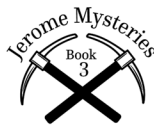


THE GOLD DOUBLOONS



Suzanne J. Bratcher



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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

For my daughter Jorie, a treasure more precious than gold.

*“Now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest
of these is love.”*

~ 1 Corinthians 13:13

PROLOGUE



1542

Spring

Aurélio looked over his shoulder. Something, or someone, was following him. Cactus. Orange dirt. Sparse gray-green vegetation. Nothing moved. Maybe it would be better if his tracker were human. The odds would be closer to even. Not as fast as a wolf. Not as strong as a bear. Not as stealthy as a mountain lion. But a man following him would mean another conquistador had missed the gold.

He scanned the mountainside for a place to hide the doubloons. Once he stashed them, he could return to camp where he would be safe. No one the wiser. Where to conceal the bag? Under one of the boulders, in a tree cavity? A cave would work. The hill was riddled with them.

Wherever he hid the coins had to be close. He was running out of time. Already the sun was too low. Soon a moonless night would close in on him.

Aurélio wasn't sure why he'd snatched up the bag except

that it was there, unguarded and tempting. It wasn't as if he could use the doubloons to get passage on a ship home. Home ... His mother would weep with happiness when he walked through the door. Aurélio sighed. He didn't even know where the coast was from where he stood. East. Northeast, Southeast, over Mingus Mountain, or back into the desert?

The soft noises that chased him came again, bringing him back across the ocean to the New World. The doubloons wouldn't have to be hidden long, just until the camp was searched. Coronado wouldn't suspect him. He was one of the quiet ones who never questioned orders, even when everyone but *Capitán* Coronado had given up on the seven cities of gold that didn't exist.

Aurélio moved stealthily, one booted foot after the other, straining his ears. Cicadas building to a crescendo, a desert frog out of tune, a mockingbird calling for a mate. He allowed himself a breath, then two. After a moment, he started out again. A rock collided with another rock. A third rock slid downhill.

Stopping, Aurélio held his breath and listened. The rocks on the hill behind him were silent. Something, or someone, must be following him. A mountain lion or a wolf would keep coming. Only a man would move when he moved, stop when he stopped. He had to find a hiding place, somewhere he could hide with the gold until his tracker gave up.

He moved again. Behind him a stone clattered. He moved faster. The footsteps came on, slow and steady. Maybe it wasn't a man. A bear might follow slow-moving prey, stopping when it found spring berries, moving again when the man moved.

Finally, Aurélio spotted a shadow darker than the other shadows. If it was a cave, he was saved. If not ... He pushed the thought away, kept moving. Ten feet from safety, his heart sank. A mesquite covered with purple blossoms cast a shadow that

mingled with other shadows. The illusion of an entrance into a sheer rock face mocked him.

The footsteps were closer now. Desperate, he picked up his pace. He was so sure he'd seen an entrance to a cave. If he could disappear, even for a few minutes, whoever, whatever that followed him would turn back, believing it chased a shadow.

A small cave would do. Even a cavity, the beginning of a cave, would be enough to hide him. If not that, in the growing dark the mesquite might hide him well enough.

Giving up on the cave, he ducked behind the mesquite. His right foot slipped in mud, and he hit the ground. Instead of slamming into the side of the mountain, he rolled and kept rolling into the cave he had searched for. He breathed in the pungent odor of disturbed earth, wet dog, and rotting meat. Not just any cave—a bear's den. A bear, not a man, had followed him up the mountain. The last thing Aurélio heard was a baby bear whining for its mother.