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THE TWELFTH GALLEON

A Manolo Caraballo Adventure — Book 1

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CHAPTER 1

The silt came up off the bottom in slow brown curtains, and Manolo Caraballo hung in the middle of it with two feet of visibility and a camera full of nothing.

Sixty-two feet down, eight miles off Cleveland, the *Mary E. Packard* lay the way she'd lain since November of 1902 — rolled onto her starboard side in the mud, a two-masted lumber schooner with her hatches open to the lake like a mouth. The history books said she'd gone down with no loss of life, crew taken off by a passing steamer in a gale. Manolo had read the account twice on the ride out. He'd read it a third time while he waited out last night's blow, because Manolo had rules about what he thought about underwater, and the first rule was: don't.

The anchor line went down through the green and hit the thermocline at thirty-five feet like a cold curtain. Above it, September. Below it, April — forty-four degrees, dark as a closet, the wreck coming up out of the murk the way wrecks always did: first a shadow, then a line, then all at once a wall of black timber with the anchor line tied off at the sternpost. Manolo clipped his transect reel to the post and started forward along the port hull, the port side being the one that faced up, toward what passed for light down here. Every five feet he stopped, framed, shot. Click. Kick twice. Click. Silt from the storm hung in the water like smoke, and his dive light cut a cone through it that died at the edges.

Navy habits died hard. He checked his air on a schedule whether he needed to or not. Seventeen hundred psi. Fine. Fingers going numb inside his gloves. Normal.

He'd dived the *Packard* eleven times. He knew her ribs the way other men knew their driveways — which was embarrassing, because the *Packard* was a picked-over lumber schooner and Manolo Caraballo had chased wrecks on five continents. Three weeks ago he'd been in the Philippines, running a magnetometer over a reef off Luzon on a Manila-galleon rumor that turned out to be a refrigerator. A refrigerator. Three weeks of boat fuel for a Frigidaire.

So when Lou called and said there was a fresh rumor on the *Packard* — lumber company payroll, four thousand dollars in gold coin, went down with her in 1902 and never recovered because nobody ever bothered to look — Manolo had said yes before Lou finished the sentence. It was probably a story. They were always stories. But the lake was flat after the blow, Lou needed a second diver, and treasure hunters ran on rumor the way trucks ran on diesel. He was working a search grid, not a survey — and documenting everything, because documentation was what separated hunters from looters.

The bow rose out of the murk, timber gone soft at the edges, and Manolo tied off the line to start his turn. That's when the light caught it.

Pale. Curved. Five thin shapes curled around a hull plank, reaching out of the silt.

Manolo stopped kicking. His bubbles went up in a sudden rush, loud in his hood, and for half a second he was sixteen years old, standing on the Rocky River dock at dawn in a borrowed windbreaker, looking at his father's empty boat with the engine cover still warm from the night before. Eighteen years, and the lake still knew exactly where he kept that morning.

He made himself breathe. In. Out. Count it. Then he moved in along the hull, one glove on the timber, and put the light square on the shapes.

His chest unlocked all at once, which was worse than the fear — the laugh that tried to come out behind his mouthpiece turned into a cough, which turned into a regulator full of lake water, which turned into thirty seconds of undignified sputtering while Lou's voice crackled in his ear through the comms.

"Manny? Manny, talk to me."

"I'm good." Cough. "I'm good, Lou. Just got startled by history."

The fingers were a brass ring, green-black with corrosion, maybe six inches across. The ring was holding a bowl of the same metal. A ship's compass, wedged into a split in the hull planking at the bow, half-swallowed by a century of Lake Erie.

Manolo fanned silt away with his glove, gentle as a man petting a dog that might bite. The bowl's rim was engraved, the letters still sharp under the corrosion bloom: SEVILLA.

Under that, a date.

1712.

"Say that again," Lou said, when Manolo told him. Static chewed the edges of it.

Manolo didn't say it again. He was working his light around the bowl, slow. The glass was long gone, but the compass card was still there under a skin of concretion — a hand-painted rose, blue and gold, a fleur-de-lis at north, the points lettered in Spanish: NORTE, SUR, ESTE, OESTE. The needle was frozen at 160 degrees, rusted to its pivot like a stopped clock.

He sat back on his heels in the silt and looked at it for a long time. A 1712 Spanish compass on a 1902 Ohio lumber schooner. A Roman coin in a parking meter. The lake didn't wedge compasses into hull planks — somebody had put it here, wedged it deep, and then the lake had done what the lake does, growing concretion over the rim in a lip thick as his thumb, locking brass to oak. That took decades. The slow accretion of a lake that never hurried for anybody.

He tried to rock the bowl, gently. Nothing. It would take a chisel and a week, and Manolo had left his chisel on the boat, and anyway: lifting artifacts off a state-claimed wreck without paperwork was the fastest way he knew to get a letter from Ohio and get his name on a list he didn't want to be on. He knew the salvage politics cold — five continents' worth — and every jurisdiction played it the same: the old wrecks belonged to the state, and you filed your permits or you kept your mouth shut. Some days the universe made your decisions for you.

He shot it from six angles, tied a pink marker tag to the nearest rib, and wrote the position on his slate in block letters. Then he checked his air — fourteen hundred, right on plan — and started up the line, counting knots through the brown dark, while the compass sat in his head and refused to move.

Not the age. The placement. Wedged into the hull like a bookmark. Like somebody wanted it found by exactly one person, on exactly one dive.

At fifteen feet he hung on the line for his safety stop and watched Cleveland's gray light filter down through the green. Three minutes. He spent them the way he always spent safety stops, arguing with himself.

It's a compass, Manny. Some collector dropped it over the side in 1960.

In a split plank, sixty-two feet down, concreted in place? Sure. And his truck ran on wishes.

Somebody's grandfather lost it—

His grandfather fished. His grandfather farmed coffee on a mountainside in Yauco and came to Cleveland twice and complained about the cold both times and died in his sleep six years ago. His grandfather never put on a dive mask in his life. Everybody knew that.

—then how did a 1712 Sevilla compass get concreted into the Packard?

That was the question, wasn't it. That was the whole question, sitting there at fifteen feet with his bubbles climbing past his mask, and Manolo didn't have an answer that didn't sound insane in his own head.

Manolo grinned behind the regulator. Insane was his favorite kind of question.

Lou hauled him up the ladder of the *Second Wind* with one hand and shoved a thermos at him with the other. Lou Kaczmarek was sixty-eight, shaped like a dock piling, and had been running divers out to the wrecks since before Manolo was born. "You look like you saw a ghost."

"Better." Manolo got his hood off and drank coffee that scalded the cold out of his teeth. "I saw something impossible."

"Impossible's my favorite. Tell me on the way in."

So Manolo told him on the way in, the lake flattening under a low sky, the camera on his knees. Lou listened the way Lou listened, which was completely, both hands on the wheel, and when Manolo finished Lou said, "Sevilla, 1712."

"Sevilla, 1712."

"On the *Packard*."

"On the *Packard*."

Lou was quiet for a while, watching the breakwater come up. Then: "You didn't bring it up."

"No chisel, no permit, no death wish — in that order."

"Good boy." Lou pushed the throttle forward a notch. "Somebody put it there, you know."

"I know."

"Somebody put a three-hundred-year-old Spanish compass on a Lake Erie wreck and left it for you to trip over."

"I know, Lou."

"I'm just saying." Lou glanced at him, eyes pale under the brim of his cap. "That's not weather, Manny. That's a person."

"What's the great Manolo Caraballo doing checking payroll rumors in my lake anyway?" Lou added, after a beat. "Five continents, and you're down here with me."

"I'm between expeditions. The Philippines ate my money and gave me a refrigerator."

Lou snorted. "Heard the Florida boys are still working the 1715 trail clean. Three hundred years and they're still pulling silver off those beaches."

"Let 'em." Manolo watched the breakwater come up. "Too many lawyers down there, not enough ocean."

At his place — a rented room above a bait shop on the west side that served as home base between expeditions, the walls papered with charts of five continents, a magnetometer in the corner wearing a boat cover like a ghost — Manolo uploaded the photos and opened his wreck book, the hardbound journal where fourteen years of hunts lived in pencil. The compass filled his monitor: the rose, the fleur-de-lis, the green-black bowl, the pink marker tag bright as a flag beside it. He worked through the frames methodically, the way the

Navy taught him, saving the wide shots, the close-ups, the scale shots. Last frame: the inside of the lid, where his light had caught something in the final seconds before he started up.

He zoomed in. Then he zoomed in again, until the pixels went soft.

Scratched into the brass, thin and deliberate, cut by a steady hand: two letters.

T.R.

Manolo sat back. The room was quiet except for the bait shop's cooler humming through the floor. On the monitor, the letters waited.

T.R. His grandfather's initials. Tomás Rodriguez, of Yauco, Puerto Rico — who had fished, and farmed coffee, and complained about Cleveland winters, and died in his sleep six years ago. Who had never put on a dive mask in his entire life. Everybody knew that.

The coffee went cold in his mug. Outside, the lake kept doing what it had done for ten thousand years, gray and patient and completely uninterested in explanations.

Manolo sat very still, staring at two scratched letters that had no business being at the bottom of Lake Erie.

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