

# FORGOTTEN BROTHERS

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although this is a work of fiction, it is based on events that actually happened. The reader will find occasional footnotes that refer to the Notes in the back of the book citing historical references substantiating the marked event. Only Vicente Yanez Pinzon's girlfriend/wife and her family, the crewmen in Alonso Sanchez's boat, the businessman Roberto Ruiz, and the Pinzons' financial advisor are fictional characters. The dialogue is fictional, but it is included during historical events, as no one except Christopher Columbus kept a journal, and even he did not record conversations.

# PROLOGUE

By his death, the Pilot of Huelva changed history.

The sun shone down like a bonfire. The small boat rocked to and fro amidst the waves, and a light wind bore it eastward. After the storm had wrecked their ship, they had taken to the ship's boat. The boat had been full, but one by one all dozen seamen who had occupied it perished. Sometimes on their own; sometimes with the assistance of one of their *compadres* they had eased themselves over the side as they had given up the will to live—anything to avoid the hell that was the incessant rocking and the unmerciful sun.

At one point the ship's carpenter dove into the sea, mumbling that a fiesta was taking place beneath the boat and the priest was blessing the food. "Hurry before the *gambas* are all gone!" he had exclaimed. With that, he gestured for his friends to join him and dove with a demented grin on his desiccated face. The boatswain's mate (bosun) went after the carpenter, but the sharks had torn the first man's body apart before the bosun could even reach him, and it was all the other survivors could do to retrieve the latter before he too suffered a gruesome death. At least that time.

With no sail or sea anchor to keep the boat's bow pointed toward the wind and waves, the little vessel pitched, helpless against the torrents of water incessantly bearing down on it. Sometimes a wave caught its nose buried in a trough between two waves and spilled water into its hollow interior, soaking all aboard and washing away the scattered detritus of the crew's belongings. Other times the boat appeared about to be swamped or turned over, but she would right herself and bravely shoulder on. As a testament to her builders, the tiny vessel withstood this pounding, the only question being whether anyone aboard would survive.

Time passed excruciatingly slow—so slow that the sun hung in the sky like a gently moving cloud. Other than the occasional rogue wave that struck the boat, time proceeded inexorably—boring and steady, but unceasing in its monotonous march.

The remnants of two mariners lay at the bottom of the boat, sloshing back and forth in pools of putrid sea water. One stirred. The captain, Alonso Sanchez, realized he still survived, but just barely. He wondered why he *was* still alive as his tongue was swollen, his skin burned from the severe sunburn he had accumulated, and his mind contained more hallucinations than coherent patterns of thought. Salt had encrusted almost his entire body, and where there had been skin abrasions from his being knocked about by the storm, painful salt-boils blistered. He cursed as he realized his eyelids were swollen almost shut and he endured sunburn over most of his body, especially on his ears, nose, and the top of his head. Sanchez stirred and, despite the stench of the putrid water in the boat, cupped his swollen hands to gather some cool water with which to douse his stinging face.

Barely alive, Sanchez refocused in his delirium; something near had disturbed him. “Shoo! Shoo!” he exclaimed with a feeble wave of his hand. The ubiquitous seagulls hovered, and in his blurry vision he saw one of the cursed birds pecking at something, at Pedro, his cabin boy and the only other member of the crew that Sanchez thought had survived this far. “*Quitate!* Go away!” he said. But too late. The gull had pecked out Pedro’s right eye and then spread its wings and glided away. *Dios Mio!* I warned Pedro not to drink seawater; he must have done it while I was sleeping. I cautioned him that it would be tempting to drink seawater, but not to do it as it would dry him up. Worse, it will make you crazy! How long has it been? How long ago did that tempest sink our ship? It seemed like months, but it had only been a little over a week. Sanchez thought that a dozen of his crew had survived the cyclone that de-masted and capsized them and forced them into this God-forsaken boat. A half-

dozen crewmen had already been drowned or washed overboard by the storm-driven waves.

Was he being delusional in his own mad dehydration or had he, Alonso Sanchez, the grand Pilot of Huelva, actually discovered a land to the west?

The weather and the elements had been so chaotic that he had trouble in taking accurate dead reckoning measurements of the distance traveled, but what he took, he wrote on a piece of paper that even now, was stuffed inside his shirt. These estimates were fairly accurate, as the key measure of rudimentary navigational instruments was the amount of water consumed by the crew. Experience had shown that the men's consumption of water remained constant under each type of weather condition—and a skilled skipper such as Sanchez could estimate distances depending on the amount of water his crew had imbibed. He was still marveling over the distance they had traveled, expanding, by far, the extent west traversed by anyone else.

Enveloped in fatigue and overcome with severe dehydration, his tongue so swollen it barely fit into his mouth; his skin sizzling from sunburn; his eyes glazed almost shut, Sanchez again slept. He awoke to find another bird, a raven this time, seemingly ready to peck at Pedro. The bird cocked its head and looked at him. Sanchez wondered if he too were dead and the raven would come peck out his eye, as well. No matter, he was so sleepy . . . . But what . . . ? He awoke with a start. A raven? A shorebird! *Dios Mio*, land must be near!

Alonso Sanchez, through sheer force of will, dragged himself to his knees to peer over the gunwale, forgetting the pain, forgetting the past. There, on the starboard horizon, lay a shadow. Could it possibly be land? Could it be an island? He rubbed his salt-encrusted eyes, burning them anew. He shook his head; he could see with difficulty through the mere slits left by his swollen eyelids and he still couldn't focus. Putting his hand over the side, he grabbed a palm full of ocean

and scrubbed his face, splashing it over his burning face and rubbed his peeling hand through his greasy hair. Looking through the telescope was out of the question given his raw and tender eyes, so he strained to focus his eyes with every ounce of strength he could generate. He managed to take off his shirt, the only thing he could use as a makeshift sail, while making a conscious effort to stick the paper constituting his log into the front of his trousers. He tied the shirt to his telescope and feebly held it aloft. It billowed with the meager breeze, filling his heart as he felt the bow of the boat rise as a puff of wind caught it.

Could it be? Could he be saved?

But progress was slow, like a plodding sea turtle, and the sun was dying.

He fell in and out of consciousness. In a final fit of desperation, he threw his body over the tiller bar so that his weight would ensure the boat's bow would point toward the windward point of the land—if it were indeed land—so that if it were, he wouldn't blow past it and remain forever at sea.

He awoke the next morning with the boat's bow crunching ashore on a sandy beach. Was he still dreaming? Was this God's sick penance for his licentious youth? Was this a trick?

But no trick. The boat was ashore. He lay, panting and delusional on the boat's bottom, and rested until he could find the strength to drag himself out of the boat. He lay on the bottom of the boat for hours, through the heat of the day, and into the evening. He was too weak to move, too weak even to swat the flies and sand fleas away from his face. But instead of his strength increasing, it was being sapped from his body as the heat, humidity, and lack of food and water drained it of energy. He said his prayers to the Virgin Mary and just as he was about to expire a shadow fell over the boat.

"Hello, what's this?" a man said. "God in heaven, I dare say, is this the Pilot of Huelva?"

A bolt of shock and understanding seemed to pass through the dying man in the boat. Somebody on this forsaken island knew him? "Si, *señor*. It's me, but who are you?" he croaked.

"Don't worry about who I am. I've sailed with you out of Huelva and Palos. You haven't seen me for a while as I've been in Portugal and you're now in Madeira."

"But, but what're you doing here?" asked Sanchez. "How, how, how . . . did you find me?"

"Don't worry, *mi amigo*. I wasn't looking for you. I live here now. I come down here often to stare out to sea, looking off to the west. What happened to you, my friend?"

"How strange that it's you that found me, you of all people," Sanchez said in his blind delirium. "To the west," he croaked, "see for yourself, here — *muy importante!*" he gasped as he leaned back to reveal a rolled up parchment sticking out of his stained and greasy trousers. The man immediately reached in and grabbed it.

"What's this Alonso, a map?" the man asked as he carefully unrolled the waterlogged document.

". . . ugh, no . . ." Sanchez began to fade. The man shook him.

"Tell me, my friend, what is this?"

". . . my log . . . shows latitude . . . the islands I visited . . . dates of measurements . . . dead reckoning longitude . . . as Ptolemy said . . . islands out there . . . off the Indies . . . tall, olive-skinned people . . ."

"Alonso, Alonso!" the man yelled as he shook his dying compatriot. "What else can you tell me?" The man quickly and desperately scanned the log to assure himself that he could figure it out before his friend expired, which he obviously was doing. He shook him again. Too late. He was gone. But the man had Sanchez'

log. It was an ironic twist; in this idyllic setting with a gorgeous sky on a picturesque beach lay a deceased mariner in a battered little boat.

The second man looked heavenward. "*Gracias, Dios Mio, gracias por este,*" he said as he held aloft the log of the Pilot of Huelva.