



1

Treasure. Every good pirate worth the salt in his bones spends his life searching for it. Plundering, pillaging, stalking the coasts, living unchecked and wild on the high seas. Only for most of them to end up dangling from the gallows dancing the hempen jig with nothing to their names but the tattered clothes on their backs. Either way, it's a sad end to a life meant for nonstop adventure, unimaginable riches, and boundless freedom.

But not Carter Humbolt. He'd have his freedom if he had to cut through all of St. Augustine to get it.

Or he'd just sneak out. Yeah, probably just sneak out.

And he'd have his treasure, too—even if he had to level the St. Augustine Pirate and Treasure Museum to get it.

Or he could just pick the lock. Yeah, probably just do that.

Because Carter was the scourge of Castillo Drive! The sea-faring scoundrel of St. John's County! A shadow in the dead of night! The most fearsome—

“Carter!”

The sharp whisper shook Carter from his fantasy

and dropped him back into the larceny at hand. Brad Humbolt, reluctant buccaneer and first mate of naysaying, breathed down his little brother's neck. "This is a terrible idea. I mean a *really* terrible idea. I definitely should not have agreed to this."

"Sturdy yer mainsail, jelly bones," Carter grumbled in his gruffest pirate voice. He didn't take his eyes off the keypad, its blinking lights like the stars that guided his ship. Or would if he had a ship.

"I have no idea what you just said," Brad growled, stooping down close to Carter's ear, "but I think I might pound you for it anyway—if we don't end up in jail."

Carter pulled his skull and crossbones hood up over his headlamp. He flicked it on and drenched the keypad in red light. He cracked his knuckles. "It'll be open seas and fair winds for us, laddy."

Brad scoffed as he paced behind Carter. Brad was sixteen, athletic, and would fit in on any high school sports team, playing any position. Cheerleaders would swoon. Parents would wish their kids were more like him. The coach would call him in to win the game...

Or in another life he would, anyway. But in this life, he just paced and watched as his twelve-year-old brother, the perpetual mischief-maker, sized up a high-tech alarm's digital keypad, preparing to break and enter.

"Can the pirate stuff," Brad said. "Just hurry up. There are no fair winds in prison. Just broken wind and other clouds of man stink."

"C'mon," came a soft voice from around the corner. "Where's your sense of adventure?" Darla Roberts appeared as if she were out for a casual stroll. She was casual in many senses of the word—never tried to

impress anyone, never cared what anyone thought—but was always down for some excitement.

Carter could practically hear Brad's heart jump.

"Hiding behind my sense of self-preservation," Brad answered. "I wouldn't do very well in prison."

"No, you're much too pretty," Darla said with a chuckle.

"And he's a nervous pooper," Carter added.

Brad choked.

Before his brother could strangle him, Carter unzipped his backpack and said, "Now, everyone be quiet. I need to concentrate."

To anyone else, the contents of his bag would have seemed a hodgepodge collection of worthless junk. To Carter, it was an adventurer's toolkit—a pirate's war chest. He laid out everything he would need—rubber dish gloves, a corroded lawn mower battery, a pair of knitting needles, and some strands of wire with alligator clips.

Carter slipped on the rubber gloves because adventure without the proper safety precautions is just reckless. Then he attached the alligator clips to the battery leads and tied the wire from the clips to the knitting needles. He touched the ends of the needles and watched as sparks danced like fireflies through the air.

"Oh, man," Brad grumbled. "You're totally gonna electrocute yourself."

Darla shushed him.

In another life, Carter Humbolt would have been a promising young scholar, a future engineer, a pioneer in robotics. In this life, however, he was a budding criminal, breaking into museums with knitting needles.

He poked at the keypad, inserted the needles into the small openings in the side. A quick stream of sparks shot out followed by a small plume of black smoke and the smell of burning plastic.

“Avast, me hardies,” Carter said through a wide smile. “The gateway is open.”

Brad shook his head. “I think something might be seriously wrong with you. Like, maybe Mom dropped you on your head or something as a baby.”

Carter’s expression turned sour and his smile slid off his face. He packed it away in his bag with his supplies. “Yeah, well, I wouldn’t know about that.”

Darla smacked Brad on the shoulder and gave him a cross look before following Carter through the now unlocked door.

Carter pushed his brother’s comment to the back of his mind and pulled something else forward to replace it. All his favorite stories from the Golden Age of Piracy—Blackbeard, Calico Jack, Black Bart. Legendary brigands of the sea. He pulled the strings on his hoodie, tightening the skull and crossbones around his head, and became one of them.

He stepped into the unlit hallways. The shadows were his home. The darkness was his kin. He was the nightmare of—

“Crap!” Carter whisper-shouted. He put his arms out, stopping Brad and Darla behind him.

Brad spun around like a cat chasing its tail. “What? Who? Where?”

Darla choked back a laugh.

“There,” Carter said, pointing at a metal box on the wall. “Countermeasures.”

Brad squinted into the dark. “I don’t see anything.”

“Ye don’t see the kraken ‘til it strikes. That don’t mean it’s not lurking below.” Carter reached into his bag of mayhem again and removed a plastic bottle of baby powder. “And you should probably eat more carrots. Your night vision is crapola.”

“You should probably start seeing a shrink,” Brad said. “I think you’ve lost it.”

Carter squeezed the bottle of baby powder, and a mist of white puffed into the air. As the tiny particles fell, there showed a crisscrossing pattern of infrared beams. He shot Brad a self-satisfied smile. “There’s a fine line between madness and genius.”

Brad shoved his little brother aside and stepped past him. “Jury’s still out as to which side you’re standing on.”

I walk a fine line between the two, Carter wanted to reply, but he kept his mouth shut.

The three of them skulked through the dark hallways, lit only occasionally by the dim neon of exit signs. None dared speak. None dared admit how nervous they were.

“Anyone else think a zombie is going to pop out around every corner?” Silence. “No? Just me?”

They passed by the gift shop. A vague memory crawled into Carter’s head. It was hazy, like he was seeing it through a thick fog. A woman with long black hair carrying him. Where were they? A store? The beach? The smell of saltwater wafted on the air.

The memory continued...

He remembered feeling safe in her arms.

Someone tugged on his leg. Looking down, he saw the face of his brother. It was a bit pudgy. Brad couldn’t have been more than eight.

“What about this?” little Brad said, holding up a small teddy bear that wore an eye patch and skull and crossbones bandana.

“Yes,” the woman said. “I think Carter would like that very much.” Then her voice dropped, became gruff. “Yer brother’s got a pirate’s soul.”

Carter felt a tug on his arm, snapping him back to the task at hand.

“Come on,” Darla said. “It’s this way.”

They rounded the corner and soon came to a wooden door. It looked out of place against the cold tile and metal of the rest of the museum. It looked warm, inviting, unique. It looked like part of a ship.

They exchanged glances. Excitement, curiosity, a little fear (Brad!). And then they opened it.

A gust of wind must have blown through an open window. No, that was just Carter gasping, sucking in the wonder of the room. Display cases lined the walls, each filled with piratical objects. Flintlock pistols, a cat-o’-nine-tails, a cutlass. Blunderbusses and spyglasses. An actual peg leg. Everything Carter needed to transform himself, to escape this life and build the one where he could be anything he dreamed of.

Well, almost everything he needed.

He peeled his eyes away from a hook hand and set to searching through cabinets and stacks of papers for that one last thing.

The one thing he had come here for.

“Oh. My. God.” Darla’s voice echoed from the far side of the room. She pressed her hands to a large display case. Brad shined his flashlight on the sign mounted above it.

TREASURE ROOM

“I found it,” she said dreamily. She traced the glass with her finger, outlining the piles of gold and silver coins, the gem-encrusted scepter, the crown beset with shimmering gemstones on the other side. “We can leave. Live anywhere. On an island somewhere. Heck, we can *buy* an island.”

“That’s not what we’re looking for,” Carter snapped.

“Wait, what?” Darla said. “We broke in here to *not* steal the giant pile of treasure?”

“That stuff’s traceable,” Carter said. “As soon as we fenced it, we’d get busted. Haven’t you seen any cop show ever? The treasure I’m after is much more—”

Before Carter could finish, the sound of a closing door echoed from the dark.

“Zombies!” Brad shrieked. “We’re outta here.”

“Not yet, I haven’t found it.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Brad said. “We need to leave *right now*. We can’t spend any treasure in prison.”

“Just one more minute,” Carter argued. “It’s gotta be around here somewhere.” But before the sentence fully left his mouth, Brad had pulled him out of the room.

They ran through the dark corridors, not even hesitating at corners to check for walking dead. They moved like ships with the wind in their sails. Like the very gods of the sea were pushing them forward. Like they were—

They burst through the door they’d come in through and slid to a halt, blinded by bright lights. Carter squinted through the pain. Red and blue lights flashed behind the men. The men with the flashlights. The men with the guns pointing straight at them.