

*TIDES OF FORTUNE*  
*episode one*



**ESCAPE**

# **Escape**

By  
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# Chapter 1

The crew were scattered among the bonfires lit to ward off the cold Florida morning. We waited on the beach of what had become known as Gasparilla Island on the west coast of the peninsula called Florida. The men were anxious, all knowing that the next few hours would decide both their fortunes and fates. We had passed bottles of rum back and forth last night as usual, but most remained sober in order to have their wits about them. I stood on the beach searching for any sign of the captain and the treasure we were to split, but as yet he had not appeared.

I felt naked standing alone, knowing eyes were on me. As cabin boy I was usually close to the captain, should he need me, and I feared their restlessness would turn against me if he did not appear soon. I have never been sure if it was the four years I had spent by the captain's side or my own abilities that the crew respected, but they generally left me alone. In fact many often looked to me for orders rather than Rhames, the first mate. Most knew that I could read and write elevating me to the unearned status of advisor. Lately, several of the men had sought me out, asking questions that I couldn't answer; mainly what they should do and where they should go with their share of the loot. My value to them was lost if Gasparilla failed to appear.

This morning we were to divide what was left of our efforts to pirate every ship that had crossed our path over the last years. Our captain held a grudge against the Spanish, but any merchant ship had been fair prey. As I looked at the water waiting for the captain to arrive, I couldn't help but notice the glances cast toward me. They looked at me as if I knew what each man's share would be, something only Gasparilla had knowledge of - if he even did. I feared if it was not enough, there would be blood. The men's expectations were hard to judge and I was getting anxious.

Things were different these days and at least I suspected that pirates, as we were, would soon be extinct. Gone were the dens of iniquity like Port Royal in Jamaica or New Providence in the Bahamas, where men could spend their plunder freely, often going from wealthy to broke within days. It was 1821 now, and rumor had it that the United States, after defeating Britain in the War of 1812, several years ago, had its eye on becoming a sea power. And that involved eliminating piracy from its waters. The fledgling government was expanding after beating the British back for the second time and Florida was a hinderance to them. I had come across a newspaper clipping that contained a quote from Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams that said, *Florida had become a derelict open to the occupancy of every*

*enemy, civilized or savage, of the United States, and serving no other earthly purpose than as a post of annoyance to them.* I had read the quote several times to the crew and received roars of approval. There were rumors that Spain, unable to control it, was ready to cede the state to the new government and the Navy was ready to launch a fleet to eliminate our kind.

Personally, I had no other pirating experience, being liberated from my family by this very group at the age of thirteen. Gasparilla, known to his men as Gaspar, had become a father figure to me. His reputation was of a bloodthirsty buccaneer, but that was at least partially fabricated to enhance his reputation. Yes, he was a pirate, but having survived into his sixties, I knew there to be more to him than just a legend. He was also a thinker and maybe that was our bond. Gasparilla was not your typical buccaneer. His reputation for blood lust was in revenge for his past, having served in both the Spanish Navy and the court of Charles III, where he was disgraced and turned to piracy. But the facts were that he was an aristocrat and generally behaved like one. Well educated and cultured he remained aloof and a mystery to his men. We had spent hours talking and planning for the changing world and today was the result.

My thoughts were interrupted by several men running toward me. I scanned the water, finally seeing what they had in the dim light of the morning, a lone boat making its way to the shore. More men ran to the beach and waded into the water, waiting to guide the boat as it surfed the knee high waves. With four men on each side, they guided the boat and our captain to rest on the sand where more men waited to haul the craft above the water line. Gaspar eased over the side, men clapping him on the back, relieved that he had come. There had been talk that he had absconded with the majority of the treasure, leaving them with little, but as they hauled the ten chests from the boat their mood lightened. I had my doubts this was the entire treasure, having inventoried most of the boats we had taken, but I remained quiet.

“Come on boys.” The captain stood on a chest and yelled to any stragglers not already there. “Time for y’all to be wealthy bastards.” He jumped down and called to Rhames who stood in front of the chests with one hand on his flint lock pistol, the other on his cutlass. The crew backed away respecting the man’s competence and brutality. The last of the men who had obviously partaken in an excess of rum last night wandered over.

“Nick. Come over here and bring the manifest,” He called to me. We had prearranged this meeting to the last detail. I pulled the folded papers from my vest and moved next to him, ceremoniously unfolding them as he had instructed me to heighten the drama. Knowing we were the only two assembled who could read, he knew the crew would respect the mystery of what was written on the documents.

He took the two sheets and held them over his head. “This is it men,” he waved the papers. “The fruits of your labor. We split it now and today we go our separate ways, all rich men.”

A cheer came from the men as two of their cohorts, also preselected for their loyalty moved past Rhames and went to the chests. The men gathered closer several carrying torches that lit the plain oak containers. The crew gasped as the lids opened one at a time, the glow of gold, silver and jewels sparkling in the light. I tensed slightly knowing that if it was going to get ugly, it was going to be now, but the captain distracted them with the manifest. In truth, it was all gibberish, just a

ruse to reassure the crew that this had been planned and each would get their fair share.

I started calling the names, beginning with the lowest, skipping over myself. We had decided earlier that the captain would retain my share until we reached the mainland. There we would decide whether to stay together or go our separate ways. I was glad for his protection as any one of these men could have taken my share with a cross look. I had learned some skill with a pistol and sword, but I had never adopted their love of violence.

They started to line up, holding burlap sacks in front of them when we were interrupted by a scream.

“Ship.”

The crew gathered to where the man was standing.

## Chapter 2

The outline of a lone frigate was clear in the distance, working north toward Tampa. Those looking through spyglasses called out that it was flying the Union Jack - a sure sign of a merchant ship in these now American controlled waters. An argument ensued as our proclaimed retirement, just started that morning, was now threatened, but majority ruled and we made for the boats to pursue the promise of plunder. I took my place beside Gaspar in the lead boat as we rowed for our ship, the Floridablanca, and scrambled up the ropes toward the deck. No time was wasted weighing anchor and setting sail as we all watched the ship's approach. The square-rigged ship appeared to be on a port tack fighting the north wind with shortened sail, something that surely should have alarmed us. If I was navigating, I would surely hold further out to sea, away from the dangers the land held. It was not my place and I held my tongue. The lure of treasure and women overcame our good sense as we scrambled around the deck preparing cannon and grappling hooks in preparation for our victim.

I looked back over the stern at our camp on the island. A handful of men stood in a group on the beach to guard the treasure we were about to divide, watching our progress. The mood on the boat was jubilant as most of the crew didn't care for the captain's decision to disband. But he had a troubled look on his face, as if some disaster was about to befall him that he stoically accepted. I finished coiling the line for the last grappling hook and went toward the captain. As first boy, it was my job to attend to his needs.

Gaspar called an order to turn out of the wind to allow the merchant leeway. We appeared to be the faster boat giving us the ability to choose our course for attack where the merchant vessel was fixed on its course, although there was no reason I could think that his sails were reefed. Judging the wind and the progress of the other boat, Gaspar called an order and we turned to port. The wind filled the sails and we picked up speed on what appeared to be a collision course with our prey. After taking the most favorable tack, there was nothing the other ship could do to avoid us. The energy running through the crew as they eagerly leaned over the rails and watched the gap close was one of the thrills of pirating and I couldn't help but be infected with it.

Our situation quickly changed as we approached. Just outside of our cannon range, the ship dropped the Union Jack and hoisted the stars and stripes of the American flag. We were powerless, our momentum too great to stop the boat as we watched the men on the deck of the other ship pull canvas covers from what appeared to be their cargo, revealing cannons. Someone yelled an order, we heard a

loud boom and their ship rocked as the guns recoiled. A cloud of smoke formed above the frigate as the projectiles were launched and seconds later the destruction began. Mayhem took over as cannon balls and shrapnel fell around us, a destruction we had only witnessed as the aggressor and victor. The main mast came down after the second volley tearing a large portion of the gunwale away. I knew all was lost and it was every man for himself. We were in disarray, yet to fire even the small swivel cannon mounted on the rails.

Our ship was doomed and I looked down into the water at the men who had already lowered the boats and abandoned ship. Another broadside from the frigate sealed the fate of the *Floridablanca* and I jumped. The longboat capsized just as I landed on the deck throwing me into the cold Gulf water. I looked up and saw debris falling toward me from another hit and dove under water to avoid a falling sail that would surely drown me. My breath was almost gone when I finally surfaced and started swimming toward a piece of floating debris. The situation was dire for many of my mates, and I had no idea the fate of my captain, but I feared for his life as I had seen a figure holding a cutlass in one hand and the anchor chain in the other jump from the boat as the longboats from the frigate approached.

Bodies floated by as I kicked toward shore, not wanting to look back at the destruction. Downhearted about what I expected was Gaspar's fate, I knew enough that I was alive and although my survival was far from a sure thing right now, capture would result in a death by the rope. I kicked harder.

"Hurry, load the boats," I yelled at the men watching the devastation as I climbed out of the water, one through a spyglass, the others shielding their eyes from the sun. Several turned to me.

"What say Nick? Is the captain dead?" A man named Swift asked.

"All is lost. We have only minutes to load what we can and make for the mainland before the Navy comes for us." I turned to see if the pursuit had begun. Surely they knew of the island and the treasure it was rumored to contain. As soon as they had captured the remaining crew, they would come after us. I grabbed the spyglass from one of the men and put it to my eye. "Hurry. They'll check the water for survivors and this will be their next stop."

The men ran inland toward the ten chests stacked against a palm tree and started carrying them to the beach. I did some quick math in my head and ordered the men to put two chests in each boat. With ten men and five boats maybe we had a chance that at least some of us could escape. The water churned as we ran back and forth loading the chests in the boats. Once loaded we jumped in and reached for the oars. The paddle blades battled the water, one man on each side, as we pulled with all we had in the direction of the mainland.

My boat led the convoy and I pondered my new role as leader. No one had questioned me in our haste to escape the island.

## Chapter 3

We made our way around the exposed seaward side of the island and were well into the protected waters of the sound when we paused. I looked across the large channel at the land on either side wondering where to go. A mile across the water in the direction of the mainland was the cover we sought. Dozens of small islands surrounded by shallow water were scattered along the coast. Exhausted, we knew we were in a life or death situation and we worked through the pain of our aching muscles, pulling hard on the oars. Thankfully we paddled with a flood tide, made even stronger by the full moon. If the tide had been outgoing, we would have been treading water, but instead the extra two knots helped push our boats toward land. Rhames sat by my side, grunting with every pull and giving me cross looks as his strokes, more powerful than mine kept moving the boat toward starboard where I sat. I knew the estuary as well as any man and navigated while he watched the horizon behind us for any sign of pursuit.

As we reached land, we collapsed on our oars, exhausted by the effort of the hour long row. We floated into a cove in the lee of a horseshoe-shaped island hidden from view from the seaward side. I had seen no boats yet, but we all knew they would come. The legend of the treasure on our boats was widespread, sought by both pirates and the United States Navy.

“Well Nick? What do you think?” Rhames said after he caught his breath.

I was shocked by the question. He was technically second in command after the captain, but most knew it was more for his loyalty and brutality than for his wits. My only guess was that after several years of bringing him orders from the captain, that he looked to me as his surrogate. I took the chance and retained the authority. Leaving our state of affairs to pirate law, meaning the consensus of the group, would probably result in several deaths and the loss of our treasure. When we were safe we could choose a leader, but for now I had an idea.

“They’re bound to follow. I saw the captain go overboard with the anchor chain around his waist and his cutlass in his hand.” The statement was met by murmurs of approval. Pirates lived hard and died young, with the exception of our captain who was sixty-five this year. I remembered the look on his face as we approached the disguised ship and thought he might have had second thoughts about retiring. Dying with your cutlass in your hand brought you to our version of Valhalla and those who fell in battle were revered. “I saw the ship go down, but there are no boats after us yet. We’ve got a good head start, but they’ll be on our scent soon enough.” I looked from man to man trying to gauge them from the looks

on their faces. These were men, although equals by the code, who were used to taking orders.

I tried to anticipate the next move the Navy captain would make. The frigate would have put their longboats in the water as soon as the *Floridablanca* went down. I was guessing they had at least twenty boats - twice ours, each holding half a dozen well-armed men. The sun, although it was only a third way into the sky was near its winter zenith indicating noon. That would give us about five hours of daylight to reach a safe haven. Considering our head start and the tide change that would hamper their efforts this afternoon, I figured they would be no further than where we now sat by dusk.

“We’ve got to head inland.” All eyes were on me and I heard my voice crack, belaying my nervousness. “The Peace River is at the end of the bay. There is a woman there that the captain trusted.” I heard several ayes and the men readied to row. I looked over at Rhames and he nodded at me, a small smile on his face. Surely he knew that once we reached land he could overpower us and take the treasure for himself. There was not a man amongst us that would contest him - and he had the only pistol.

As we rowed through the small islands toward the point of land that marked the entrance to the Bay, I started to question my decision. My mouth was already dry and I realized we had no food or water. Fortunately, the December air was cooler and less humid than the summer months, but we would have to find drinking water by dark. The cover of the islands was behind us and we were exposed as we neared the headland. I looked past the point to the open water that lay beyond. Several times, the captain had taken me and several other men through here to a farm called Spanish Homestead where he favored the Lady Boggess. My plan was to reach the homestead and seek her sympathy and protection either through her hatred of the Navy for killing her husband or through bribery.

On our past trips to the farm, we had stopped for the night at a small village named Punta Gorda where I knew we could get food and water. To complicate matters, the near shore was totally exposed. We would have to row the two miles across open water to reach the southern shore and the small islands that would offer us protection. If we were to hug the north shore until dusk and then make the crossing, the landmass would hide the angle of approach of the pursuers. Once we reached the far shore we could use the cover of the islands and the full moon to reach Punta Gorda where several of us would sneak ashore and steal water and food. Thus provisioned, we could make for the mouth of the river and seek the aid of the captain’s lady friend.

With nothing to do but pull on my oar I started to think ahead. Word would spread fast and the lure of the treasure we carried would bring out every bounty hunter in Florida. I also feared traveling overland through the territory; a war between the Americans and the Seminole Indians was brewing, making the land as dangerous as the ocean. The size and weight of the chests would necessitate a horse-drawn cart which was slow and noticeable. With only ten men to defend it, the treasure would be in jeopardy before we started. I looked back at the open water thinking it our best chance for escape.

## Chapter 4

Wind blown spray flew over the bow of the boat as we pulled to our limits crashing through the waves in our path. We were soaked and despite the hard work, I was shivering. It was hard to tell how Rhames fared as he stared straight ahead and rowed. The waves were capped with white foam, some high enough to block our view of land when the boat fell into the trough. With the help of the outgoing tide, the crests stacked up in the entrance to the bay so close together they slammed the boat continuously. I chanced a glance at the other boats in our convoy when we crested a wave, and they were struggling as we were. At least to this point, we remained together.

With every glimpse of land, our situation looked worse. The island we were making for seemed to diminish in size. Was it possible the current was moving us backwards? I thought about asking Rhames, but his skill lay more with the pistol and cutlass than navigation. No, this was my call. I looked toward the sky for a sign and what I saw changed our course. A dark line of clouds was approaching. Not the huge puffy clouds with their dark anvil bottoms that wreaked havoc during the summer, but a long dark line etched across the horizon. There was no way to know how quickly it would hit us, but when it did, the wind would be fierce and would likely last for several days. All I knew was it was not visible several hours ago, meaning it was moving fast. We were in no way prepared for the rain and chill that accompanied these winter storms.

“Rhames,” I yelled over the wind. He turned toward me. “We need to go back.” I nodded my head toward the line of clouds that seemed even closer now.

“Aye,” he replied and started to back his oar.

That was about as much as I could expect from him, but I needed to make sure the other boats knew our plan. I yelled at the top of my lungs, but the wind threw my words back in my face. Rhames must have noticed and yelled with me. His voice was lost as well. We had to signal the crews or the current would scatter us. I noticed the pistol stuck in his belt and yelled for him to fire. Without a word he withdrew the gun, pointed toward the sky and fired. The blast was deafening, and I turned to see if the other boats had heard. The sound had carried and heads turned. Now that we had their attention, I focused on the maneuver that was so simple in calm water, but dangerous with the present conditions.

I continued to pull forwards as Rhames back paddled, trying to time my strokes with his. The boat started to turn and I braced myself for the crux, when we would be beam on to the waves and in danger of capsizing. I closed my eyes and froze, not wanting to watch as we turned and the wave came over the boat.

“Row, dammit. Whatever happens - row harder,” Rhames yelled.

I woke from my stupor and pulled as hard as I could. Finally the boat broke free from the friction of the water, but paused as if hanging on the wave. We were stalled, about to fall backwards and in danger of capsizing when we glanced at each other and with a furious attempt we both pulled at the same time. I pulled again, feeling only air and exhaled as we found ourselves on the crest of the wave. Having passed through the dangerous quarter the boat moved quickly toward the island we had just left.

We had done enough beach landings to know how to surf and despite being drenched and cold, the feeling of riding the waves was exhilarating. I looked back, a smile on my face that quickly disappeared when I saw the scene behind us. Two of the boats were following, another was struggling through the turn, but the last was gone, an oar floating in the water where the boat should have been. “Look,” I yelled at Rhames and waited for him to turn.

I desperately searched for the men, but the only sign the boat had been there was the single oar. It was too loud with the wind blowing and waves crashing against the boat to hear anyone yell; if the men had survived, they were invisible in the white-capped water. Rhames, more pragmatic or less emotional than I, simply turned away and started to row again. He had been around long enough to know that there was nothing we could do to save the men, the boat or the treasure chests that were now on the bottom of the bay.

I felt a tinge of guilt as I looked away from the water, and focused on the land ahead. The captain had taught me how to use fixed points of land to determine a position on the water. It was easier with a compass, but I knew if I could find the right landmarks, that we could return in better conditions and recover the chests. We had sounded the entrance to the bay on previous trips and with the water only around ten feet where the boat went down, we could dive on the site. I struggled to line up any features that would be memorable.

My eyes went first to the headland on the left and I was able to line up two small islands that I knew. I scanned the coast to the right looking for another landmark. A tall palm leaning toward the water caught my eye and I searched the landscape behind it for anything that I could use to line it up and mark the position. I noticed a small mound behind the tree with a scrub oak and committed them to memory.

I’m not sure if Rhames knew what I was doing as he said nothing, but there was something about the look on his face that gave me the impression that he approved. With our mates lost, at least for now, the four boats stayed close, surfing the waves as we approached shore. The distance it had taken hours to row, we now covered in minutes and the waves settled as we moved behind one of the larger islands near the headland. I pointed toward an island and Rhames corrected his stroke change out course toward the small beach.

It was a relief to be back on land, but we were in dire trouble. We huddled on the beach shivering. There was no fresh water and we would be forced to forgo a fire to remain unseen. I looked around the island for anything that might be able to provide shelter for the coming storm.

## Chapter 5

The rain pounding on the hull woke me and I wondered if it was daylight yet. At least the overturned boat kept us dry and with the eight of us huddled underneath it was warm, but I couldn't see outside. The wind howled and rain sheeted in as I raised an edge of the boat and looked out of our makeshift shelter. My stomach growled and my mouth was dry. The last thing I wanted to do was to leave the shelter, but we needed water badly.

I elbowed the man next to me and received a grunt and a jab back in return. "Swift. Get up. We need to get water."

"Boy. What do you want from me? I'm tired, lemme sleep."

I would not relent and pushed back, moving out of the way before he could reciprocate. "Now," I demanded pushing my authority as far as I dared. He rose and hit his head on the bottom of the boat, but helped me lift the edge enough so that we could crawl into the cold and wet night. It was a good blow, the line of clouds we had seen earlier were surely upon us. I looked around for anything that would contain rainwater, but found little. There was water in the boats, but it was dirty and mixed with salt water. We needed fresh clean water.

"Dig a hole," I called to Swift over the wind.

I didn't wait for an answer, but went straight to a small palm tree nearby and started pulling the broad leaves off. The palm was more a bush than the large coconut palms that towered overhead and the leaves were wide and solid. I took a handful and set them down next to the hole that Swift was digging and went back for more. When I returned he had excavated a three foot by three foot hole about a foot deep in the sand. I started to line the bottom with the palm leaves overlapping them to prevent leakage. Swift caught on and started another hole a few feet away. My hole was just about finished now and the water was already about an inch deep in the bottom. I kneeled down and with cupped hands pulled water from the hole and drank. Swift came up alongside and did the same. We drank greedily from the hole, the fresh rainwater soothing our dry throats and he gave me a reassuring nod.

Finally sated, I looked at the sea in the direction of our island and noticed the fires. Despite the rain, the Navy was burning our shelters probably out of frustration; the weather keeping them from following. Swift saw it too and nodded at me. As uncomfortable as we were, the storm was protecting us from the hangman's noose.

Fifteen minutes later, we crawled back under the boat and shivered in the darkness, but at least we would have water. I was too wet and cold to sleep anymore so I waited out the hours before dawn planning our next action. They

would surely come after us in the morning. These kinds of storms lasted several hours, not days. The wind might blow, but it wouldn't stop them - not with pirates to hang and treasure to recover. We would need an early start and a long row to reach the homestead by nightfall so I waited for the first sign of dawn and woke the men.

"Get up. We've got to move," I waited a minute for them to gather their wits. "They've burned the island and now they're after us." They started moving quickly now, knowing the consequences if we were caught. We flipped the boat we had used for shelter and pushed it to the edge of the water alongside the other boats. I pointed out the wells we had dug and they ran over and started drinking. We had no vessels to take water with us so I implored them to drink their fill as I scanned the horizon for any pursuit. Fires were still burning on the island and I could see the long boats rowing for the frigate. They would be aboard and be under sail in minutes. If I had to guess they would move into the mouth of the harbor and dispatch the boats from there rather than have them cross the sound as we had.

"Hurry up. Drink and let's go." I grabbed several of the men and started tipping the other boats over to remove the water accumulated overnight. The rain had stopped, but the wind stayed strong. I could only hope the tide would be our ally as each man drank again and we pushed the boats off the beach.

The wind remained from the north and at our backs. This time, with a favorable wind and a slack tide, we were able to cover the water it had taken us hours yesterday in less than half that. We faced the island we had camped on as we rowed. I looked over my shoulder fixed on an island ahead to correct course, but when I faced backwards as is the normal position to row, I lined up the landmarks I had committed to memory yesterday marking where the boat had sunk and further etched them in my mind. The water was too dark to see the bottom as we passed the spot and I said a silent prayer for the men we had lost. My focus turned to the maze of small islands ahead of us. I tapped Rhames on the shoulder, pointed to the small cay I was aiming for and he adjusted his pull to change our course. Another half hour of hard rowing and we pulled behind the small island which screened us from our pursuers.

Through a small opening in the brush we could see that the frigate was now anchored outside of the Boca Grande pass, in the mouth of the channel. The large vessel could go no farther without the time consuming practice of dropping a lead every few feet. Longboats were dropping from its side and we could see men climbing down the cargo netting to the boats. Several were already fully manned waiting in the water. I looked around at the men as they looked at me and could see the indecision on their faces.

We had no time to waste. The Navy boats were bigger, and manned by six to eight men each. With that many oars in the water they could easily catch us. We would have to rely on stealth to escape the faster boats.

## Chapter 6

I was counting on my knowledge of the area to lose the Navy boats. In the months we had holed up here, I had been in the marshy backcountry many times, foraging for oysters and netting fish between the narrow shoals. We had no chance of outrunning the larger, better manned boats that followed; our best chance was to ditch the boats and head inland, but then the treasure would weigh us down.

We brought the boats together in the lee of the island and I found all eyes on me.

“Alright, Nick,” Rhames said. “What’s the plan?”

I hesitated, still uncomfortable with my authority and unsure if the men had the fortitude for the dangers that lay ahead. “We can’t lose them on the open water. There are too many. Their boats are faster and they’re well-armed.” I started to plead my case and waited while the men looked at each other and grunted in assent. “I’m thinking we row down the coast and hide out.”

“That’s a lot of open water to cover,” one of the men named Red said as he slapped the side of his boat. Several other men nodded in agreement.

“We’ll have to row at night, but if we stay out here, we’re dead men and all this will be lost,” I waved my hands at the chests.

“What about the lady?” another asked.

“That’s the first place they’ll look,” I responded.

Rhames eyed the group instantly stopping the dissent. “Boy’s right.”

That was all he said, but it was all that was needed. In agreement we turned to the West and led the small convoy through the chain of islands. By noon, the wind had started to die and the rowing became easier, but as our anxiety about the seas diminished our hunger and thirst began to dominate our thoughts. “We have to find some food,” I said to Rhames who only grunted.

“We get a turtle, it’ll hold us for a while.” I pointed toward an inlet that looked like it turned into a small river. “They won’t think of looking in there and I have an idea.”

He pulled hard on his oar and we swung toward the mouth of the inlet. The other boats followed and we made landfall on a gravel beach about a hundred feet in. We gathered around the boats, the group again looking to me for leadership.

“They’re going to think that we are heading for the Spanish Homestead and the Lady Boggess. We should be safe in here. Red, take five men and follow the river in. We need fresh water and food - oysters, turtle - even a gator. Some coconuts would be good as well.

“What about you?” Red asked. “You gonna sit here and sleep?”

I met the first resistance to my leadership easily. “Rhames and I are going to create a diversion.” They all looked at me again. “We need to empty one of the chests.” They eyed me suspiciously but I ignored them. “We meet back here at sunset - and be ready to row.”

“What about the loot?” Red asked.

He was quickly becoming my opposition, “We empty one chest and combine its contents with the others. You take the rest.” That seemed to satisfy him and we split into two groups. Rhames and I waited as the men took three of the boats and started to move inland. We set the empty chest in the boat so it was visible above the gunwales.

“Well, I hope you have a plan.” Rhames said.

I sat on the beach with my back to the boat. “We need the tide.” I said and closed my eyes to give the illusion that I actually knew what I was doing. Unable to sleep, my mind was trying to finish cooking the half-baked plan that I had sold the men on. I was counting on the tide to float the empty boat toward the Peace River, giving the Navy men reinforcement for what they already thought; that we were heading to Spanish Harbor. We would hike back here after sending the boat. With their attention upriver, I intended to regroup at sunset and head west using the night for cover. The chain of islands that protected us ended a mile from here and we would be exposed for several hours once we left their cover and visible to the frigate until we reached the channel leading to the Caloosahatchee River. From there we could continue down the coast and seek refuge in the marshes.

We would need to leave close to midnight and before the moon rose. We would pass the river mouth, exit the protection of the waterway and head for Estero Bay. The portage required to enter the bay from the North ought to discourage pursuit. The bay offered excellent vantage points to observe anyone entering from sea and its many islands offered refuge. We could regroup and plan there. Rhames was asleep when I woke him an hour later. “Time.” He seemed to like simple commands.

He rose and shook his dreadlocks out. With his help, we pushed the boat into the shallow water. We jumped into the lead boat and started to row, the empty hull with its barren chest followed behind. The wind had died a bit, but was still brisk and helped push us toward the mouth of the Peace River as we exited the protection of the inlet. I motioned for Rhames to hold water. The wind and tide were working in our favor now. We stayed in the lee of the islands and out of view of the long boats I expected to be close by. At the headland we beached the boat. As I was about to push the sacrificial craft into the current, Rhames stopped me. “It’s a bit of a walk back there.”

I nodded and we pushed the boat off the bank. We stood there as the tide and wind took it around the headland and into the river. I heard someone yell and turned to look back into the bay where a handful of longboats were speeding toward the river mouth. The boat had been spotted. With no time to watch our plan unfold, we started a fast hike back toward the inlet, trudging through the marshy muck that permeated the shallows. As we approached, I saw a small stream of smoke coming from the beach we had departed from and picked up our pace.

## Chapter 7

“Douse it now!” I yelled as we pushed through the brush and onto the beach. Rhames didn’t wait, he ran to the fire pit and hurled sand onto the flames. The men had killed and brought back a large loggerhead turtle which now lay on its back in the embers. Worried we might have been spotted, I sent two men with one of the boats to the mouth of the inlet to stand watch. The Navy ship lay less than a half-mile away and although we were screened by the island and brush they could still see the smoke.

The fire was smoldering now and we pulled the turtle out. “You want to eat now, it needs to be raw. Open up the belly and start butchering. We’ll take it with us, maybe get a hot meal tomorrow, but before that we have a long night ahead.” Several men pulled knives from their belts and I flinched for a second, thinking they were coming for me, but they went to work on the turtle. They sliced the belly and started cutting slabs of meat from the two hundred fifty pound animal. This would be enough food to see us for a week, if we were careful and able to preserve it. Within minutes all the meat was out of the shell, sitting on palm fronds cut from the brush. “Clean the shell too. We’ll need that.”

I caught a look from Rhames and followed him down the beach.

“You’re doing well, boy. They listen to you and what you say makes sense,” he paused and pulled on his braided beard. “You take the lead, but watch me.”

This was the most I had ever heard him speak. I grasped his meaning, and thought we could make a good team. He had let me know that I could lead, but he was in charge. I could live with this arrangement; it would keep me alive. Without Rhames behind me, the other men would soon turn against each other. With his menacing figure backing me up, the crew would fall in line. Red seemed to be the only dissenter among them and I knew from the past few years how he worked. He would whisper to the men, planting the seeds for unrest, then sit back and wait for them to blossom. We walked back to the makeshift camp.

I looked up at the sun, which was starting to sink in its low winter arc. I had planned on pushing off around midnight when the watches on the Navy boat would be less attentive. We had a long exposed row before we reached the cover of Pine Island and the protection of the clusters of islands along the shore and a good part of the journey would be in clear sight of the frigate anchored in the mouth of the harbor. I sent a relief party to replace the men on watch and lay back in the sand. Some of the men were eating raw turtle, but though my stomach rumbled, I was not ready for raw meat. If all went to plan, we would be far enough

up the river by tomorrow morning to start a fire and smoke the meat. Small bands of Indians were common along the river and our fire would blend with theirs.

I tried to sleep, but between the cotton in my mouth, the rumble in my stomach, and my thoughts racing through my mind, I failed. Although we had a good chance of escaping detection and reaching the bay below the mouth of the river, we were far from safe. The diversion would have been discovered by now and the long boats were probably on their way back to the frigate. I had no doubt the captain of the Navy ship would send more boats, but he would wait until morning, giving us a decent head start.

Rhames came and sat by me, "Don't take a watch, not something the captain would do. Better to stay here and keep an eye on these worthless bastards."

I nodded. "We need to leave around midnight. That'll give us six hours to get past the mouth of the river. I'm guessing it close to twenty miles. You think the men have it in them?"

"They've got the treasure - they'll die for it."

He was right and that brought up my next conundrum. We were running heavy; the chests loaded and cumbersome. The smart thing to do would be to bury them here on the beach and travel light to escape. We could double back when we knew our pursuers had given up and split the bounty. But I could already see the looks cast back and forth at the chests and knew the greed of the men. There was no chance any of them would let the treasure out of their sight. Trust among pirates was rare if it even existed at all.

The time passed slowly. I changed the watch one more time and tried to rest. As the sky darkened, I started to second guess my decision. Confident that the diversion had been discovered by now, maybe doubling back and going toward the Peace River was the safer route. Would the Navy captain be shrewd enough to think us patient enough to wait them out and follow our own diversion? Pirates, by nature, were impatient and I tried to place myself in his place, asking myself what I would do. My answer surprised me and I knew the Peace River was the wrong destination. Even if the Navy searched elsewhere, the river was heavily populated and word would surely have reached the settlers there. Everyone would have an eye out for us and the treasure. The men were all restless and I decided to scout the mouth of the river and if all was clear we would move now.

## Chapter 8

With my first power struggle behind me, I still felt oddly self-conscious leading. I would stay in command, but Rhames had made it clear that he would have veto power and would back me as long as he agreed. The politics would wait; at this point I was focused on escaping the Navy and keeping the group intact. Getting the men safe, fed and watered was a top priority. It was hard to control a hungry group, and as I had learned yesterday there were some willing to risk their lives and the treasure for a hot meal. It would be a constant battle to fight their need for immediate gratification. We needed to get off the water by late afternoon, somewhere safe where we could make a fire.

It turned out to be an easy row, the elements all in our favor. We stayed quiet during the night, not knowing if there were any Navy scouts on the water or boat crews camped nearby. I thought they had gone after our decoy boats, but a shrewd captain would have sent boats toward Pine Island as well. It was a misty cold night and we were thankful when the sun rose. We had reached our goal for the night and the landmass blocked the frigate's view of us. Protected again by the islands near shore, the men's spirits picked up with the sun and as the morning wore on, we rowed through Buzzards Bay with no sign of the Navy men. As we exited the bay, I estimated we were half way down Pine Island and started thinking where we could camp for the night. It was essential that we could find a camp with fresh water and where we could start a fire. I knew I would start losing the confidence of the men if we continued in this condition.

"We need to cross to the island and camp," I told Rhames, the first words we had spoken all night.

"Aye," he responded.

Ahead of us was a large island in the center of the channel. We changed course toward the back side, further screening us from any pursuit. As we reached Pine Island, I started looking for a place to camp, but the coast was marshy and looked less than hospitable. From my position facing backwards as I rowed, I could see the faces of the men in the boats behind us and knew we would have to make camp soon. Around a bend, I pointed toward a small inlet. For better or worse this was it. The adrenaline I was running on for the last two days was waning and the men had reached their breaking point.

"Is this it then?" someone called from another boat.

I tried to exude confidence and replied, "It is." Just as I said it, we lurched forward as the bottom of the boat scraped an oyster bar and our oars smashed against the barnacles grounding us in the entrance. I jumped out and started to

push, hoping it would look like I knew the obstacle was there and it was all part of the plan. Again, Rhames sensed my predicament and jumped out. The boat floated across the bar easily without our weight and we guided it over the shoal through the calf deep water. On the other side of the obstruction we hopped back in and continued rowing, watching behind us as the other boats followed our lead.

Two more bends came in quick succession and I started looking for a place to land. The marshes soon turned into gravel beaches and I nodded my head toward one. We beached the boats, got out and stretched the stiffness from our joints. The land under my feet felt good, although my legs were wobbly after nearly eight hours in the boat. The other boats grounded and we pulled them above the high tide line. We milled around, exploring the immediate area, not knowing where to start. The island was nowhere near as hospitable as Gasparilla Island. Mosquitos swarmed and every step needed to be guarded less you step into a marshy pit.

“Let’s start a fire. It’s daylight. If we use dry wood it won’t smoke badly.” Several men moved toward a mound and started to dig out a fire pit while others moved inland to scrounge for wood. Twenty minutes later, Rhames struck his flint and the coconut husks caught. Soon the wood above was crackling and I looked to the sky, happy the smoke was almost invisible. We were used to camp life, and there were no orders needed as we sorted ourselves out, everyone performing the tasks best suited for them. The meat was smoking over the fire now and I went to the beach and pushed a boat into the water.

“Oysters,” I yelled as I caught the looks of several of the men thinking that I was absconding with the treasure chests onboard. I rowed to the bar at the inlet, both to collect the mollusks and more importantly to check if any boats were near. Thankful we were still unnoticed, I hopped out of the boat and started harvesting oysters, prying them off with my knife. I had a large pile in the bottom of the boat when I pulled off the bar and started back to camp. On the beach, the men were gathered around the fire, eating turtle and drinking the succulent juice from the coconuts they had foraged. It seemed, at least for tonight we were safe.

Several of the men talked amongst themselves and I was surprised I had no interest in their conversation. I started to appreciate the value of Rhames as I fought sleep and finished cooking the meat and oysters. The fire would have to be extinguished before dusk and it would be another cold night, but we had warm food in our bellies and our thirst was sated from the coconut water.

Everyone was asleep now and I stood to walk the camp, keeping the first watch and sorting out our provisions in case we needed to make a hasty exit. I split the meat, wrapping it in palm fronds to keep the bugs off. We were into December and it was dryer and less buggy than the summer months, but this was Florida, and there were always bugs. I gathered ripe coconuts, fallen from the wind the other night and set a dozen in each boat as well. Finally after what I thought was four hours, I woke another man and laid down in one of the boats to rest.

## Chapter 9

The unmistakable sound of steel striking steel and the grunts of men woke me. I looked around trying to get my bearings and found the clearing crowded with men fighting at close quarters.

I left the cover of the boat and crept toward Rhames who stuck his pistol in my hand. "Guard the treasure," he said and ran to the fight.

I went to the boats, the chests still loaded where we had left them and started pacing back and forth. There was no immediate threat to me or the boats, at least not yet, and I was able to observe what was happening. We were fighting a group of men, maybe a half dozen all dressed as we were. I looked at the gravel beach, not seeing a boat, and wondered who they were and how they had gotten here. The most dangerous unknown was if there were reinforcements on the way, but at least I knew from the ragtag dress of the men it wasn't the Navy.

They must have come overland, probably from the channel which ran between the barrier islands and our location. I heard a man scream in what sounded like Cajun and I started to piece together what was going on. Jean Laffite and some of his crew had escaped Galveston earlier this year, running from the same Navy that now sought us. They had set up a small camp on an island south of ours and he and our captain, both aging and wishing to retire, had become friends often talking about joining forces and heading to Columbia where they might obtain Naval commissions and live out their years. They must have seen our ship go down and after seeing the Navy burn our village had joined the pursuit. It was no secret some of our men had sought out Laffite to join his crew when we disbanded. They knew we had treasure and were greedy for it.

More men came through the brush and it looked like we would be overwhelmed, but Rhames saw them and rallied our men. We stood a better chance to escape if we scuttled one of our boats so with one eye toward the fight, I started to load the provisions I had split last night into two boats. Just as I finished, Rhames cut through several intruders and fought his way toward me, yelling at the men to follow. Laffite's men, guessing our motive started to pursue. I took the pistol and fired at their group. This stopped them momentarily and allowed our men to reach the boats. Rhames ordered several of the men into a semi-circle to protect us.

"Get the treasure in two the boats and trash the other." I yelled over the fracas. Understanding that our only means of escape was by water. A few men fell back from the fight, flipped the empty boat and started to punch holes in the bottom with rocks. Rhames and I moved the chests to the two remaining boats and we pushed them into the water. "Fall back!" I ordered and the men jumped in the

boats and manned the oars. We looked at the others staring at our escape, now knee deep in the water and unable to follow.

Rhames handed me the black powder. The flintlock pistol reloaded and the pan primed, I got another shot off and reloaded again. When I looked up ready to fire, they were out of range. More than a dozen men stood on the beach waving cutlasses at us as we made our escape. But off to the side, I noticed what looked like one of our men held at knife point by two of the intruders. I counted the men in the boats and confirmed my sighting. My short reign as leader was faltering. In two days I had lost three men, three boats and two treasure chests.

The only way out of the estuary was over the oyster bar where we grounded yesterday, but the tide was high and even with the heavily-laden boats we just scraped the hulls as we floated over. I moved toward the bow, shielding my eyes from the rising sun as I looked for any other boats. The Navy frigate was probably still anchored at the mouth of the harbor, about to start the search afresh with the new day. This time I suspected they would send boats in this direction as well. The unknown was Laffite. If the old pirate had seen or heard the fate of the *Floridablanca*, he would guess the Navy frigate was anchored to the North and move his ships to block the Southern exit from the sound. He would then send out small parties like the one we encountered to search where the Navy was not yet looking. The two exits blocked we had no choice but to abandon my plan to seek refuge in Estero Bay and make for the river. The Caloosahatchee was dangerous and unknown country, its source rumored to be a massive inland lake that had a river of grass running south into the Florida Keys. If we made it to the Keys, we could figure it out from there.

“To port,” I yelled to the men who had their backs to the bow. We crossed the channel and made for the mouth of the river. Just as we reached open water, I saw Laffite’s boat anchored where I expected it. We were too small for him to see from that distance and I ordered the rowers into a small inlet. Not knowing if it had an exit or not we blindly rowed south hoping it was fed from the river. I had no idea if we could make the river from here without a portage, but we needed a place to hole up and regroup. I looked back toward the rowers and it was then that I saw the blood mixing with the water in the bottom of the boat.

“Which one of you is hurt?” I asked looking at the backs of the two men. “Aye, but it nothing,” Rhames responded.

It didn’t look like nothing from the amount of blood mixing with the seawater in the boat and I looked for a place to land. If something happened to Rhames, I had no doubt my short tenure as leader would be over. I directed the boats toward the only dry land I saw, a small beach. I jumped out and pulled the boat onto the beach wanting to go to Rhames right away, but also aware that would look like a sign of weakness. Instead I waited for the men to disembark and scatter on the beach before I went to him.

The cut was long and deep across his stomach. If there were a surgeon amongst us he surely would have stitched the wound and if we had supplies I would have attempted the same. Instead I took off my shirt and tore several strips from the tail, helped him remove his shirt and checked the cut. It looked clean and I bound the linen around his body hoping to stem the blood flow. He lay down, his face pale from blood loss and exertion and I looked at the other men wondering what they were thinking.

## Chapter 10

We stood in a circle and I watched each man as their eyes moved from Rhames, to the chests and finally to me. It was an uneasy feeling standing there being scrutinized and I put on my stone face. I couldn't afford one uneasy look or gesture. Rhames lay in the boat, moaning in pain. There was nothing more I could do for him - time would tell if he was to survive. My problem now was to keep the crew rallied around me.

"Red," I looked at their leader. "We should scout the river mouth. We can't stay here too long." I looked around. There was no freshwater and starting a fire here would be out of the question. Although sheltered by the estuary, the smoke from the smallest fire would be seen by the watching eyes of the Navy and Lafitte. Without waiting for an answer I looked at each of the men, fixing my gaze on them until they made eye contact. "You men stay here and keep an eye on him," I pointed to Rhames, who was trying to sit upright. "No fires and keep a watch. We are nowhere close to safe."

"You heard the man," Red said as he picked up his cutlass and started walking away, "You coming?" he looked at me.

I took one look at Rhames who nodded to me in assurance. He was clearly in pain, but was sitting upright in the stern of the boat now, the flintlock pistol secure in his belt.

He removed the gun and handed it to me. "Go," he said.

I slid the barrel into my waistband and went after Red who was already a few hundred feet away. When I caught him, he looked at me with a half-smile that concealed his intentions. The smile turned to a frown when he saw the weapon in my possession. Rhames may have saved himself as well as me by giving me the pistol. If he had passed out with the gun, one of the men would surely have shot him, and with the weapon I held the upper hand with Red.

We trudged along the bank, fighting through the calf-deep muck along the mangrove-lined shores. Although the temperature was fair, within minutes we were sweating from the exertion of walking through mud.

"How far you reckon, Mister Nick?"

We had been moving for what I figured was half an hour. I stopped to catch my breath and looked behind us. If we had gone a mile, it would have been hopeful. I had never been in the estuary before, but from where its entry lined up with the tip of the island to seaward, I estimated we had to cover two miles to reach the river mouth. "About the same. Maybe another mile," I replied and started

moving again. Sweat stung my eyes and my throat was parched, but this was not the time to show weakness.

We picked up our pace as we heard the grunts from several gators concealed in a small creek on our left. Finally the bottom started to turn hard and we could see the river. Although it was a relief to be able to walk on hard bottom, I noticed the water was getting shallower as well. By the time we reached the middle of the small pass, we were ankle deep at best. The mangrove roots along the shore revealed what I suspected, that we were close to high tide now. If we wanted to use this pass, and we had little choice as any other route would expose us, we would have to portage the boats. Red must have come to the same conclusion.

“Gonna be a bit of work here to get the boats over,” he said and turned around to go back.

“Wait. I want to go out to the point and have a look.” “Suit yourself,” he said and remained where he was.

I ran the hundred yards to the seaward side of the small inlet and went down the beach as far as I dared. I didn’t want him out of my sight and turned back several times to confirm he was still there. From the point, I had an unobstructed view of the river mouth and as I suspected, Lafitte’s frigate guarded the entrance, but the shoals near shore forced him to stand half a mile out to sea. I couldn’t see any long boats in the water, but I suspected he would launch a reconnaissance before the day was out. Our only chance would be to make the portage and enter the river at night.

Lafitte was a seasoned and capable seaman. He and his men had been double-crossed by the US government following his help in fighting the British in their attack on New Orleans in the war of 1812. The Navy soon labeled his small community on an island near Galveston a pirate haven and burned it to the ground. I considered myself fortunate to meet the man and had learned much about both strategy and business by listening to his talks with Gasparilla. They had become friends, but there was no doubt Lafitte knew of his demise and now sought the treasure.

I ran back to Red who stood in the same spot. “Well?”

“Lafitte’s ship is in the mouth of the river. We’re going to need to make the portage tonight if we want to get upriver.”

“There’s no other way,” Red stated.

“No. The Navy is on the other end and Lafitte is here. Neither will be willing to go too far upriver, especially if they don’t have any reason to suspect we have gone there.”

“Let’s get back then,” Red said and started wading through the muck.

We reached the clearing an hour later and collapsed by the boats. Rhames was still alive, but hovering on the edge of consciousness. I looked toward the west to gauge how much daylight was left and realized we would have several hours to wait before leaving. “We move in two hours,” I called to the men and went for one of the boats where several coconuts were floating in the bilge water. I took two and went toward Rhames who opened one eye. From my belt, I pulled out a small dagger, took the steel point and inserted it into the coconut. Once it was embedded I started to push and twist. It was far from clean, but I pulled the blade out and saw a residue of milk on it. I handed it to Rhames and watched with satisfaction as he held it to his mouth and drained the juice. I took the other and repeated the process, keeping this one for myself, before cleaving them open and sharing the meat.

Rhames looked better after the nourishment, but I was worried about his wound and knew I needed to care for it while we still had daylight. I went to him and started to remove the dressing. The bleeding had stopped, but the wound was weeping and ugly. Its edges looked like the leaves of a palmetto palm and were starting to turn green and fill with puss. I left him and went to gather the discarded coconut halves and brought several back. From these I scooped the paste from the edges and started to apply it to the wound. He jumped when I touched it, but knew as I did that something in the oily meat of the coconut helped the healing process. I just hoped he wasn't too far gone.

I left the wound open to look for anything that might help me close it and went back to the men who were huddled together talking. They stopped as soon as I approached and I knew something was amiss. As I turned to go back toward Rhames, one of the men jumped on my back. He held me while another slammed his fist into my stomach. I doubled over in pain. Without knowing I reached for the gun, heard it fire and collapsed onto the sand, thinking I had shot myself. As I hit the ground I realized it wasn't me, but the man holding me. The other men stood frozen staring at me, the smoking pistol still in my hand.

## Chapter 11

As quickly as I could, I reloaded, watching the process with one eye while my other watched the men gathered around the downed man. Their disorganization gave me time to finish loading before they could act and I regained an advantage as I held the pistol in my hand.

“Do we have a problem here?” I asked looking at Red who stared at the ground. I met the eyes of the other three dissenters one at a time.

None spoke, but slowly they met my gaze having realized their gambit had failed. We were six men now with two boats, barely enough man power to move the chests. I looked back at Red, “We together or not? If we stay together we can do this.”

Red nodded and looked at his compatriots. They seemed to reach an unspoken agreement. “Sorry about that Mister Nick,” he shrugged. “Our greed got the best of us.”

“I want a vote right now. I’m either captain or we elect someone else,” I said. It was a gamble, but the pistol in my hand gave me courage. Red was the decision maker for the other three and I appealed to him, “We need the numbers to stay alive and keep the treasure.”

“You seem to have learned a bit from the captain.” Everyone dropped their heads at the mention of Gasparilla. “But all the same, we can split the loot and go our separate ways. With just you, and Rhames near dead, I don’t expect you’d get far.”

He was right and I looked down in defeat.

From behind me I heard a rough voice, “You’d all be best to listen and acknowledge your captain. I know you bastards and not one of you will be alive in a day without him.”

Red finally broke the silence, “Let’s hear your plan then. Then we’ll vote.”

I paused knowing what I had in mind was the hard way, but I didn’t want to sugarcoat anything and be forced to have a daily mutiny to deal with. “We can’t go to sea. Lafitte’s at the mouth of the river and he has Rudy, who’s probably sworn him allegiance and told him who we are as well as how we are provisioned and armed. On the other side is the Navy.” I looked at the men who were focused on me now and paused, “And none of us wants to be caught by them.” If we were caught by Lafitte, we stood a better than average chance of surviving by joining his band. The Navy on the other hand would hang us.

I could tell from their looks that I had them and let the silence linger for a moment before I continued. “There is another way. There’re no maps and it’ll be a long and dangerous path, but the Indians say the river empties into a huge lake

whose southern end turns into a river of grass that leads to the Keys. They won't expect us to take that route."

I tried to look uninterested, but strained to listen as the men gathered in a circle. A minute later they faced me again.

Red spoke for the group, "Aye, Nick. It's the only plan. You've got our votes."

I wasted no time trying to act like I expected this outcome. "Get some food in you and rest for an hour. Then we're off." I turned and went to attend to Rhames.

"Nicely done," he said. "I'd be dead without you."

"Stop that and get me some food. I don't expect you to carry me through this."

I looked at him and focused on the wound. I'd have to find a way to stitch it if he was to travel. The way it looked now, one wrong movement and he would spill his guts. I looked around and grabbed a discarded coconut husk. Carefully I started to peel the fibers, called coir into foot-long segments and laid them next to Rhames. Now I needed a needle. I got up and moved toward the men who were eating turtle meat and drinking from coconuts. They sat in a circle as far from the dead man as the clearing allowed. There were several pieces of meat laid out and I took two and brought one to Rhames while I chewed the other.

The meat gave me an idea, and I went to the shell laying in one of the boats. With my dagger I sliced a sliver off the edge of the shell about three inches long and went back to Rhames. I ate and whittled, fashioning a crude needle from the shell. With the fiber threaded I looked at him.

"Get some help to hold me and get on with it," he said as he finished the meat.

I got up and went to the men, explained my plan and waited as they finished eating and followed me back to where Rhames lay. One of the men gave him his dagger and Rhames put the wooden handle in his mouth and nodded. The men held him tightly as I prepared to suture the wound. The needle met resistance, the skin tougher than I had anticipated. He screamed and stared at me with bulging eyes as I forced it through. It took several stitches to get a feel for it but I slowly closed the wound. Finished, I looked up and saw him still conscious, his teeth firmly in the wood handle of the dagger and drool running from his mouth. I removed the dagger and he relaxed. After a few deep breaths I recoated the wound with coconut oil and tore another strip from my shirt to bind it. Satisfied I had done all I could, I laid down exhausted.

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An hour later we were loaded and started to move out, three to a boat. For the first time Rhames and I were separated, but this was my decision. Only two could row the boats and he was incapable and I was the weakest. The water was calm and we reached the beach by the spot we would portage at dusk. I got out of the boat and went to scout the river mouth when suddenly I heard a large explosion. It was almost dark now and I ran toward the point where a glow from a fire showed in the distance. The outline of two ships were visible where only Lafitte's was earlier. The Navy frigate fired again.

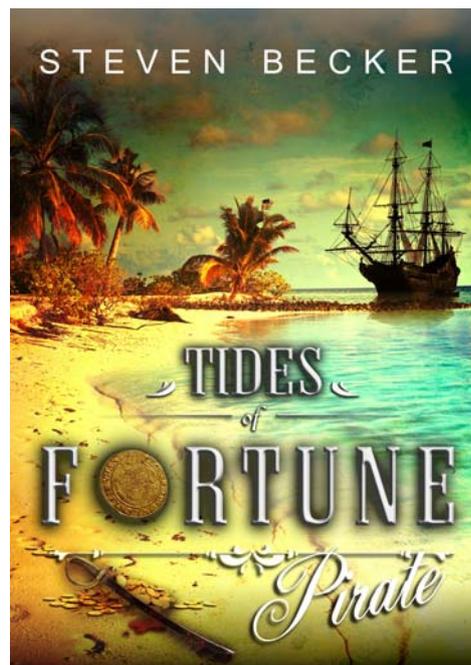
I ran back to the beach. "The Navy just fired on Lafitte. This is our chance." I started pulling a boat across the sand. The men quickly ran to the boats and followed my lead. I had planned on waiting until later that night, when there was

less chance of being spotted, but the Navy had given us our opportunity. Anyone not on the two ships would be watching the action and not the river mouth.

After five minutes of back-breaking work, the boats floated in the knee-deep water and we hopped in. The men took to the oars and pulled into the river. From my position in the bow I was able to look backwards at the fire blazing as Lafitte's ship went down.

## END OF ESCAPE

**Escape is the first part of Tides of Fortune: Pirate**



**KEEP READING**