

Maryland

By Katherine Boutry

Chincoteague, 1582

Legend has it that in September of 1582, seeking shelter from some bad weather, a Spanish galleon slipped out of the Delaware Bay and behind the flat narrow islands hugging the Maryland shore, where she snagged on some rocks and promptly sank, drowning every living soul aboard. But the legend is flawed. There were some survivors. And more than likely, it was the soft, shallow sand that did her in, not the rocks. The shoals probably stopped our ship like bathmat on butt, much too quickly and with a depressing halt of momentum, and simply broke her in half.

The Spanish *marineros* manning her had no way of knowing that September is prime hurricane season in the North Atlantic. So just as the crew was beginning to celebrate land and the end of a long, arduous passage by cracking out the last kegs of reddish amber *porto* saved for this very purpose, it started to rain. Hard. So much that the kegs had to be re-stowed and lashed tight even before the burn could fade from their throats and light some kindling in their bellies. Reluctantly, the multiple sails lowered. It seemed too unfair to be possible. Having made the unlikely voyage across the Atlantic, safety and cheer was owed our men. After all, a well-developed sense of entitlement is what had gotten them there in the first place. Most were escaping a worse life at home in Seville or Lisbon, and if they'd had any guts at all, they'd have stayed *there* to face their demons. It was hard not to take it as a punishment. For just when they were secretly starting to feel convinced by the treeline of their true

potential with the *right* woman, their turned over leaves, and their fresh starts, they faced sinking like stones, and they felt laughed at, and then, of course, just mean.

Amidst curses and annoyance, some sailors, mostly the more experienced ones, started to pray. They had hit weather, worse than anything they had encountered in the open seas, because now by being close to shore and safety and fresh fruit, there were things that those terrible cathedral-high waves could smash you into. Many jumped ship and made a swim for it, but being unwilling to lose their stiff leather boots filled with coins and knives and the tools they used for their jobs or hoped to use in building a shelter amongst the orange and red fall foliage they could just make out a few miles inland, most of them proved no match for the waves and sank. The greed and cowardice that had put them on the seas undid them in the end. We can't be certain how many may have made it unconscious and sunburnt to the shallows. What we know for sure, is that our ship went down.

I know what you're thinking. Shipwrecks aren't news. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were full of them. Ask any diver in the Caribbean. Certainly, half of the optimistic colonizers who set sail with their eye on a bigger backyard and world domination met with a watery death. But what is significant about *this* particular shipwreck, at least in terms of our story, was its cargo.

This galleon, let's call her the *Isabella de Castilla*, was carrying in her hold twenty-five purebred mustangs of exceptional breeding. These horses were rewards to Spanish lords who had done the good and dirty work of properly (brutally) suppressing the indigenous populations who might have quibbled with a Spanish lord's decision to occupy their prime real estate and their women without so much as an invitation or a nod. The stallions were also bribes, lest the *conquistadores* get too greedy and decide to keep the New World spoils for themselves, or get too smart and realize that no living soul on earth could stop them.

Our horses, although not accustomed to swimming, had an instinctive knack for it. That, and they were fed up. Tired of being cooped up in the *Isabella's* hold for three months with dwindling food, the seedy tang of manure and sweat-soaked men, and no exercise to speak of besides balancing, even the skittish ones were willing to risk it. So, storm or not, the horses jumped at the chance to stretch those lean forelegs made for running. They longed to feel solid earth under their feet after so long, but swimming would do. When they hit the water, their long strides and some powerful current brought them first to shoal and then to the islands, where they found a version of footing in the soft sand. Too exhausted to push on and uncurious about the mainland just a half mile away over the Chincoteague Bay, they stayed put.

The horses that made it (some were too exhausted and too soft from their months at sea to match desire with action) sniffed the air with gratitude and then mistrust. But that was just instinct talking and unwarranted. The islands where they landed were the first stroke of good fortune these stallions had enjoyed in a while. There was plentiful salty grass and fall berries and cool fresh water in pools for the taking. Best of all, and most difficult to believe, there appeared to be no men. The only tricky part of the island was the black, brackish mud around the water holes that could mire a weakened horse or a sickly foal and trap him there until he starved. They quickly learned to avoid that particular hell by its smell, cloying and sulfurous. What the stench also covered, was the presence of two grateful human survivors who would come to love and then to hate each other so much, they would wish themselves drowned.