

The Wind

Lars D. H. Hedbor

Tales From a Revolution: West-Florida

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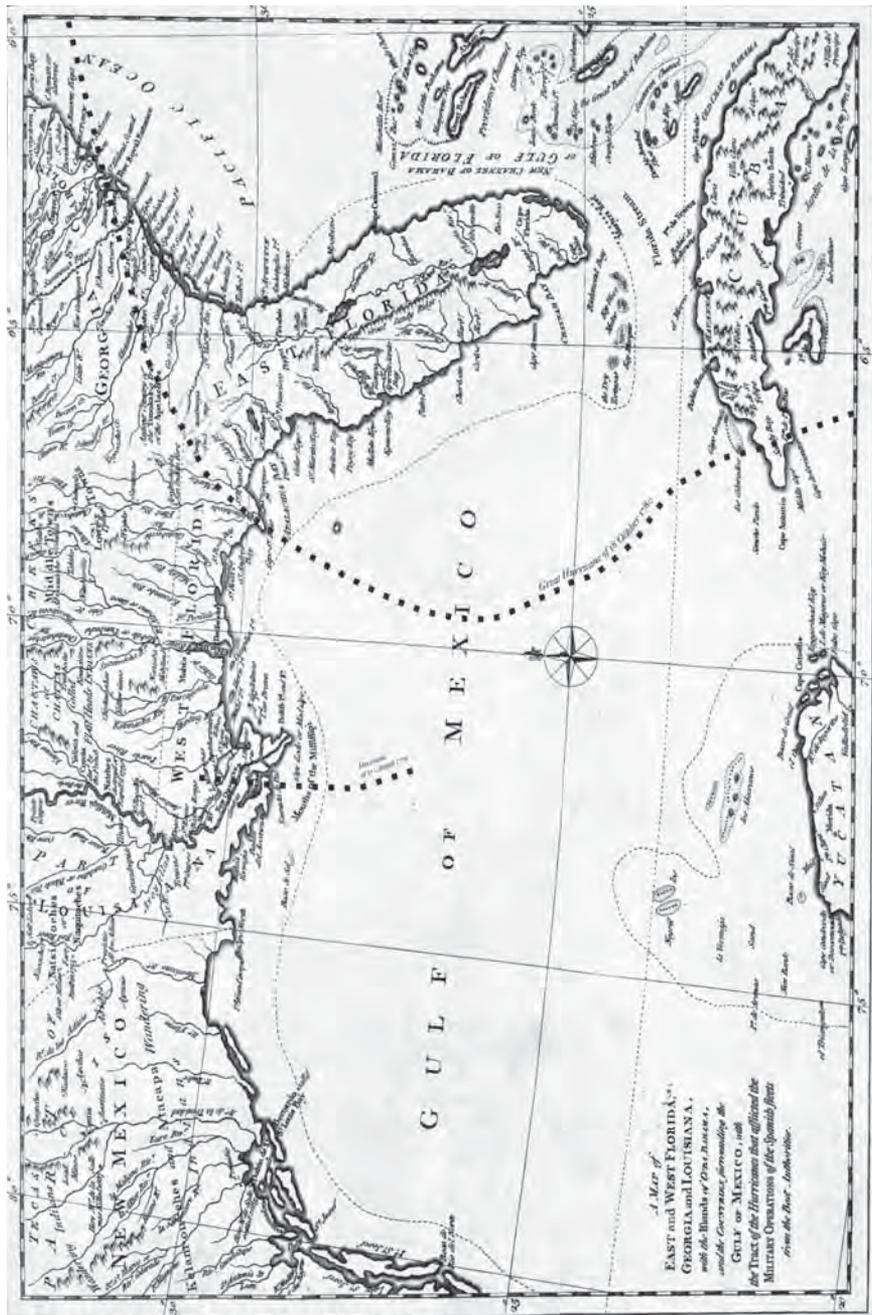
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Dedication

*for Lara,
who showed me
the first step
on the path*



A Map of
EAST and WEST FLORIDA,
GEORGIA and LOUISIANA,
with the Limits of the Spaniards,
and the Governor's Jurisdiction, the
GULF or MEXICO, *with*
the Tracks of the Spaniards that affixed the
Military Operations of the Spanish Fleet
from the Port of Anahuac.

Chapter I

As he sank beneath the waves, Gabriel found himself becoming very calm. The water was warm, and it was quiet down here—quiet, at least, in comparison to the chaos that reigned above.

The whistling of the wind in the rigging, the desperate shouts of men struggling to make themselves heard over the storm, the crash of water against the sides of the ship, all were silenced. Gone, too, were the cracks and thuds of falling spars, the hoarse cries of surprise wrenched from the throats of men as they were swept from the decks, and the deep, muffled booms of thunder.

It was not an unbroken peace, however. Gabriel was aware of pain, both in the leg that had caught awkwardly on the railing as he went overboard, and growing in his lungs, as his breath ran out.

Calm was replaced with a growing sense of concern, even panic, and he would ever after this day remember the moment when he realized that he had a choice, a decision to make. Decades hence, he would relate to his grandchildren the moment when he realized that he had decided to live, although he'd never be able to clearly explain what had driven him to the decision.

Although a single, sharply painful kick proved that his injured leg was not fit for propelling himself, he began to kick with his good leg, and struggled toward the surface on the strength of

his arms and his will.

By the time he broke the surface, his lungs burned as if he'd inhaled the smoke of burning pitch, and his first breath was more water than air, it seemed. It was enough to win him a second surfacing, and another coughing breath, and then another. He finally gained the strength to stay above water long enough to see that his ship, scarcely more than a wallowing river barge under the best of circumstances, was heeled over sharply.

He noted that its mainmast had been carried off by the force of the wind on just the sheets of rigging, and guessed that the supplies he'd helped painstakingly load and balance in the hold now laid against the starboard side, dooming her to list until she should founder and go down. As there was no prospect of rescue from that quarter, he turned his attention in the opposite direction, where he could just make out the lights of shore.

Not for the first time, he sent a blessing heavenward to his father, thanking him for forcing his eldest son to learn how to swim. "The day will come, *mí hijo*, when you shall have the choice of whether to sink or to swim," he'd said, and it looked to Gabriel as though this day were the one. Turning away from the sight of the sinking ship, he struck out for the shoreline illuminated by lightning, pulling himself along with his arms. As he swam, he gritted his teeth and did his best to ignore the pain of his damaged leg.

An eternity later, he cried out as he was lifted by a breaking wave and driven heavily into the gravel of the shore. He tumbled in the surf for a few minutes, his injured leg bringing him fresh agonies each time it was bashed into something or twisted by the swirling waves, but finally found a moment when he was deposited

on relatively dry ground long enough to pull himself clear of the water entirely.

The wind, which had been devilishly rising throughout the day, seemed to be whipping itself into an even higher frenzy now, and a flash of lightning revealed the hulk of a ship—whether it was his or another he could not tell—being rolled up into the shattered embrace of a copse of live oak, a mere dozen paces from where he lay.

The sight galvanized him into action, as he realized that although he was no longer actively engaged in the process of drowning, he was far from any sort of safety. Grabbing a nearby length of broken branch, Gabriel struggled to his feet, hunching himself against the wind, and confirmed that he could move by leaning heavily on his improvised crutch.

Between savage gusts of windborne rain—or was it seawater, still?—he made his way forward, stopping to rest, stooped low against the wind when the storm threatened to sweep him entirely off his feet. Just after a particularly ferocious gust, his crutch struck a solid impediment of some sort, and he groped in the darkness, cursing the storm for failing to provide lightning now that he needed it.

Whatever laid in his path seemed to consist of rock and was perhaps knee-high. He made his way around the end of it, and sat heavily in the lee of the obstacle, relishing the relative quiet he found there.

For the space of several deep, shaky breaths, he sat, thanking the blessed Virgin for interceding in his moment of greatest need. It was in this moment, without warning, that a heavy piece of airborne debris struck him from behind, and he fell, senseless, to the ground.

Chapter 2

When Gabriel woke, the first thing he noticed was the starry sky overhead. In every direction beyond the patch of inky sky above, he could see flashes of lightning from the storm, but he was in some sort of strange islet of quiet air, enough to make him wonder if he were dead, and awaiting an invitation from San Pedro to enter through the gates of Heaven proper.

The throbbing pain of his head, answered with each beat of his heart by a matching throb in his leg, soon dissuaded him of this idea, however. He felt the back of his head, where he'd been struck, and found a lump there with a gash across it, but was reassured that the injury was not mortal. He sank back down into the muck where he'd fallen, and closed his eyes to compose a long and heartfelt prayer of thanks to San Antonio, the protector of lost sailors.

He barely noticed that he'd fallen asleep until the first fat drops of rain blew into his face. Opening his eyes, he felt the freshening breeze whip itself nearly instantaneously into a resurgent gale that seemed to be vindictively seeking out his shelter on this side of the obstacle that had, up to this point, shielded him.

A few more moments were all that it took to convince him that the wind had, indeed, changed direction. "*Dios mío,*" he muttered. Such a thing was outside of his experience—storms should blow foul out of one quarter only, not from every quarter of

the wind! Painfully, he lifted himself up, relying on the comforting solidity of the barrier behind which he'd found safety, and moved around to the other side of it.

Debris was piled up on that side, affording him little in the way of the protection he'd enjoyed in the lee, but he shoved away a tangle of branches, heavy with mud, and pushed his way down below the height of the obstacle, even as a gout of warm rain poured over the crest, soaking him anew.

Some time into the endless succession of rain, wind and lightning that followed, Gabriel became aware that he was singing, finding comfort in the familiar melodies he had heard as a child, or the shanties of his fellow sailors, somewhat rougher in content and structure than what his mother sang to him in his youth.

He belted out the songs, unable even to hear himself above the storm, but keeping his attention off of the many indignities it continued to inflict upon him. Now sweeping out from the unseen land to his west, the wind was picking up all manner of debris, most of which passed overhead unnoted.

Some, however, dropped over the top of his sheltering barrier, covering him in a rough blanket of twigs, grass, and material he was just as glad to be unable to identify. Slowly, he noticed that the clouds were no longer lit solely by flashes of lightning, but that there was some sunlight filtering through.

Too, the wind no longer blew so hard that it threatened his ability to even draw breath. As the storm slowly abated, Gabriel began to sing improvised songs of thanks, nonsense, even babble, and he worried in some corner of his mind for his own sanity.

Eventually, the rain slowed to something less than a constant deluge, and though gusts still sometimes bent the trees

that yet stood, he was able to rise gingerly on one leg from behind the wall where he'd spent the longest night of his life, and brush off the clinging coat that the storm had deposited on his form.

Through the misty sheets of rain that still fell, he could see a scene of utter devastation. The ship he'd glimpsed as he came ashore lay overturned in the distance, and he was shocked to realize that the wall he'd laid beside through the storm was what remained of a familiar landmark in town, the small mission where he'd celebrated his last Mass ashore before his fleet was to sail.

He recognized it only by the distinctive timber he'd noticed at the foundation beside the door when he had entered the prior Sunday. A single, massive oak bole, he'd wondered how any human team had been able to move it, and had been struck by the heartfelt, if crude, carvings of the Blessed Virgin along its outer edge.

He ran his fingers over the representation of Mary's smooth forehead, wondering at the power of the storm that had swept away every other remnant of the church, while sparing him more serious harm. He could see no other hint that there had been a structure of any sort on this site, much less the shacks that had clustered about the mission. Even more striking, it had easily been a mile from the church to where he'd clambered aboard the launch for the short row to his ship, and yet he'd been swept to nearly this spot by the waves. In the strange twilight of the dark storm clouds overhead, he could see the waves of the ocean still far inland from where the shore had been. He wondered idly when, if ever, it would retreat, while continuing to scan the land and sea for evidence that he was not the last living man on Earth.

His makeshift crutch was long gone in the dark confusion of the night, but there was no lack of ready replacements available,

and Gabriel began to make his way in the direction of the shore, hoping to find some sign of the rest of the fleet, or any other living soul.

The hurt leg had not improved any for the night in the storm. If anything, the throbbing was worse this morning, though his head, at least, only ached, rather than feeling as though it were in danger of exploding across the wrecked landscape. Gabriel tried putting weight on the leg, but the sickening pain this simple action brought on convinced him that he had broken at least one of the bones in his lower leg.

Once the wave of nausea from his experiment had passed, he looked around for a better walking stick than he had found close to hand by his shelter. A gnarled branch from a mangrove fit just about perfectly under his armpit, and a twist that had been rubbed smooth in contact with some long-gone obstacle formed a ready-made spot for his waterlogged and scraped hand to grab and hold.

Shaking his head to toss away the pain, Gabriel picked his way through piles of mixed debris. It looked as though every tree he could see had lost most of their branches, if they hadn't been snapped off at the base or knocked over, roots and all, forming great craters in the ground.

Everything was coated in a thick layer of muck, dragged up from the bottom of the bay and deposited to turn all visible into shades of murky grey. Through the mud, he could see heaps that might have been merely aggregations of plants, or could have been the corpses of animals—or even people.

Though the wind remained steady and rain came and went, the light was strong enough now that he could see for some distance around him. Little looked as though it were unscathed, though a

few gulls screamed and cavorted in the winds in the direction of the bay.

Aside from the overturned hulk of the ship he'd already seen, there was nothing in evidence to hint that this had, at the prior dawn, been a busy, if small, settlement, or that a modest fleet had stood at anchor in the bay, ready for an expedition of war between his own King and the British sovereign.

He shook his head. Oh, how the mighty had been humbled, reminded that before God, all of Man's works were as playthings, and that those which did not serve His plans in any particular moment were forfeit to the power of nature He might unleash upon them.

Gabriel was overcome, for a moment, with humility at the fact that his own life had been spared, among the wholesale destruction that lay all about him. Falling to his knees, he spoke a fervent prayer to the saints, the Blessed Virgin, and the Holy Father of all who had obviously chosen him for some purpose that was not furthered by his premature death.

As he struggled back to his feet and adjusted his mangrove crutch to bear his weight, he was startled to hear a voice behind him, the voice of a woman.

"*¡El muerto!*" she called. "How do you walk among us, though you have the look of the grave about you?"

Gabriel whirled about to see a woman with her hair streaming out over her shoulder in the wind, but otherwise appearing as though she had spent the storm in a dry and safe shelter somewhere. Her plain white dress and ebony hair relieved the uniform grey mud with a shock of color.

He looked down at himself, and could see at an instant why

she greeted him as the dead one—between the debris which clung to him, the filth of the bay that coated him, and the fact that his clothing was drenched to his skin, he supposed that he did look as though he were better suited for a grave than for a walk.

He walked toward her, noting that she bore a wary, suspicious expression on her face as he approached. “I was swept from my ship, and preserved from the storm by the grace of God alone,” he answered.

“I will grant you that I was handled somewhat more roughly than you appear to have been,” he added, gesturing with a wave of his hand at her appearance.

Her arms crossed before her, she regarded him for a moment, and then motioned with a toss of her head and a grimace, saying, “We weathered the storm in a cabin my father had insisted upon building into the ground, in the way he once saw in his travels. It is, for the most part, intact this morning, and all we who sought shelter there have survived.”

She looked him over pointedly, and said, “You have found a more difficult manner of surviving the storm, it seems, but one cannot fail to be grateful for the blessings we are given, no matter how mixed they may be.”

She dropped her crossed arms and held out her hand to him. “Come, let us see to your hurts, and hear your story.”

He hobbled forward and she put her hand on his elbow, guiding him through the scattered rubble, back past the ruin of the mission. He tripped once and grunted in pain. She grimaced at him and, without any words, shifted over to the side of his injured leg and put his arm over her shoulder, taking his crutch out of his hand.

She moved to toss it away, but hesitated when he started to object, reaching for it, and she said, "Fine, I will carry it for you, but you will not need it at this moment."

He nodded and relaxed to let his weight settle across her sturdy shoulder. Though he was not accustomed to accepting assistance, he could not deny that they were able to move more efficiently across the smashed terrain this way. His stubborn pride was not so great as to prevent him from accepting the inevitable.

He also could not deny that her soft shoulder was a more pleasant way to keep weight off of his injured leg than the twisted branch, as fortuitously-formed a crutch as that may have been.

"You wanted to know my story?" He snorted. "There is not much story to tell. I was on a ship, which was not a good place to be in a storm such as we experienced last night. I was hurt as I fell overboard, and I washed ashore."

He shrugged. "There is not much more than that to tell."

As they walked, the wind occasionally blowing rain into their faces, he noticed that she was peering about intently, and he asked, "Are you trying to find something lost in the storm?"

She pursed her lips and said tightly, "Not something. Someone. My husband."

Gabriel waited for her to explain, but she was finished talking about the subject, and the expression on her face made it clear that asking more questions would be both fruitless and unwelcome. She kept her stony gaze directed forward, her bearing discouraging him from making any further attempts at conversation, even to learn her name or family. In her turn, she seemed to have lost interest in hearing of his travails, and he regretted the sudden stop to their conversation.

He chose to put his attention instead to observing the caprices of the storm, noticing that some trees looked as though they had scarcely shed a branch, while others had been reduced to splinters. They crested a small rise, and he saw that it had given shelter from much of the wind, though there was still plenty of debris carried in from elsewhere.

Midway down the back of the hill, a low, solidly-constructed roof emerged from the ground, and the woman nodded in the direction of the structure.

“*Casa de desastre*,” she said, her mouth quirking into a half-smile in spite of herself. “That’s what the villagers called it when he built it. We laughed at him then, but none are laughing this morning.”

Gabriel nodded thoughtfully. “Your father is obviously a wise man,” he ventured tentatively.

She wheeled on him, glaring. “My father is a fool in those things that matter. But for him, I would be walking together with my husband this morning, instead of dragging back a broken-down sailor.”

She visibly regretted her words the instant they were uttered, as Gabriel drew himself up, balancing on his good leg and withdrawing his arm from her support, his expression a mask of anger and wounded pride.

Before he could speak, she blurted, “I did not mean that as it sounded. I am only—oh, it is too complicated.” Her mouth again pursed, she shook her head angrily and blinked hard, looking away in denial of the tears that leaked out of the corners of her eyes.

They regarded each other for a long moment, unspoken anger thick in the air between them. She broke the quiet, saying

softly, “I am sorry for my clumsy words. I am not angry with you, but with my father and my husband. They are both men of much *dignidad*, and with that sometimes comes much foolishness.”

She gestured back toward the chaos that reigned behind them. “I fear that my Paulo has paid the price for their foolishness in this night. He argued with my father yesterday, and then refused to take shelter with us as a result of this petty fight. Today, I can find no trace of him, while you stand before me. It is not your doing, and yet I cannot help but feel your preservation as a rebuke to his foolishness.”

Gabriel took a deep breath, his nostrils flaring slightly as he did so, and then nodded. “I have seen men permit their pride to drive them into grievous mistakes.” With a slight relaxing of his face, he added, “I have even been guilty of such moments of pride myself.”

He wobbled slightly as his balance on the good leg wavered, and he raised his arm back to the height of her shoulder. “If you can forgive me for being preserved through the storm, I can forgive you for being angry at me for doing so.”

She nodded and moved back under his arm. He gratefully restored his balance with her support, and then said, “If I am to depend upon you, whether against my preference or not, I ought to know your name, shouldn’t you think?”

She smiled at him slightly, looking up to see a quick answering smile flit across his lips. “I am Carlotta Dominguez Delgado. And you are called . . . ?”

He drew himself upright as far as he could, respectfully inclining his head in her direction. “I am Gabriel Llandro Garcia y Cortez, and it is my honor to make your acquaintance. I only wish that I were in a position to offer you aid, rather than requiring

aid of you.”

She nodded graciously in reply, saying formally, “I am certain that when the day comes that you are able, you will offer any aid that I might need.”

She gestured to the shelter, saying, “I will leave you with my father and our neighbors here, and continue looking for Paulo.” He nodded, and they walked together, Gabriel steeling himself for the possibility that he would be witness to a continuance of the ongoing confrontation between Carlotta and her father.

He was surprised, therefore, when she opened the door and called out softly, “My father, this man needs our help.”

He heard a rustling from within the shelter and out of the darkness stepped a short, stooped man with grizzled hair and a greying beard. Squinting in the comparative brightness of the overcast morning, he peered up at Gabriel’s face.

“This is not your husband,” he observed, his voice gravelly and firm.

“No, father, I must search further to find Paulo.”

The older man sighed and nodded, closing his eyes in a sorrowful expression. “I still do not think it wise to venture out before the storm has spent itself completely, but then it is not my spouse who went out into it. I will take care of this man, while you search for yours.”

He took Carlotta’s place under Gabriel’s arm and assisted the younger man into the darkness of the shelter, without so much as giving his daughter another glance. For her part, Carlotta turned and marched off into the increasing rainfall without any further comment, and without looking back.

Chapter 3

Gabriel woke with a start, taking a moment to remember how he had come to be in such unfamiliar surroundings. The air was dank with the smell of smoke, wet earth and the press of an uncomfortably large number of unwashed human beings in a close space for too long.

Though his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, he could see scarcely anything by the puny flicker of light given off by the small but functional fireplace at the back of the shelter. He lay where Carlotta's father had placed him, on a low, hard bed, too short for his injured leg, bound straight as it now was to a splint.

As he shifted uncomfortably, he found that he was not alone in the bunk. Another person—there was no way to tell who it was—lay beside him. Pressed against the rough-hewn log wall, Gabriel tried to move to relieve the pressure on his hip where he'd slept, and finally found a position where he could relax enough to perceive that his bunkmate was soundly sleeping, even snoring lightly.

Listening, he could hear only the sounds of people breathing, punctuated by the occasional pop or crackle from the fire. He tried closing his eyes and going back to sleep himself, but the ache of his leg was too great to permit him

to relax sufficiently.

Too, his mind raced as he pondered the effects of the events of the past day. His ship's loss was but one small piece in a much larger setback resulting from the horrible storm. His had been one of a modest fleet of ships, mostly built for river travel, but pressed into service by Governor Gálvez in his plan to intervene on the behalf of the rebels against the British crown.

It had been a bold plan—sail swiftly upriver to Baton Rouge and seize the English post there, disrupting their plans to attack New Orleans. All swept aside now by the unpredictable power of the storm, a factor that he suspected was not doing as much harm to the plans of their enemies upriver.

He sighed inwardly. He didn't pretend to understand the motivations of kings or governors, and he resented it when their machinations interfered with his work as an honest sailor, recently advanced to the position of quartermaster. On the other hand, he reflected, the opportunities for extra profit as a smuggler did rise when faraway rulers squabbled, so it wasn't an unrelieved burden.

That was a risky path as well, though—the British had arrogantly posted a warship on Lake Pontchartrain, and Gabriel's ship had been stopped and subjected to search on several occasions. The British captain and his crew cared nothing for the proper stowage of cargo, and the additional work these searches imposed on Gabriel and his shipmates made trips upriver into chancy affairs.

Even in a small ship, though, there were always hidden corners—Gabriel's favorite had been a pocket of space just astern of one of the knee braces under the forward deck. A loosened plank readily concealed a sack or two of shot, and the American rebels were grateful to exchange some silver for the lead.

And then there were jobs like this one, where his captain had been persuaded by the governor to join the fleet. Gabriel did not know whether Captain Batista had been moved more by an appeal to his duty as a Spaniard or by the potential for plunder in the wake of a sacking of Baton Rouge, but in either case, Gabriel trusted the captain well enough to follow him into the fray.

Now, with his ship and many others lost, and Captain Batista's fate unknown, Gabriel could hardly guess what ships might remain for him to sign on with. He sighed again silently. From what he'd seen of the devastation without, there might not be any shipping left at all.

A rumble of thunder sounded outside, and he heard a fresh spatter of raindrops start on the roof, followed by the sound of another downpour beginning. Gabriel lost his train of thought in the soft rush of the rain, and sleep finally came to him.

Light from the opened door woke him, and around him he heard others stirring as well. The figure beside him rolled over, and he noted that it was Carlotta's father. The older man sat up and said, shortly, "There was no other place. The floor is too wet, and we have many who have taken shelter with us here."

He rose and went over to the fireplace, where two men and a young boy sat. He spoke quietly to them, and sat down with them. Glancing around the dark room, Gabriel spotted Carlotta, who stood up from a bunk on the other side of the crowded space. She met his eyes and walked over to him.

She sat down on the edge of his bunk, and he noticed that her eyes were red and her face puffy, as though she had been crying ever since the last time he had seen her. His expression formed the question that she answered with a slow, sad shake of her head.

“I found no sign of Paulo. When I found you, it gave me hope that he might have found shelter as you did.” Punctuating her conclusion with a deep sigh, she said, “I must face the fact that I am a widow.”

She closed her eyes and turned away, and Gabriel struggled upright to sit beside her. He sat quietly for a long moment, and then said, “Until you have buried him, you must not abandon hope.” He waited until she turned back toward him, her eyes again bright with unshed tears, but with a shade of hope in her expression.

He smiled quickly at her. “Tell me about your husband.”

She drew a deep, slow breath. “Paulo is . . . well, as I said, he is proud. Stubborn. He works as a farmer with my father, raising cattle. He is strong—I have seen him drag a full-grown bull to where he needed it—and he is very handsome.” She looked down modestly at this, and Gabriel smiled.

“You have no children yet?”

“No, we have not yet been blessed with children, although we would both like very much to have them. We have been married only two years, and he has very often been away with my father.”

Gabriel nodded encouragingly. “It is, perhaps, just as well that you do not have that worry at this moment, to add to your burdens.”

She sighed deeply, replying, “I know you are right, but I cannot help but think that if I had given him children, perhaps he would not have been so quick to go out into the storm—”

With a gasp, she buried her hands in her face and jumped up, throwing herself back onto her bunk, where her shoulders shook with the unrelenting sobs of the bereaved. Gabriel wanted to offer her some comfort, but there was nothing in his power that could

ease her pain and worry.

With a sigh, he pushed himself up off his bunk and hobbled over to where her father sat with the other men and the boy. Wordlessly, the older man moved aside to make room for Gabriel to sit with them.

“Excuse me, *señor*, but in the course of all that you did for me yesterday, I do not believe that we were properly introduced. I am Gabriel Llalandro Garcia y Cortez, a quartermaster of the river trade by profession, although—” he gestured ruefully at the door “—now without a ship.”

The older man regarded him for a moment, and then answered, “Salvador Dominguez. I raised cattle, before they were all killed in this storm. I also know not what I will do now.” He looked back down at the table, where he stared at his own hands for a long time before adding, “Whatever my daughter has told you about me, I am ten times as foolish, and ten times as wicked.”

The older man stood, avoiding Gabriel’s questioning gaze, and slowly made his way out into the daylight, his shoulders slumped and his head bowed.

Chapter 4

The sun was shining warmly, a light breeze flitted through Gabriel's hair, and he had become nearly insensate to the destruction all around him. Watching others working on cleaning up while he sat with his leg immobilized was nearly enough to drive him mad, but there was nothing to be done for it.

The men had organized themselves into a crew to clear ground near the shelter, and a number of them were ranging over the surrounding area, bringing back materials and what food they could salvage. They'd piled timbers as neatly as possible on one side of the cleared area, and someone had returned with a quantity of still-sound sailcloth they'd found in the rubble.

Two men were discussing how best to fashion a shelter with it, and Gabriel called out to them in a sudden burst of animation, "Let me see the cloth, and perhaps I can be of some assistance, despite my infirmity."

They brought it over and one man said to him, "We had forgotten that you are a sailor, and that you have experience with this material. Here, let us open it up, so that you may see what condition it is in."

Gabriel noted that it had the appearance of having been ripped from a relatively small ship while still furled—in places, rope was still wrapped around it tightly—and so was not surprised when the two men unrolled it to reveal a wholly intact jib, which

formed a long, narrow triangle perhaps three paces across at the base, tapering to a point some nine paces away.

He nodded, saying to the man nearest him, "It's in good condition, and will serve to provide shade and some protection from rain as well, if it's rigged up well. It won't provide complete protection from the wet, but it will help. Have you found any loose rope, other than what was around it when you found it?"

"No, we hadn't yet found any, but I will send my son and his friend to look for anything that might serve." Gabriel nodded in reply, feeling for the first time since he'd gone over the railing on his ship that he might be able to help somebody else more than needing help for himself.

While they waited for the children to return with whatever rope they might be able to locate, Gabriel busied himself with undoing the line that had been wrapped around the furled sail to keep it wrapped. Simple for a sailor to untie, the knot at the clew cleat would have stymied any of the other men there, particularly in its waterlogged state, and would likely just have been sliced open, wasting valuable line.

He had the other men secure the clew and tack corners to the front of the shelter, pulling the length of the sail out away from the door, where he had them erect and secure a tall, stout pole while he directed them to secure the head end of the sail, once the boys returned with a shredded portion of what Gabriel judged to be the sheet line from a ship about the same size as his had been. He untangled it and parceled out the individual lines to the men who were now working under his direction.

When they were finished, the sail formed a long, narrow sunshade, tapering off to the point where it was attached to the

pole. Gabriel nodded at it, satisfied. He'd spoken a few times over his career with sailors who had been shipwrecked, and they'd always praised the utility of sails for building shelters.

As Gabriel and his crew had been working on the shade, another group of men had hauled in a steer that had been killed in the storm. Gabriel turned away from the sight of the animal, which appeared to have drowned. He did not like the idea of eating anything that had been in the water like that and, like most sailors, had a particular horror of drowning.

He limped back under the newly-build sunshade, smiling at the pair of boys who'd fetched back the rope as they scampered about under the shade, enjoying some game of their own devising. It amazed him how children could find entertainment in even the hardest times, but he supposed, too, that they needed to divert themselves from that which they could not understand.

After several minutes, he glanced back over to where the men had brought in the dead steer, and saw that they were already well engaged in the process of butchering the carcass. He could hear snatches of their conversation, and was gratified to hear that he was not alone in feeling reservations about eating a drowned cow.

A man holding a long, wickedly sharp knife was using surprisingly short, gentle strokes to separate the sodden skin from the corpse, carefully pulling it away from the tissue beneath as he cut. As he did so, he commented, "It still smells all right, so far."

"I don't know, Marcos," someone else commented. "I heard you say last week that you still smelled all right, and I know that wasn't true."

All of the men around the carcass laughed as Marcos fixed

the other man with an expression of mock indignation, pointing at him with the knife. "So you are saying that I had been too long out of the water, while this poor fellow was too long in it? Make up your mind, Fernando!"

Another round of laughter answered him, and he went back to the task at hand. Gabriel had to admit that the carcass looked much less unappetizing now that it was half-skinned, but he still felt much better when he looked away. He'd consider it further when it looked less like an unfortunate animal and more like meat in the larder.

As he averted his gaze from the butchering, Gabriel spotted Carlotta's father trudging over the lip of the hill into which his shelter was embedded. Slung over his shoulder was a dark form, the identity of which Gabriel was immediately certain he could guess.

He seized his crutch and hobbled as fast as he could to intercept Salvador's path. As he feared, the shape on the older man's shoulder was the corpse of a man. As he drew close enough to Salvador, Gabriel called out tentatively, "Paulo?"

The old man grunted and eased his burden down into the sodden earth at his feet. "No," he said brusquely, continuing, "but I dare to fear that I may yet find him as well."

Salvador rested for a moment, his hands on his thighs, bent over as though the man's weight were still on his shoulders. He took several deep breaths, looking at the face of the corpse before him. The man looked very young to Gabriel, and his face was composed, his eyes peacefully closed forever. There was no mark upon him, nothing to reveal how he had died.

"No, this is Julio, who worked for me also. I could not find

him before the storm began, but now I have, and I need to go and confirm his wife's fear that she sleeps a widow tonight." Salvador straightened, a defeated look on his face, his posture bearing his weariness almost as a suit of armor.

Gabriel reached out and placed a hand on the older man's shoulder. "You have done much to preserve all of these people," he said, gesturing to the small crowd that was arrayed at their various tasks around the shelter. "None can fault you for the loss of a man whom you tried to save."

Salvador snorted, shrugging Gabriel's hand away angrily, and said, "And what of the man whom I chased out into the storm, to find his fate in the wind and the water? I have no doubt in my heart that my daughter faults me for his loss, and I agree in every particular. What good is it for me to save the village, but lose the one who was as a son to me?"

Gabriel could see the tears held tightly in check in the man's eyes as Salvador continued, "*Dios mío*, I wish that God would strike me down now, if only he would return Paulo to my Carlotta. I would gladly trade my life for his, and instead I traded his life for my pride. I have no right to call myself a savior of men with his loss on my conscience."

Gabriel responded quietly, "And as I have said to your daughter, until we have buried him in the ground beside Julio, we must not abandon hope. The Lord indeed moves in ways that are a mystery to us, and He may yet have a purpose for Paulo on this earth."

He sighed and nodded in the direction of the people still working around the shelter. "Now, which one is Julio's wife? Let us go and speak to her."

Salvador considered Gabriel for a moment, and then said, “I will go and speak with her alone. It is not your duty, nor your place.” He grimaced. “I cannot attempt to give you a lesson about knowing one’s place, but I assure you that this is more than you will be welcome to do.”

The older man turned away and trudged down the hill, leaving Gabriel in Julio’s silent company.