

## To Find Gold

"You're looking well, Grandpa."

"Thank you, Jacob," Mr. Comstock replied. "I appreciate the compliment, although a glance at the mirror tells me otherwise."

"Still can't sleep?" Jacob asked.

"Not enough," the old man said. "I've finally reached the point in life where I have the time and the money to do pretty much whatever I want. Sadly, I've also reached the point where what I want most is to sleep through the night. A few hours of sleep followed by a few hours of restless dozing seems to be the best I can manage. But I didn't invite you here to listen to an old man complain about his sleep. I want to show you something."

He turned and spoke to the caregiver standing behind him. "Robert, could you please hand me the item we found in the trunk today?"

Robert took a package off the sideboard and handed it to the old man. Then he rolled the man's wheelchair forward so he could give it to Jacob.

"Looks like a book," Jacob said as he examined the package. Inside a plastic bag was a large, leather-bound book with no title, like a diary, together with several loose pages and fragments of pages.

"It's a ship's log," Mr. Comstock said. "Or at least that's what the antique dealer in Spain who sold it to me claimed. Supposedly it's the ship's log of the *Santa Maria de la Concepción*, a Spanish Galleon lost near the Bahamas in 1528. He said it was carrying a treasure in silver and gold back to Spain. I don't have a lot of faith in his story, but it was obviously very old, and the price was reasonable, so I bought it. It was falling apart when I got it, and the writing was very faded and hard to read, but I was able to find the words 'Santa Maria de' on a page fragment. It's deteriorated even more in the years and multiple moves since then. I was hoping to find details as to where the ship was lost, but I never had time to study it until I retired, and by then my eyes were too weak to do the job."

"So, you want me to look for the location?" Jacob asked.

"Only if you want to. You majored in history, and I thought it might interest you. You're still, uh, between jobs, right?"

Jacob nodded. "History is really interesting, but I guess majoring in history wasn't the smartest decision I ever made."

"You followed your passion. For what it's worth, I think you're extremely smart. You take after your mother. She used to stump me with questions about Greek and Roman mythology when she was still in middle school. I have every confidence that you'll eventually find the right job and take off like a skyrocket. In the meantime, though, if you want to study that log you're welcome to it."

Jacob looked at the book with renewed interest. "I've never been on a treasure hunt."

Mr. Comstock laughed. "Let's not talk about treasure hunting. Not yet anyway. That book may just be a hoax designed to capture a few *pesetas* from gullible American GIs. Or it may be the boring diary of a penniless monk. There's an old Spanish proverb, 'It takes much silver to find gold.' Let's find out what information is actually in the book first, and then we can decide if it's worth doing anything more."

Jacob looked thoughtful. "There are probably archives somewhere in Spain that have information about the ship."

"Probably," his grandfather said, "but if I were you, I'd start with the history library at the university. They were a big help to me when I was researching my books."

"That's certainly the easiest place to start," Jacob agreed.

"Just one word of caution about that library," the old man said. "It's probably best if you don't mention my name. I made what I thought was a modest donation after they helped me research the Spanish American War. After that, every time I went in there the head of the library insisted on personally assisting me. He's a nice guy, but he's hopeless. You're better off working with his staff."

"How do I explain where the book came from?" Jacob asked.

Mr. Comstock thought for a moment. "Just tell them you found it among your dad's things, and you want to know what it is. They should be able to take it from there."

"Dad didn't leave us much," Jacob commented.

"I know. He loved you and your mother very much, and he was a wonderful man, but he didn't have much of a head for business. Your mother was devastated when he died, but she

did a good job of raising you by herself. I offered to help, but she wanted to do it on her own. She was stubborn. I'm afraid she got that from me."

"You did a lot," Jacob said. "You were always there when she needed you, and you moved back here after you retired. And I never would have been able to finish college without your help."

"I wish she could have seen you graduate." A look of grief clouded the old man's face. "You don't expect your little girl to die before you do."

"She was there," Jacob reassured him. "We may not have been able to see her, but I could sense that she was there. So was Dad."

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Jacob struggled with the book for several days. The pages were not numbered, so he had no idea where the loose pages went. He didn't want to handle the book any more than was absolutely necessary because the pages were so fragile, but he couldn't scan the pages because when he tried to open the book wide enough to scan it he loosened more pages. The book was, not surprisingly, written in Spanish, and the handwriting was so ornate and so faint that none of the optical character recognition tools he tried could make heads or tails out of the loose pages he was able to scan. He tried to interpret the handwriting himself and type it into a translation tool, but with little success. Interpreting faded, ornate handwriting is difficult enough if you speak the language. If you don't speak the language and can't tell if a squiggle is "oo," "ou," "on," or something else, typing all the possibilities into a translation tool just leads to frustration. Finally he gathered up the book, the loose pages, his scans, and his notes and took them to the university library.

He explained his problem to the man at the reference desk.

"I think you want to see Maria," he said. "She's our research librarian. She's helping a student now, but she should be free at 4:00. Are you faculty? Or a student?"

"I'm an alumnus," Jacob said. "I got my Master's here." It had never occurred to him that only faculty and students could use the library, but his answer didn't seem to bother the man behind the desk. He just typed something into the computer and said, "She'll be expecting you at four."

When Jacob came back at four the man was no longer at the reference desk. He had been replaced by a middle-aged woman with grey hair and thick glasses. He thought she looked

familiar. Maybe she had been there when he was a student? Or maybe she just looked like a librarian. She took his information, picked up a phone, and said "Mr. Summers is here." He was idly wondering why so many librarians looked like old ladies when a voice behind him said "Mr. Summers?"

He was taken aback by the beautiful woman who was looking inquisitively at him. She had long dark hair, dark eyes, and a lovely figure. He guessed she was in her mid-twenties. He was temporarily at a loss for words so he just nodded his head in response to her question.

"I understand you have a book for me to look at. If you could follow me into my office, I'll see what I can tell you about it."

They sat down in her office. He showed her the book and told her what little he knew about it.

"I'm not even certain it's a ship's log," he said. "That's what the antique dealer told my dad, but I don't know if he was telling the truth. I haven't been able to translate much of it, but this," he pointed to a line on one of the scanned sheets, "looks like 'plancton.' Plankton. Doesn't sound like something from a ship's log."

Maria stared at the sheet and squinted. "I think that's 'platano.' Banana. Might be something the ship carried as cargo. But it's very hard to read. Can you increase the contrast on your scanner?"

"Maybe," Jacob said. "But I can't scan the pages in the book. I tried, but they started to tear when I flattened them on the scanner."

"Can you open the book enough to take a picture of each page with a camera?"

"I tried that, but I could only open the book far enough to take a picture at an angle, and part of the page was out of focus. It was also very distorted because of the angle."

"Try using some really bright lights," she suggested. "That will close down the aperture and give you a greater depth of field. Do you have access to photo editing software?"

"I've got a pretty good program on my computer."

"See if it has a tool to correct perspective. That should straighten out the distorted page photos. It won't make them perfect, but it should help. And you might play around with the brightness and contrast to see if you can make it easier to read." She looked at her calendar.

"I've got some time at 2:00 tomorrow afternoon to take another look at it, if you think you'll have time to take pictures by then."

"Sure!" Jacob said, as he gathered up his things. "I really appreciate your help."

"This is what I do," Maria said. "That book really fascinates me. I hope we can figure out what it is. You just need to take a few pictures, to see if they're easier to read. And don't bother trying to translate them. I speak Spanish, so it will be easier for me to translate than for you to look up each word. You just need to focus on getting the best pictures possible."

Jacob had a gooseneck desk lamp which he managed to arrange to shine directly into the partially opened book while he took photos. With the brighter light, the entire page was in focus. It took him a while to find the best adjustments to make with his photo editing software, but he finally managed to produce some pages which, while still faint, ornate, and hard to read, might be decipherable.

When Maria looked at the pages she was able to translate most of the words with little effort. There were some she said she'd need to research, as the ornate script might be confusing her, the spelling might have changed over the years, or they might be arcane nautical terms, but she was almost certain the book was a ship's log. There were references to tides, personnel assigned to certain duties on each day, features observed on the coastline (including banana trees), and other details which a ship's captain would have recorded.

"Now comes the hard part," Maria said. "You need to photograph and clean up every page of this log, including the loose pages and the dozens of broken scraps of paper with writing on them. Putting this log back together will be like assembling a giant jigsaw puzzle. A puzzle with pictures on both sides of the pieces and one where you don't know what the finished pictures look like."

"I can do that," Jacob said.

"There's another issue," Maria said. "They pay me to help faculty and staff with their research. I can't justify spending hours and hours helping an alumnus decode a book the library doesn't own."

Jacob felt his hopes crumble.

"I don't work on weekends," she continued, "so if you want my help with this, let's get together on Saturday. I can reserve one of the study rooms in the basement and we can work on it there."

“That would be great!” Jacob was embarrassed by how enthusiastically he said this. “I mean, I would really appreciate your help. I don’t think I can do this without you, but I don’t want to spoil your weekend.”

Maria smiled. “I’m probably just as curious about this book as you are. It’s much more interesting than most of the projects the professors bring me. I mean, comparing the nutritional quality of food consumed by peasants, craftsmen, and nobility during the Middle Ages might be important from a historical perspective, but it’s a real yawner when you’re poring through books trying to figure out what people ate.”

Jacob laughed.

“Let’s meet at 9:00 Saturday morning,” Maria said. “You don’t need to photograph the entire book by then. Just bring printouts of whatever you have. And bring some scissors and tape. It will probably be easier to piece together the fragments if we cut them out and tape them together when we find a match.”

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Several weeks later Jacob met with his grandfather again.

“I’m afraid I have some bad news for you, Grandfather. This book is a ship’s log, but it’s not from the *Santa Maria de la Concepción*. It’s the log of the *Santa María del Nacimiento Virginal*. It was a Spanish Galleon, but it struck a reef off the coast of Cuba in 1547. It was sailing from Spain to the new world with a cargo of flour, linens, china, gunpowder, and other commodities that weren’t available in the Americas. It was part of a convoy, so the crew was rescued and the other ships salvaged what they could of the cargo. The rest may be of archeological interest, but there’s no treasure.”

His grandfather just nodded. “I never really believed the antique dealer’s story, but I thought it was worth looking into. I’m sorry you wasted so much time on what turned out to be a wild goose chase.”

Jacob shrugged. “It may have been a wild goose chase, but it was an interesting one. I told you about the librarian, Maria, who was helping me translate the log and research its origins. She asked if I would consider donating the book to the library. I told her I’d have to think about it, because I couldn’t tell her it really wasn’t mine to give away.”

The old man waved his hand dismissively. "She's welcome to it. From what you told me, she's put a lot of her own time into this project. If she wants a crumbling old book in return, I'm certainly not going to say no."

Jacob smiled. "She's been very helpful. She even found me a job as a research assistant. It doesn't pay much, but I can work on a PhD and it will give me an inside edge on any faculty positions that might open up."

"That's great news!" his grandfather said. He glanced at his watch. "It's almost dinner time. Do you want to go out for dinner to celebrate? My treat."

Jacob hesitated before replying. "Thanks, but can I take a rain check on that? I've already got plans tonight. I'm taking Maria out to dinner to celebrate my new job."

"So maybe it wasn't a wild goose chase after all?"

Jacob grinned. "It's still early, but I think I've found my gold."

Later, after Jacob left, Robert wheeled the old man into the dining room for their dinner. When he brought out the food he said, "You don't seem very disappointed about the ship's log, Mr. Comstock."

Mr. Comstock chuckled. "I'm not. I didn't lie to Jacob, but I'm afraid I'm guilty of not telling him the whole truth. I said I didn't have time to research the log while I was in Spain, and that's true, but I didn't tell him that one of the civilians I worked with had time. He was an amateur historian, and he had some friends who maintained archives of Spanish shipwrecks. They were aware of the log in the antique shop, and they had already determined that it came from the *Santa María del Nacimiento Virginal*."

"So why didn't you tell your grandson about that?"

"I worked with Maria when I was researching my last book. I was very impressed by her. I immediately thought of Jacob, but during one of our conversations she complained that her mother was always trying to set her up with 'nice boys' and she resented the interference. So, I knew she was single, and I knew I couldn't set her up with Jacob. I thought maybe if he met her on his own things would be different."

"How do you think she'll react when she finds out he's your grandson?"

The old man grinned. "I'm hoping by that time it won't matter. By that time my deviousness will just be family lore. Part of the 'how I met your mother' story."