by Salmon's cabin door. "Alright, admiral."

Salmon nodded, satisfied, and went back inside his cabin where a speaking trumpet stood on end by the entrance flap.

Under his breath, Fermin said, "I'll use my language skills."

Men sat in clusters around fires, eating their rations, fighting off mosquitos.

Fermin stepped through the camp with the trumpet in hand.

He searched for a spot until he saw...

The mast with its crow's nest had no lookout at the moment.

Fermin looked up...hesitated, then ran up the rope shroud.

Once atop, Fermin's eyes rolled with fear as he clung to the mast high above the camp.

He took a deep breath and moved to the edge... He could feel the mast tilt. He grabbed a secure line and stepped to the edge and looked down.

Bernardo and his senior officer Mendez ate with several others around a fire. Among them was Francisco, Don Antonio's chief pilot, and other familiar faces from Don Antonio's fleet.

Fermin aimed the trumpet at them, but at first they only heard a distant muted sound until a hush befell the camp as Fermin's words became clearer to all...

"...and I know you are men of honor."

Fermin gazed down upon the myriad faces looking up at him. He wasn't sure which made him feel sicker, the height or the attention of several hundred listeners. "I would never ask a soldier to disobey orders, but..." Fermin choked up as he thought of Manuel for a moment. "...sometimes you have to follow your heart in order to do your duty."

He aimed the trumpet directly at Francisco. "General Echeverz and innocent survivors are under siege."

Murmurs flourished.

"Mutinous, murdering, thieving cutthroats have overtaken them six leagues to the south."

A man somewhere in the sea of faces shouted, "Six leagues is a full day's march...on solid ground. Without the heat."

Many mumbled their agreement.

"With longboats we can be there by morning, well rested, with firearms and ammunition," Fermin reasoned. "They are only fifteen in number."

Admiral Salmon marched to the mast and addressed the camp in a booming voice that required no amplification. "Any man who disobeys my orders will be fined five hundred ducados and receive twelve lashes." To Fermin he ordered, "Stop this nonsense...or I'll have you put in chains."

Fermin lowered the trumpet. He looked at Bernardo and said in quiet voice, "He's my father." He lifted the trumpet back up and shouted to Mendez, "He's your commander." To Francisco he pleaded, "How can you abandon him?"

"NOT—ONE—MORE—WORD!" Salmon was furious.

Fermin relented and stepped to the first foothold. He stopped and aimed the trumpet toward Bernardo et al. "While other ships

## **The Treasure Galleons**

lost their crews, Don Antonio managed to lay his ship on her side so that you could escape Neptune's wrath!"

More murmurs flourished as Fermin descended. He safely landed before two waiting guards who marched him away to a mix of accolades, taunts and "boos."



## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Behind the wreckage of Ubilla's cabins, Fermin sat chained to a tree by a bulky iron on his ankle.

The camp appeared to be asleep, save a few guards on the perimeters and up in the crow's nest.

In a chair facing him, a guard nodded off.

"Don Fermin!" A whisper came from the jungle brush behind him.

The guard woke with a snort, looked around, then nodded back off.

Julia, dressed as a man, stepped out of the berm. She carried an adz, a hoe-shaped axe used by coopers.

Before Fermin could process anything, she raised the adz, ready to strike the ankle iron.

Fermin moved his foot and motioned "No!"

"Don't worry," she whispered. "I never miss..."

## The Treasure Galleons

Fermin held her off. He looked at the guard...still asleep. With some effort, Fermin maneuvered the iron off his ankle. "I was just waiting for the right moment."

Julia grabbed his hand and pulled him up to run into the brush.

Safely hidden with a view of three horses tethered nearby, Julia and Fermin watched a large group of men in a heated argument over a bonfire close to the water.

Fermin and Julia's whispers went unheard thanks to the surf. "How did you get here?"

"I know how to take care of myself."

Fermin looked at her masculine attire and the adz in her hand. "You're not exactly the angel my brother thinks you are. Are you?"

Julia glared at him a moment. "I'm not like my father, if that's what you mean." She softened her tone a bit. "Instead of asking how I got here, shouldn't you ask me why?"

"I assume it's to help your father and brother steal the treasure."

She looked at him, ready to argue, but held her tongue.

"Well, I doubt you came to help me."

"I didn't know you were here until you made a spectacle of yourself. But now I'm helping you, so—"

"If we're both here," Fermin realized, "who is caring for Pedro?"



At Pedro's bedside in the barracks, the haggard physician finished "letting" Pedro's blood into a bowl.

Behind the physician a priest and two homely nuns administered last rites in Latin.

A flurry of noisy activity at the front of the room interrupted the ritual.

Soldiers carried seven injured men in on litters. "Physician! You're needed."

Racked with pain and delirium, Pedro screamed out.

The physician stood and looked at Pedro's amputated foot, then at the horrified nuns. "Sometimes what is not there hurts more than if it were." He went to tend to the new arrivals.

One nun took Pedro's hand to comfort him.

"[Y]ulia."

The nuns looked at each other.

The physician went to the beds where sunburnt, dehydrated, scraggly bearded men on litters lay in agony.

"What's happened?" the physician asked.

The soldier shook his head. "They drifted many days before the sea landed them a hundred miles north."

One of the injured cried out through a raspy voice, "*Por favor*, you must tend to Señor Echeverz first. We would not be alive if not for him."

The physician was confused. "Echeverz? But he's been here—"

"I think he means that one..." The soldier pointed to a large man struggling to stand from his litter.

It was Toro. And he was mad as a lanced bull when he saw the priest hovering over Pedro. "Get that deathmonger away from my brother!"

The physician went to calm Toro who fought to get past him to Pedro.

The soldier pulled the physician away and another soldier helped Toro limp over to Pedro's bunk.

The priest and nuns stepped back as Toro fell to his knees beside Pedro's bed. He took Pedro's hand. "I tried to come sooner. You weren't planning to go without saying goodbye to your favorite brother?"

Finally, Pedro's hand squeezed Toro's and his eyes slit open.

Toro flashes his toothless grin behind sunburnt lips.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER FORTY

A full moon over the ocean revealed two silhouettes moving down the beach...

Julia and Fermin galloped on horseback.

Fermin held on for dear life like a novice while Julia rode like an expert.



At the site of Don Antonio's ship, three campfires surrounded a tent, a longboat, a mule and several barrels.

Under armed guard, Don Antonio and the other captives dug to create eight-foot mounds of sand that served as fortress walls to the

## The Treasure Galleons

north and south. Some of the Dutchmen worked to place tins on strings as an alarm in the scrub behind them.

Xander and Ludolf, well armed, sat on barrels and looked out to the crashing sea with a sense of anticipation.

Xander spoke low, in Dutch, out of others' hearing. "Pray for a calm morning. I want us in that longboat with at least two chests on our way to the Biminis by nightfall tomorrow."

"How will we get Julia from Saint Augustine?" Ludolf asked.

Xander gave him a chilling shrug of indifference.

Julia led Fermin on foot toward a dim glow of firelight. "They may only be fifteen in number, but they fight as if they are fifty. That's why Captain Jennings wanted us in his armada."

"Who's Captain Jennings?"

She stopped to look at Fermin, struck by his youth and naiveté in that moment. "You must ask your brother someday."

They could now see the mound of sand blocking the firelight that reflected off the berm foliage.

A sentry with a musket patrolled.

Julia and Fermin moved into the brush for cover.

"I'm going in. Wait here for your father to come out."

Fermin gave her a mistrustful shake of the head.

Julia sighed. They'd been over this already while they tied up the horses a mile back.

Don Antonio and the others were just a means to an end for her father. If she didn't intervene, she feared he would kill them, and there would be no hope of sparing his or her brother's life.

The only hope for both of their fathers was to make a trade. Not of people, but of promises. If she could talk to her father and convince him to let the Spaniards go unharmed, Fermin would ask the court for leniency should they be brought to trial. This would make Fermin and his father worth more alive to her family than dead.

But for this to work, it required as much of her trust as it did of Fermin's.

"I promise. I'll do as we agreed. It isn't about treasure anymore. I just want to spare my father the noose before it's too late."

Wary, Fermin nodded. "Fine, but only if no one gets hurt."

Julia stepped out of the brush, but Fermin pulled her back by the sleeve of her masculine clothes.

"He'll think you're a man and shoot you before he recognizes you."

Julia thought a moment.

Fermin watched the sentry lean against the mound.

Bored, the sentry lit a pipe and moved to throw the match to the water—

His eyes froze on a shadow coming out of the water.

So did Fermin's.

Julia's naked silhouette looked like a mermaid walking out of the water. She held her arms behind her back.

The pipe dropped from the sentry's mouth. "*Een zeemeermin?*" He held the lit match up and made out her face. "Julia?"

Julia smiled seductively, then raised her adz and struck him with the blunt edge.

The sentry fell unconscious.

"*Mijn apologie, Cornelius.*" Julia motioned for wide-eyed Fermin to come out of the berm. "I assume you meant no one gets seriously hurt."

Fermin tried not to look as he handed her clothes.

While she re-dressed, she whispered to him. "Whatever happens, once your father is free...you must both run. They'll lose their advantage, and this ends. Okay?"

Fermin nodded and bent to pick up the sentry's musket.

Julia was quicker. She snatched it up. "There'll be no need for guns."

Before he could object, she walked to the edge of the mound and disappeared around it, musket in hand.

Fermin put his hand on the hilt of the marquis' knife hidden at his belt beneath his oversized shirt. "I don't want to fight any pirates." He took a deep breath and looked at the reflected firelight. "But I will if I must, Papa."

Angry voices broke through the night air, followed by shouts. Then a shot.

## **The Treasure Galleons**

“COME SHOW YOURSELF!” Xander ordered from within his sand fortress.

Fermin froze with fear.

“SHOW YOURSELF NOW OR GENERAL ECHEVERZ DIES.”

Fermin peeked over the mound, dismayed at what he saw.



## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Within their sandy fortress walls, Fermin saw Julia standing by Ludolf who aimed the sentry's musket at Don Antonio. His arm was bleeding from a gunshot wound.

The other Dutchmen trained their weapons on the ten survivors.

Xander stepped up to the mound and pointed the smoking pistola at Fermin's face. He smiled and...

Pulled the trigger!

Nothing happened.

Fermin sighed relief as Xander laughed and reloaded as if to teach Fermin how. Xander gestured with a headnod. "Come join *la fiesta*, Don Fermin."

Fermin, deflated, climbed over and slid down the mound.

"I hear you're quite the swimmer." Xander motioned for him to join Don Antonio. "Rest up. You have much to do in the morning."

Fermin, accusatory eyes fixed on Julia, sat with Don Antonio.

Julia hid her face.

## The Treasure Galleons

Fermin was glad to see her shame, but he was distracted by his father's tight hug.

Xander aimed the reloaded pistola at Don Antonio and Fermin and ordered Ludolf, "Go get Cornelius and place a guard." To Julia, he said without emotion, "You've done well. Go and sleep."

Julia slunk to the tent, still hiding her face.



Still tied up on the *Holandesa's* deck, the frantic dog dragged the table to the deck's splintery edge until it tipped over and got stuck on a railing. Now the table was wedged in such a way that the line started to choke Capitana.



Don Antonio dozed where he sat, Fermin huddled at his side.

An alert guard noisily replaced a sleepy guard nearby.

Fermin awoke with a start, which wakened Don Antonio. He looked down at his son. They looked each other in the eye. As if for the first time.

Don Antonio spoke in hushed tones. "Why did you come, Ferminito? Has something happened to Pedro?"

Fermin shook his head. "He sent me here, but..." Tears welled in his eyes. "I wish I could trade places with him. He would've known what to do."

As Don Antonio searched for words, Fermin confessed, "I heard you praying... I wish it had been me instead of Pedro too."

At first Don Antonio didn't comprehend. "What are you saying?"

"I know I've been a terrible son. All this time I thought... Well, I understand why you wish it had been Pedro and the others who survived instead of me."

Don Antonio was stunned. He thought back to his prayer and realized he must have spoken aloud. “No, Ferminito. I could never wish this on you.”

Tears welled in Don Antonio’s eyes. “It was *me*. I wished God had taken *me* instead of any of my sons.” He pulled Fermin close. “I thank God every day that you’re still here.”

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

At the first sign of morning light, Ludolf dragged the loaded longboat toward the glassy water.

Xander yanked Fermin awake by his collar and ripped him from Don Antonio's arms, then towed him toward the boat.

Startled, then enraged, Don Antonio stood and rushed Xander. But Ludolf was quicker. He tripped him.

Don Antonio tumbled and rolled next to a sleeping Dutchman.

Wincing, he clutched his wounded arm while he grabbed the sleeping man's sword and stood in challenge to Ludolf. To Xander he shouted, "Release my son, or I'll dispatch yours."

Ludolf watched Xander turn, Fermin in his grasp.

Eager for a fight, Ludolf drew his sword and faced off against Don Antonio, just as his son had done with his father that fateful day on the Spanish Main.

Ludolf, ever impatient, was first to strike. To his surprise, Don Antonio proved to be very skilled and agile.

## The Treasure Galleons

But Ludolf had youth on his side, and used it against Don Antonio's age...and his wound, charging him high so that Don Antonio was forced to exert more energy with his wounded arm raised.

The sleeping camp arose around them to watch the duel unfold.

Julia emerged from the tent, distraught at the sight.

Despite his efforts to gain the upper hand, Ludolf remained on the defensive until he remembered Pedro's fancy move that had disarmed his father. He tried to employ the same circular maneuver, but Don Antonio saw it coming, evaded, and caught Ludolf's ribs with a small but stinging slice.

Ludolf turned on Don Antonio, landing a punch square into his bullet wound.

In agony, Don Antonio rushed Ludolf with blow after blow displaying his superior swordsmanship until Ludolf was disarmed and fell back on his buttocks.

Don Antonio held him at sword point and ordered Xander, "Let him go. NOW!"

Xander wavered...still holding Fermin.

His father's hesitation struck Ludolf as betrayal. Fueled with rage, Ludolf dug his hands into the sand, then whipped a handful at Don Antonio's face.

Blinded, Don Antonio foundered. "Fermin...RUN!"

Fermin wrestled free from Xander and ran, but not to get away. He ran *to* Don Antonio.

With a dozen pistols aimed at them, Don Antonio dropped the sword and clung to Fermin.

Ludolf watched them with jealous eyes as his father ranted, "Just a spoiled nobleman who's never known the pain of want. You think yourself better. But you were born to good fortune and accepted your lot. The better man doesn't accept his fate... HE TAKES IT."

Xander pulled the broken gold wing on its chain from his shirt and showed it to his men who cheered for him.



## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Xander and Ludolf rowed Fermin to where the keg still floated over Don Antonio's wrecked ship. Ludolf dropped a small anchor.

Xander ordered Fermin, "Remove your shirt."

Fermin remembered the knife still hidden at his belt.

"I...I'd rather dive with it on."

Impatient, Xander tossed Fermin a looped rope. "Fine. Tie this around your mangled chest."

Don Antonio sat, helpless, under guard of a tired but alert Dutchman. He watched the boat out on the water. His sand-scratched eyes couldn't make much out across the distance.

Julia emerged from the tent with cloth strips and water. She went to Don Antonio to clean and dress his gunshot wound while he used the water to clean sand from his eyes.

## The Treasure Galleons

“I’m sorry,” Julia said, head down.

“You did your best to stop them.”

Don Antonio acknowledged the bruise on the side of her face, given to her by Xander’s backhand the night before when she’d tried to talk to him.

“I should’ve known. My father won’t let anything...or anyone get in his way when he wants something.”

They shared mutual sympathy before she stepped away.

Don Antonio stood to watch the boat on the water.

The Dutchman guarding him cocked his pistol.

Don Antonio ignored him and stepped to the water’s edge to watch.

Fermin stood in the boat, tied in a medieval-looking tangle of chains and ropes with no hope of escape.

Xander eyed him. “You know what to do?”

Fermin, terrified, held up a rope tied to a hook and nodded. He moved to dive in when Ludolf shoved him so that he landed with a belly flop.

Fermin went down fast, weighted by the chains.

He swam for the first upright treasure chest he saw. It had a broken latch, so he opened it quickly to verify its contents. It was filled to the brim with shimmering coins. Torn sacks of silver on the right, shredded sacks of gold on the left. In the middle, an untied velvet sack of colorful gems.

He threaded the hook through the rings on both ends, then hooked it to the line in a triangle shape to secure it.

As instructed, he tugged twice on the line attached to him. Nothing happened.

He looked up to see Xander and Ludolf looking down.

He turned to the line attached to the box and tugged twice. It immediately went taut and the chest rose in the water.

Fermin grabbed one of the rings before it was too late and rode up with the chest.

Once it reached the surface, Ludolf tried to pull the chest up, but it was too heavy. Xander joined him. Still too heavy.

Ludolf spotted Fermin hanging on the chest. "Look!"

Xander stood and hammered Fermin's hand with a loose chain.

Fermin let go and disappeared below the surface.

Ludolf panicked. "He has to get the second chest!"

"He's caused enough trouble. We know the treasure is here. My men can dive for the rest after we finish off those Spaniards—"

Suddenly, the boat tipped and Xander went flying over the side, headfirst.

Ludolf looked to the other side of the boat where Fermin tried to tip the boat more with Ludolf in it.

Despite that he knew his father couldn't swim, Ludolf was unwilling to let go of the line to the chest. He angrily kicked awkwardly at Fermin until he let go.

Fermin tried to grab the anchor line when Xander yanked him downward, away from any lines.

Fermin struggled to reach his knife as he sank fast.

Don Antonio watched with concern. "Bring me a spyglass."

The Dutchman guarding him just laughed.

"They're drowning my son!" He rushed the guard but was met with five more armed Dutchmen, all with their weapons drawn.

Underwater, Xander pulled Fermin farther down while he kicked to ascend.

Sinking, Fermin freed his knife and frantically cut away at the ropes that bound the chains around his torso.

The moment he was free of them he headed upward, but just before he broke the surface he was pulled back down. Xander used him like a ladder to climb up to the surface first.

## **The Treasure Galleons**

Ludolf watched Xander emerge with a gasp for breath, flopping around like a disoriented fish on land.

Ludolf looked for a line to throw him when Fermin popped up seconds later a few feet away.

Xander lunged for Fermin and both went under while Ludolf could only watch from the boat. He couldn't see either of them through the foreboding cloud of blood that rose to the surface.



## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

After struggling all night to break loose of the line, Capitana whimpered in defeat, ready to collapse and die.

A shout from the south brought the dog back to alertness. It was Señor Lima, owner of the beached shipwreck to the south, accompanied by a scout, both on horseback.

Seeing the dog and the abandoned camp, Lima ordered the scout, “Go fetch my militia. Something is amiss here.”

The scout rode back southward while Lima drew his knife and approached the suffering dog.



## The Treasure Galleons

Don Antonio and the survivors all stood in a line by the northern mound to face their Dutch firing squad. The Dutchmen were in a panic as something had obviously gone terribly wrong out on the water.

Don Antonio tried to think what to say to negotiate with the Dutchmen when a voice behind him shouted, "Drop your weapons!"

Scores of men from Salmon's camp, led by Mendez, Bernardo and Francisco, pointed their few firearms at the Dutchmen.

Don Antonio looked to his faithful men. Bernardo caught his eye with an apologetic look. "Your son was too fast for me once again. I needed more time to convince the admiral's men to defy him."

Before Don Antonio could express his appreciation, all eyes were drawn to the rattling of tins in the brush.

Seizing the opportunity, Don Antonio yelled to his fellow survivors, "GET DOWN!"

Don Antonio and the survivors dove to the ground.

All at once, every man with a firearm pulled the trigger.

A handful of men on both sides dropped dead, Francisco among them. His body rolled down the mound to Don Antonio.

Those left standing tossed their firearms and drew swords, knives and machetes.

Sad yet grateful, Don Antonio closed Francisco's eyes and took his sword from its scabbard.

Mendez started the charge with a roar, and the clash began.

The roar of battle drew Ludolf's attention. He looked to shore, shocked by what he saw.

Not just one army of men from the north, but also another approaching army of men from the south, led by the barking dog.

If that were not enough, the entire berm was lined with natives, cutting off any hope of escape for the outnumbered Dutchmen, who fought nevertheless.

In his shock, Ludolf's grip on the line slipped and it broke free, burning his hands until he fully let go.

The treasure chest overturned, dumping all its contents.

"NO!" Ludolf shrieked.

Underwater, glittering coins cascaded like a waterfall through sun beams in the water and landed on and around...

Xander's dead body, the marquis' knife plunged in his heart.

Despite the odds, the Dutchmen fought just as doggedly as they did when surrounded by Don Antonio's fleet.

Don Antonio fought with vigor reminiscent of Pedro, cutting through men like a sawmill.

The wealthy man used his cane to poke, trip and hammer Dutchmen.

Ludolf rowed backward out to sea, his tearful eyes glued to where the Dutchmen finally threw their hands up in surrender.

A shadow overtook Ludolf's boat. The bow struck something.

Ludolf looked up and back to see the marquis looking down at him from the rail of his colorful ship.

"We've caught a sea monster!" the marquis shouted to his crew.

Solorzano looked over the rail and grinned. "Ha! You thought it was you I might rescue? You've much to learn about the art of espionage."

Ludolf dropped the oars in utter defeat.

Underwater, Xander's body was blanketed in coins like a burial shroud.



## **The Treasure Galleons**

On the marquis' ship, Solorzano and his militia led tied-up Ludolf belowdecks.

The marquis peered over the rail. Smiling, he shouted to the helm, "Come 'round. I must cast a line for a spirited minnow."

Below, treading water, Fermin raised the knife in victory.



## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Don Antonio oversaw the building of shelters in the now orderly and well supplied camp.

Treasure chests were stacked with armed guards on all sides. Unable to distinguish with certainty which treasure belonged to living or dead passengers, and which belonged to the king or to Don Antonio's family, everything recovered from his flagship was counted as the king's until the value of the royal treasury was fully compensated.

Toro, recovered from his ordeal, and several large natives worked the spars of a capstan drilled into the ground near the water's edge. They hauled a large, heavy chest through the surf toward the beach.

Fermin watched from his place on the diving platform anchored above Don Antonio's ship.

The capstan had been Fermin's idea when he discovered it on one of his dives. The men dove willingly under young Fermin's

## The Treasure Galleons

leadership. All referred to him as *manicato*, the Arawakan word for “braveheart.”

After two months, Don Antonio had enough to bring to the king. At Salmon’s camp, much had been recovered too, but the Queen’s Jewels were not yet recovered.

It was decided that work would continue until the Queen’s Jewels and as much of the remaining treasure as possible could be salvaged. No one could predict how long that might be, so Don Antonio was ready to return to Madrid and face the consequences.

And Fermin was ready to go with him to face whatever consequences there may be for his future.

The marquis waved to Don Antonio from a launch boat as the anchors on his colorful ship were drawn up to the bow.

The dog was in the boat with him and his waiting rowers.

“I promise to keep good care of your dog while you are in Madrid,” the marquis said to Fermin who stood by Don Antonio’s side at the rail. “She’s prettier than my wife, no?”

Fermin puzzled, “She?”

“You didn’t know?” the marquis said. “*Puf!* You have much to learn about women! But that is an adventure for another day.”

To Don Antonio, the marquis said, “Godspeed to you with the king’s portion. Give him my assurance that we will not stop salvaging until we’ve found the Queen’s Jewels!” He bowed respectfully to both of them. “And Godspeed to your familia with my deepest sympathy for your many losses.”

Don Antonio nodded and drew Fermin close to his side. They waved goodbye to the marquis.

Toro leapt to the top of the capstan on shore and waved along with everyone else ashore.

The ship fired two salvos at Don Antonio’s command, and she slowly moved from shore under a gentle wind.



Drums rolled out an ominous executioner's cadence from the courtyard of San Marcos fortress.

Atop the rampart facing the water, a gallows wheel loomed like a Maypole over the courtyard where a crowd gathered around the drummers to watch the surviving Dutchmen come to their grim end.

Each condemned man stood atop a barrel. Several boys of various ethnicity stood ready with ropes to pull the barrels out from under their feet.

His neck in a hemp noose, Ludolf attempted a stoic face in spite of his trembling.

A priest paced before the condemned, crossing himself.

In the crowd, Julia's eyes were fixed on Ludolf.

The cadence intensified and the priest stepped away.

The drums stopped, barrels were drawn away...feet dropped.

Julia lunged forward in grief-stricken protest.

At that moment a hand grabbed Julia's hand and pulled her back.

She fought to be let free for a moment, then turned...

Pedro stood, weak and aided by a cane, next to her.

She threw her arms around him. They steadied each other with an embrace. Julia knew she had a new family now.

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

A large nativity was displayed in the center of Madrid's palace square.

Christmas snowflakes landed on Fermin's red hair as he and Don Antonio oversaw the offload of 145 royal chests from a caravan. Fermin shivered. He had never seen snow, let alone felt it.

"Before we go in..." Don Antonio removed Manuel's necklace and handed it to Fermin. "He'd have wanted you to have it."

Militiamen dropped the corner of a chest to the ground and Don Antonio ran to reprimand and supervise.

Fermin studied the necklace, wistful.

All around, clusters of beggars huddle against the cold.

Fermin looked up at the lavish palace facade.

He reached into his shirt and pulled out the primitive necklace with the natives' clam-shell painting of a galleon.

## The Treasure Galleons

He contemplated the two necklaces against each other, then looked around. He spied an especially frail-looking beggar woman with two young children huddled behind the nativity.

He stepped over to them, looked the woman in the eye and kissed the ruby as if it were a rosary, then placed it firmly in her hand and walked away.

The woman opened her hand and marveled at the ruby in shock.



The throne room felt more French than Spanish with its white décor, fringed with gold everywhere. Don Antonio walked the long blue carpet, head held high, dignified and confident.

Fermin followed, marveling at the gaudy opulence around them.

Behind them, the militia carried the chests in a train.

Don Antonio halted the procession to face Fermin. They were barely halfway through the long hall.

“Whatever happens,” Don Antonio said to Fermin, “you must know I’m proud of you, and whatever path you choose in life, I remain proud.”

Behind Don Antonio, Fermin could see the king rise from his throne.

The militia carrying the chests looked at each other, nervous.

“Papa...” Fermin answered with all sincerity, “the path you take, I take.”

Don Antonio put his hand on Fermin’s shoulder and resumed the procession, side by side.

The intimidating figure of the king came more into focus.

Fermin leaned in and added “...Even if that path leads to an irritated king.”

Don Antonio almost cracked a grin.

They finally came to a halt before the throne.

In a ridiculously high and long wig the marquis would be envious of, handsome young King Philip studied the pair with squinting eyes. He approached, then circled them like a lion going in for the kill.

Fermin felt ready to soil his noble pants.

Suddenly, Philip grabbed Don Antonio by the shoulders and gave him a European kiss on both cheeks.

Terrified, Fermin suffered the same assault.

When it was over, Philip smiled and made a grand gesture to indicate the palace with a “French” flourish. “*Joyeux Noel*, Don Antonio. And to your son...Fernando?”

Don Antonio opened his mouth to correct him—

“I’ve been so worried about you since that dreadful Capitaine d’Aire sailed in with his horrible complaints. Can you imagine? The very day my grandfather—” The king directed an aside to Fermin, “—King Louis of France—” then went back to Don Antonio, “—passed from this life, that miserable man accused you of detaining him. He had no idea your entire fleet had been wrecked...”

As the king prattled on like a gossip monger, drifting in and out of French, Fermin became distracted by a lovely young red-haired woman off to the side.

She slowly approached the king and touched his arm.

Philip turned to her, smiled and presented her. “Ah...my lovely queen. Elisabetta.”

Don Antonio and Fermin’s jaws dropped as she stepped forward.

A full view of the queen revealed that she was several months pregnant.

The king simply said in a cheery voice, “Voila.”

## **The Treasure Galleons**



## EPILOGUE

Against the pre-dawn sky, a fleet of British ships anchored off shore near Solorzano’s salvage camp.

To the sound of war drums, an army of three hundred diverse pirates marched up the beach, led by Henry Jennings.

Solorzano, carrying a white flag, approached with a mere fifty or so Spanish, native and African men behind him.

“*Feliz Navidad*, old friend,” Jennings quipped. With a tone of demand rather than request, he said, “I’ve come for the mountain of wealth—*seja de monte*.”

Three hundred weapons were drawn simultaneously.  
Solorzano’s face turned as white as his flag.

From the deck of one of the pirate ships, Pedro, Julia and Toro witnessed it all as an especially colorful pirate named Calico Jack

## **The Treasure Galleons**

Rackam held the three of them at pistol point after intercepting their transport back to Cuba.

And thus the booming sound of cannon fire heralded the beginning of the Golden Age of Piracy in the Caribbean.



*Three hundred years later, millions of dollars in unclaimed treasure lie on the ocean floor along Florida's "Treasure Coast."*

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## Tammy Gross



Tammy Gross is a musician turned writer who loves history, true stories and cinematic narrative. To date every completed screenplay she's entered into competitions has won awards.

While always working on the next screenplay, Tammy now helps other award-winning screenwriters turn their finished scripts into novels under the *Reel Novels* imprint.

And of course it's her dream to see these scripts filmed on the silver screen. Distribution & fandom of these books ensures a greater likelihood of that reality.

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## The Treasure Galleons

All interior illustrations are by Peggy Gross, an active member of the Space-Treasure Coast artist community. Paintings can be viewed (and purchased) through her website at:



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Tammy Gross

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