

A sample of
THE LEGEND OF GASPARILLA AND HIS TREASURE
by Carolyn Arnold

ALSO BY CAROLYN ARNOLD

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Matthew Connor Adventure Series

<i>City of Gold</i>	<i>The Legend of Gasparilla and His</i>
<i>The Secret of the Lost Pharaoh</i>	<i>Treasure</i>

Standalone Title

Assassination of a Dignitary

THE
LEGEND OF
GASPARILLA
AND HIS
TREASURE

CAROLYN ARNOLD

HIBBERT & STILES
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Sample of *The Legend of Gasparilla and His Treasure*

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Prologue

Manhattan, New York
A Monday in January, 10:46 AM Local Time

You're telling me he's in possession of some diary that contains clues to a vast fortune?" She clucked her tongue and studied the man before her. His name was Roman. He was built like a tank and deadly—just the way she liked her men. But even better, he was loyal and submissive when it came to her. Then again, she owned him.

"That's right, ma'am. It has clues to some pirate's treasure or something."

"Pirate treasure or *something*?" She slapped him hard across the face, and he stiffened but otherwise didn't react. "What makes you think I'd be interested?"

"Could be worth tens of millions." Roman wasn't meeting her eye, and that was a wise move on his part. She couldn't tolerate insubordination.

"And you think I need the money?" The question was bait and rhetorical. Of course, she needed the money. She could never have enough. The office they were in was in her Manhattan high-rise, which was one of three such buildings she owned in the United States. She had no qualms admitting that her wealth was based on ill-gotten gains and shady deals in the antiquities market—unless she was talking to law enforcement, of course. But if a girl wanted the finer things in life, she had to be willing to take risks and create her own luck.

“I asked you if you think I need the money,” she repeated with emphasis, circling around him.

“Everyone needs money.” Gaze straight ahead. Back ramrod straight.

She rounded the front of him again, smirked, and put a hand on his cheek that was bright red from her assault. “You’re very right, darling. And I expect you to succeed in securing this diary for me. Do we have an understanding?”

His eyes darted to meet hers briefly. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Very good. Do whatever you have to do. *Kill* whoever you have to.” With that, she turned and looked out over the city streets below, waving a hand over a shoulder. “You’re dismissed.”

One

Five Days Later

Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, Washington, DC

Saturday, 3:00 PM Local Time

Matthew Connor would rather be jumping out of a plane. That would actually be fun. Instead, he was looking over a crowd of easily two hundred. He'd stared death in the face many times as an archaeologist, adventurer, and treasure hunter, but he just might be brought down by a little public speaking. His heart was beating rapidly, and his hands were clammy. All those eyes on him, waiting for him to say something. He swallowed roughly and plastered on a smile. His throat felt stitched together.

He glanced at his best friends in the crowd. Cal Myers was at the back of the room taking pictures. A God-given talent he possessed and put to good use. As a professional photographer, he freelanced for some of the biggest-name magazines out there, including *National Geographic*.

Robyn Garcia, a beautiful Latina angel, was in the front row. She met his gaze and dipped her head in a show of encouragement. Her position as a curator at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada, often put her in situations when she needed to speak publicly. She'd been his coach and helped him practice his speech. She stressed that he needed to hook people by immersing them in a story right from the get-go.

"Good day, everyone," Matthew started and winced. He was doing it all wrong. Scratch jumping out of a plane, he'd take confinement in a tight box over this and be left to battle his claustrophobia.

He gulped and gripped the podium. To hold him up. To give him support. His eyes caught his watch. He still had the full thirty minutes of speech ahead of him. He should be thankful for the opportunity—and he would be if his nerves weren't threatening to embarrass him.

He and his friends were invited to the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC, for the opening of their City of Gold exhibit. Not bad for three adults in their early thirties. He, Cal, and Robyn all played a part in discovering the Incas' lost city, but he was the one who'd netted a two-book publishing deal after returning from Egypt last July. He let his publisher, Golden Books, rope him into doing this in promotion for his upcoming book on the city, due out late fall. A book he still had to finish writing. A book he was supposed to have submitted another five chapters for two weeks ago. He should be home writing. Yet here he was, strangers staring at him. Some impatient, some mirroring his awkwardness, others smiling encouragingly.

He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. "Imagine a city of gold, where the streets are paved with gold, the buildings are made of gold, but to get there, danger awaits you around every corner..." He paused briefly, and Robyn smiled at him and dipped her head in approval. He went on with his speech and hoped he'd pulled off what Robyn had said during a rehearsal about his words being "impactful."

Of course, it would probably be more difficult for him *not* to show the emotions he felt as he retold the journey of finding the lost city. It had been the most personal quest he'd been on. His nemesis, Veronica Vincent, had kidnapped Cal's girlfriend Sophie, and it was either find the city or risk her life. He could easily summon up the fear and the apprehension. If the threat to Sophie's life or laying eyes on a city that had been abandoned centuries ago wasn't enough pressure, tack on a tight deadline. The fact that the three of them and Sophie had all survived was a small miracle, but not everyone involved with the quest had returned home. And it had eventually taken a toll on Cal and Sophie's relationship.

Matthew would much rather leave Sophie out of the entire thing, but his publisher wanted him to delve deep into it. His

editor, Riley Zimmer, had told him more than once, “People like danger, Matthew. It sells books. That’s why thrillers are the number one genre out there.”

Matthew mistakenly countered that maybe he should write a thriller, then. Riley told him he was, and the fact it had a basis in the real world was even better. It was never hard to miss the hunger for money in his editor’s eyes. And it was quite possible his editor knew what he was talking about because as Matthew delivered his speech, everyone was silent, and most appeared motionless. One exception was a fiftysomething man with spiky, gray hair who popped into the back of the room, scanned the crowd, and left just about as quickly as he’d shown up.

Thirty minutes after Matthew had started, he closed his speech, and everyone clapped.

Robyn joined him on stage. He shuffled to the side so she could speak into the mic, but she pulled out a cordless one. “Thank you, Dr. Connor, for your exciting retelling of our discovery of the City of Gold.” Robyn clapped her free hand to her forearm, and the audience followed her lead in another round of applause. She gave it a few seconds, then said, “I know everyone’s eager to see the exhibit, but we have some time allocated for question-and-answer. Who wants to go first?” She smiled out at the crowd and selected a man whose hand shot up so fast it was like he’d been jabbed in the side.

He stood. Slightly potbellied, somewhere in his late forties, beady eyes. “Why did you go after a legend when there wasn’t anything to truly prove its existence?”

“We knew—”

“Your friend’s life was at risk,” the man cut in. “From what we just heard, you didn’t really ‘know’ anything definitive. Sounds like you took quite the gamble.”

Matthew glanced at Cal, who had stepped back from his camera on the tripod. It was rare when a camera wasn’t in his friend’s face. Matthew had touched on Sophie’s kidnapping, as much as he could stomach and to appease his publisher. Under Cal’s gaze, he felt like a sellout.

Matthew tightened his grip on the podium. “I had reason to believe the City of Gold was where we ended up finding it.” That’s what he said, but feelings of guilt were swirling in his gut. He’d had some aerial photographs, shots from ground-penetrating radar, and a hunch. There was another alternative to getting Sophie back, but it wasn’t a path he wanted to go down, and it could have landed him and his friends behind bars.

“You couldn’t have known for sure. That’s a gamble,” the man countered with a smug tilting out of his chin.

“When you set out after a legend, nothing is for certain, but we weren’t left with much choice. As the saying goes, we were between a rock and a hard place. If we didn’t try, Sophie was dead.” He paused there, feeling the four-letter word burrow into his chest.

“If you failed, she’d die, too.”

“Then it seems luck was on our side, because as you know, we found the city.” Matthew was irritated by this twit but was more cognizant of how his questions could be affecting Cal. Sophie had never been a fan of him going on expeditions, and things on that front had gotten worse after her abduction—for understandable reason.

“Anyone else have a question?” Robyn scanned the audience and numerous hands rose. She chose a woman near the back.

The man who’d first been called on was still standing. “You didn’t really answer my question, Dr. Connor.”

“I believe I did.” He tried to tamp this man down with as much etiquette as possible, but his temper was quickly rising to the surface.

“Why did you go after a legend that by all intents and purposes never existed?”

“Again, I feel that I answered that question sufficiently, but in simpler terms, it’s what we do. Myself, my friends. We go after legends.” Matthew caught sight of the spiky-haired man stepping into the back of the room again. He returned his gaze to the man interrogating him. “The world can be a hard, bitter place,” he added. “So many of us have forgotten to dream, but I’m not wired that way. Someone says something can’t be done—or doesn’t exist—and I’m about proving it can be done or that it does exist.”

“So you’re naive and fickle.”

The audience booed the man, and Matthew wasn’t sure why he was there if he detested him so much.

“We have others with questions. What did you want to ask Dr. Connor?” Robyn’s tone of voice left no room for negotiation as she pointed to the woman she’d chosen before the twit had interrupted.

Finally taking the hint of dismissal, the interrogator left the room. The spiky-haired man followed after him.

“How did you feel when you saw that giant anaconda?” the woman asked in a Southern accent. She held a certain charm to her that softened everyone in the room. “I mean, I can’t imagine I’d remain upright. I hate garters.”

Most people chuckled. The woman beside her bobbed her head.

He coached himself that everything from this point would be just fine. After all, most people were there because they wanted to hear what he had to say. He smiled at the woman and went on to answer her question. He fielded five more questions before Robyn turned to him.

“Dr. Connor, thank you again for being here with us today,” she said.

“My pleasure.”

Robyn added, “Dr. Connor’s book, *City of Gold*, will be available late fall. Be sure to watch for it. In the meantime, he’ll be signing posters in the gift shop, starting one hour from now.” She gave them fast directions and added, “But take your time enjoying the exhibit. There’s a lot to see. Matthew will be around for the next few hours. Now, what you’ve been waiting for...” Robyn stood back and moved to the left, and Matthew shuffled to the right. Behind them, curtains that marked the entrance to the exhibit parted.

A floor-to-ceiling remodel of the Inca pyramid had the crowd gasping. Visitors would enter a cut-out in the replica and hopefully feel an inkling of what Matthew and his friends had felt when entering the real thing. People wasted no time making their way inside.

Cal joined his friends on stage now that it wasn’t the focal point of people’s attention. He snapped off a couple of shots of Matthew and Robyn, then lowered his camera.

“Great job, buddy.” Cal put a meaty hand on Matthew’s shoulder.

“You know you had every right to be up here, too. People know all about your contribution and your...” Matthew left the rest unsaid, but he’d been thinking *sacrifice*. He’d already told Cal on a few occasions that he hated bringing Sophie into the find at all. It wasn’t public knowledge that he and Sophie had broken up, but people could appreciate that Cal would have been emotionally distraught on the quest, wondering every moment if Sophie was okay and if they were going to be able to save her.

“Nah, you know me. I don’t like the spotlight.”

Robyn and Matthew laughed.

“What? I don’t.”

“Uh-huh.” Robyn put her arm around Cal’s shoulders. “You tell yourself what you want, but we know you better.”

“Hey.” Cal narrowed his eyes. He’d always been a ripe target for teasing. “Let’s go meander, shall we?” He jacked a thumb over a shoulder to indicate the exhibit. “I’d like to take some candid shots of people enjoying it.”

“Sure thing,” Matthew said. He was happy that the topic had shifted so quickly from Sophie, but if he knew his friend at all, the guy was still hurting and trying to bury his feelings.

I can't believe my publisher talked me into doing the speech and signing all those posters." Matthew rotated his right wrist. He'd scrawled his name on all five hundred handouts his publisher had provided for promotion of his upcoming book. The splash across the page of *Coming Next Fall* was there just to taunt him. *No pressure*. "I feel like I'm being pimped out."

"Poor guy." Robyn pouted, then laughed. "I think you're being a little dramatic. Maybe taking cues from Cal."

"Hey now," Cal said.

Matthew, Robyn, and Cal were set up in a booth at a restaurant not too far from where they were staying at the Colonial Hotel in the National Mall district of Washington. If the decor didn't give it away as an English pub—with its hunter-green walls and gold-framed photos of celebrities who had made their way through the place—the menu did. They'd already ordered their meals and were working on the beers in front of them.

"Am I being dramatic, though?"

"Usually when you have to ask..." Robyn took a sip of her drink.

"There weren't even five hundred at the presentation."

"You would have picked up people at the gift shop that hadn't made it to your speech," Robyn said matter-of-factly. She pointed to the framed photos at the end of their table that showcased a couple of supposedly famous people—don't ask Matthew their names. "Maybe you'll be up there one day," she added.

"Oh, pretty please." He took a drink of beer.

“As I’ve told you before, just remember your motivation, Matthew. It’s a good one.” She smiled at him and sipped her draft.

It had been Robyn’s appeal to his ethical side that had swayed the pendulum in favor of accepting the book deal. She had reminded him that his motivation for unearthing legends in the first place was to bring them to the people. And what better way to extend the reach of his finds than to publish a book?

“And whether you like it or not, you better get used to being in demand,” she said. “That’s what it’s like to be famous.”

Cal took the cheap shot. “As if you’d know.”

“Very funny, Cal.” Robyn glared at him.

Same old performance, but Matthew wouldn’t change a thing. They’d been a group of friends for the better part of four years now. While Cal and he didn’t go back as far as he did with Robyn, their friendship had been solid from the start. One of those relationships where you feel you’ve known each other forever and the other should know everything about your past even if you haven’t told them about it. Matthew was thankful that Cal and Robyn got along well, too. Everyone needed friends with whom to jest and sometimes be brutally honest.

“In all seriousness,” Matthew said, “I don’t know if I’ve got what it takes to see this through.”

“What exactly?” Robyn asked.

“For starters, the book. Then the touring and public speaking. Mostly the writing.” It was a toss-up, but every time he thought about putting words to the page, he started hyperventilating. As if on cue, his phone rang. Caller ID told him it was Riley, but he didn’t say as much out loud. “Oh no.”

“It’s your editor,” Robyn guessed.

It was spooky sometimes how she could read his mind—or read *him*. “Yeah.”

“Well, answer.”

He hesitated. He could guess quite accurately what his editor would want. He took one deep breath, then accepted the call.

“How did it go?” Riley asked. “I bet you were a hit.”

“I—”

“Did you sign and give away all the posters?”

“I—”

“What am I thinking? Of course, you did.”

There were times trying to have a conversation with Riley was more like listening to a monologue. Matthew waited for his editor to stop talking and would let the silence build before trying to speak again.

Matthew shook his head, and Robyn smirked. Again, like she had read his mind. Besides, she had met Riley in person and knew his tendency to talk over people.

“So? Talk to me,” Riley prompted.

Satisfied that Riley was ready to listen, Matthew spoke. “It was good. Lots showed up for the exhibit.”

“Your pre-order sales spiked.” There was no mistaking the zeal and excitement in Riley’s voice. “How do you think it went?”

Again, all about the book and the resulting influx of cash. Nothing was asked about the exhibit itself or how people responded to witnessing history with their own eyes.

“Matthew, how was it received... Good? Bad?”

“You said the sales were up, so that’s good.” Matthew rolled his eyes. He should probably have sought a publisher and editor more in sync with his goals and motivations.

“Everyone had good questions for you?” Riley asked. There was a twinge to his voice that hinted at frustration, like he was trying to move the conversation up a hill without help. “People showed a lot of interest?”

“All the posters went,” Matthew said, finally getting out the answer to one of Riley’s first questions. With reflection on the day, his interrogator flashed to mind. Not everything had been positive, but there was no sense bringing up that loser to Riley. “Yeah, everything went great.”

“Great...great. So, hey, how are you making out on those chapters? You have them ready for me to look at yet?”

“I’m working on it. As they say, perfection takes time.”

“No such thing as perfection in any arena, let alone literature, but I’m afraid deadlines are deadlines. Seven weeks, Matthew—that’s all I can give you, and I’ll need the entire thing. We need to start the editing process, and the fall will be here before you know

it.” He paused as if expecting Matthew to jump in and make a vow to get it all done in time—a strong-arm negotiating technique—but he wasn’t going to react. Eventually, Riley offered, “But if five chapters feels like too many, why don’t you just send me a few by Friday?”

“This coming Friday?” The scooped collar of his T-shirt suddenly felt tight. All of this pressure to write was taking him back to his university days and all the papers he had to produce. He must have been delusional to accept this publishing deal and then stubborn enough to think he could handle it himself. He’d never been wired for writing; he was suited to adventures and high-adrenaline sports. Out in the world, not confined to a desk. He should look into hiring a ghostwriter.

“Yes, of course this Friday.”

Matthew tried to pick apart the deadline in his head. Smaller, more manageable chunks. Six days, seven if he counted what was left of a today. A couple of chapters. It really wasn’t that big of a deal, was it? “I’ll do my best,” he said without truly committing and caught Robyn shaking her head.

“Okay, I’ll follow up,” Riley said, “say, Wednesday, just to see how you’re coming along?”

“Sure.” Panic burrowed in his chest. Why did he feel such a need to get the message about the City of Gold out there? He was cursing himself and his ideals.

“Great. Good luck. Talk soon.” Riley was gone before Matthew could even think *goodbye*.

Matthew pocketed his phone and signaled their waitress. “I’ll take a refill,” he told her when she came over. He pointed at the beer he’d hardly touched *yet*.

She glanced at his glass and said, “I’ll get that right away. Anyone else?”

Robyn and Cal shook their heads. The waitress left, and Robyn leveled a look on him.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

He was too busy gulping his beer to respond.

“He’ll go out into a jungle or the middle of the desert, but he’s afraid of putting words to the page. Oooookkkkaay.” Cal laughed and took a draw on his brew.

Matthew wiped his lips and set down his empty glass. "It's just the pressure to write. It's never come naturally to me." *Where's that other beer?*

"Stop thinking about the words and focus on why you're writing," Robyn suggested.

She always knew the right thing to say, and if anyone in their little group was "the glass is half full" sort, it was her. Nodding, he looked past her to the bar. He spotted the spiky-haired man he'd seen at the museum seated at the counter, and the man was watching him. Under Matthew's eye, the man turned to face forward, a poor attempt to conceal the fact he'd been gawking, only made worse when he glanced over a shoulder.

"Earth to Matt." Cal waved his hand in front of his face.

He caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and slowly looked at Cal. "What?"

"I asked if Riley moved up the deadline," he said.

"No, he just wants—"

"Here you go." The waitress set a new beer in front of Matthew.

"Thanks." He took a big swallow of it.

"Not a problem at all." She winked at him and sauntered off with his empty glass.

Robyn watched after the waitress, and Matthew would pay for her thoughts just then. The two of them used to be lovers—more than that, in a serious and committed relationship. He was going to ask her to marry him when they graduated university, but she'd been offered her dream job in the form of a curator at the Royal Ontario Museum, and he wasn't going to stand in the way of that. They'd agreed to remain friends, which was a tricky balance to find sometimes as the romantic feelings were still there.

Matthew's gaze went to the spiky-haired man again, and this time, he found him staring unapologetically. The man got up and headed their way.

"Dr. Connor?" The man was twitchy and awkward and had a satchel strapped across his chest, which he hugged to himself as if someone were going to steal it. He had no fashion sense and was dressed in an olive-green tweed jacket that he wore over a blue, striped collared shirt. That with his navy-blue slacks were the

closest he came to a coordinating wardrobe. Even his hair wasn't so much a style, but rather a wake-up-and-*never*-brush 'do.

"That's me." The beer on his empty stomach had him feeling a little carefree, but he still didn't like lurkers. And there was no reason why this man wouldn't know who he was. Matthew's name had been on a large poster set on an A-frame at the door to the exhibit room. He would have passed it to step into the room.

Spiky's gaze darted nervously to Robyn and Cal. Back to Matthew, he said, "Could I talk with you?"

"Go ahead."

"I meant..." He gave another glance to Robyn and Cal. "Alone."

"Anything you have to say to me, you can say to them." Matthew offered a smile of encouragement. The man jittered like he'd downed a pot of coffee, but despite a little voice of caution in the back of his head, Matthew really didn't think the man presented any harm.

"Umm, could I sit down?" Spiky gestured to the half-empty bench where Matthew was seated.

"Sure." Matthew moved over to give him more room.

Spiky sat and continued to hold his satchel to his chest.

"You can put that on the floor or beside you if it's more comfortable," Robyn suggested. She must have sensed his discomfort, too, though it was hard to miss.

"No, I'm good." Spiky readjusted his satchel but retained a tight hold.

"So, I'm Robyn Garcia." She held her hand out across the table, and the man took it.

"Mel Wolf," Spiky said.

"Cal." He flailed a hand nonchalantly.

Spiky dipped his head.

Seconds ticked off in silence.

"What is it that you want to talk about?" Matthew asked.

Another adjustment to his satchel. "First of all, I'm sorry about the guy who was interrogating you during your speech."

Matthew recalled seeing his interrogator and Mel leave the room at the same time. "You knew him? That guy who put me on the spot?" The lightheartedness that came with the alcohol was fleeting quickly.

Mel's eyes darted to the table. "I guess he really did do that."

"He did, but why are *you* sorry?" Matthew wasn't sure he really liked this twitchy stranger.

"I hired him to do that." Mel slowly lifted his gaze to meet Matthew's.

"Why?" Scratch not being sure about liking him; he was definitely crossing over to not caring for the guy.

"It was necessary." Mel itched the tip of his nose. "You see, I needed to know that you're really the man you're made out to be. That you'll pursue treasure even when there's a slim possibility to none that you'll find it. Even when your life and the lives of others are on the line."

"We're not treasure hunters for hire," Cal snapped.

Robyn put a hand on his shoulder, and Cal glowered at her. She shrugged and took a drink of her beer.

"I know...I know," Mel stuttered, "that you're not for hire, but I'm hoping that I can intrigue you enough to help me. You see, I recently bought a house at auction. This house is on Marco Island, in Florida." Mel searched Matthew's eyes, almost as if he expected Matthew to piece together the point of all this from that alone, but Matthew had nada. Mel went on. "Well, I found something that I'm certain you'll be interested in."

It was probably the beer that had Matthew still hearing this guy out. "And what is that?"

"The house I bought is old. It dates back to the late eighteenth century. I happened to stumble across a hidden passageway and—"

"Lots of older homes have them," Cal cut in. "I've photographed a lot of them in my career."

"Sure, but have you photographed any in a home that belonged to John Gómez?" Mel tossed out the name, showing his first sign of spunk.

Cal groaned. "Don't tell me you mean Panther John."

"Who's that?" Matthew asked at the risk of coming across naive.

"Panther John was supposedly someone who lived in the early nineteenth century, believed to have been born in the late eighteenth century. He yapped a lot, told tall tales about his adventures in life." Cal rattled those tidbits off like he'd be more fascinated with

watching paint dry. He continued. "In rumor, he's been associated with José Gaspar. Very laughable because that man's existence has never been proven. Never existed, if you ask me."

"What if I told you he did?" Mel smiled, and an expression that typically made its bearer's looks improve gave Mel the appearance of a sloth with fangs.

"Yeah, whatever." Cal picked up his glass and took a swig.

Robyn passed Cal a brief look, then said, "Okay, who is this Gaspar guy?"

"Also known by the nickname Gasparilla," Cal responded, despite her question being directed at Mel. "He's nothing more than a mythical pirate, said to have plundered the Gulf of Mexico and Spanish Main during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Lore and something fantastical told to children. No more real than pixies."

"Yet, ask Peter Pan about pixies," Mel rebutted with a slight smile. Less fangs this time.

"See, he's nuts." Cal slumped, his body language screaming he wasn't interested in continuing the conversation.

Matthew studied his friend. "How do you know so much about Gasparilla?" Usually it was him and Robyn who educated Cal.

Cal lifted his gaze from the table where he'd started tracing a pattern on the Formica with a fingertip. "Every year, there's a festival held in Tampa, Florida, in his honor. The event organizers hired me to photograph it one year. Only reason I ever heard tell of him." Cal angled his head toward Mel. "And you said that you can prove Gaspar's existence? I'd like to see what you've got. Rumor was this Gómez character, Panther John, was Gaspar's first mate. But another guy named Rodrigo Lopez was also up for the position. Just like a typical legend, there's so many versions, it can make your head spin."

"Gómez was Gaspar's *son*." Mel adjusted his satchel again but held up his head a little higher, showing some confidence. "Not first mate."

"Sure, okay," Cal said, skeptical. Then his face screwed up. "What even makes you say that?"

"I found a diary in that passageway I mentioned, and it was written by Gómez himself. One entry says that Gaspar was his father."

"Oh," Robyn exhaled.

"Yeah, *oh*. Tell us more," Matthew said.

Cal shook his head. "You two can't be serious. We don't even know this guy." He flailed a hand in Mel's direction. "And even if you found some diary, as you say, anyone could have put it there. Someone's messing with your head."

"I don't think so, Mr..."

"Myers," Cal said, providing his last name.

"Mr. Myers, I had this diary inspected by someone who specializes in antique documents. The paper and ink date back to the early nineteenth century."

Cal held out his hand toward Mel. "Can we see this diary?"

Mel deflated. "I don't have it."

Cal smirked and shook his head. "Uh-huh. You had it. Now you don't?"

"That's right. I put it in a safe place."

"Yep, okay." Cal looked away and took a gulp of his beer, enlarging his eyes like Mel was cuckoo.

"I swear to all of you that I'm telling you the tru—"

Plates, glasses, and cutlery smashed and clattered to the floor. A few tables away, a busboy had dropped his loaded tray.

Mel jumped, and his eyes shot to the front door as if a gunman had come in and opened fire. "Please, you must listen to me." His voice trembled. "There's a lot in the diary no one else knows about. Like in one passage, Gómez commented that his father often said that his heart will always lie with Useppa. Gómez said he never figured out what that meant."

"Ah, so we're dragging Gaspar's alleged girlfriend into this, too. Why not?" Cal set down his empty glass with a little force on the table.

Matthew and Robyn looked at their friend for an explanation.

"Fine, I'll continue to play along." Cal rolled his glass on its bottom as he spoke. "Some versions of the legend say that Gasparilla was in love with a Spanish—sometimes said to be Mexican—princess. Apparently, he named an island 'Useppa' in her honor."

“Yes,” Mel began, “and some legends say she rejected his advances, and he killed her and buried her body on Useppa Island.”

His heart will always lie with...

The passage Mel had quoted was kicking around in Matthew’s brain. “So, was Useppa the woman’s name or just the name of the island?”

“The island’s name,” Mel said. “As your friend alluded to, her true identity has been obscured in history books.”

“One rumor says the woman was Josefa de Mayorga, the daughter of a Spanish viceroy. Other explanations are that Gaspar couldn’t pronounce her name correctly—or spell it right, apparently. Hence Useppa, not Josefa, Island. Was the name Josefa in that diary of yours?” Cal asked with a little snark.

“No.”

“Even if this diary was, in fact, Gómez’s—and again assuming its existence—I’m not really sure how you can believe anything he wrote,” Cal said. “Censuses show that Gómez changed his birth date and birth location several times.”

“So, he was a real man,” Robyn said.

“Don’t let that distract you,” Cal cautioned.

“Let it,” Mel said, overriding Cal. “I have the man’s diary. A man who even your friend here hasn’t disputed once existed. Now, if a man can’t be honest in his diary, then where?” Mel put it to Cal, who shrugged.

“I have yet to see this diary,” Cal mumbled.

Mel went on. “The reason Gómez lied about his past was because he was trying to hide his lineage, all in an effort to protect the treasure.”

“Let me guess. Also in the diary,” Cal stated drily.

Mel nodded and carried on in a lower voice. “Gaspar’s treasure is estimated to be worth over thirty million dollars in today’s market.”

“Rumored to be.” Cal crossed his arms, but Matthew sat up straighter. His mind was starting to get carried away with thoughts of another quest. Like drugs to an addict, adventures gave Matthew a high he couldn’t find elsewhere.

“Is there a treasure map in this diary or directions to Gasparilla’s bounty?” He tried to keep the enthusiasm from reaching his tone; he didn’t want to seem too eager.

“Not exactly, but there are clues. Well, at least one.”

“A whole one. Wow,” Cal said snidely.

Matthew could understand Cal’s skepticism, but the dreamer in him wanted to take hold. “Maybe Gaspar hadn’t meant his romantic heart when he talked about it always lying with Useppa, but rather ‘heart’ was symbolic of something. And there is only one thing that’s of all importance to a pirate. Could his treasure be buried somewhere on Useppa Island?”

Mel smiled, the expression touching his eyes. Again, all sloth with fangs. “You are quick, Dr. Connor. I, too, believe ‘heart’ refers to his treasure.”

“There’s no treasure, Matt,” Cal deadpanned. “There was no pirate.”

“However, I really don’t believe the treasure is somewhere on the island,” Mel said, not giving indication that Cal’s interruption even hit his ears.

“And all this from a diary you can’t produce.” Cal stopped the waitress on her way by their table and ordered another beer.

Matthew sighed with the plain truth of his friend’s words. “He is right, Mr. Wolf. All that you’re telling us makes for a fantastic story, but—”

“Not a story. Now, Mr. Myers, you mentioned Rodrigo Lopez. Well, according to the diary, Lopez *was* Gaspar’s first mate aboard the *Floridablanca*—that was Gaspar’s ship,” he added for Matthew and Robyn, and then turned his attention on Cal. “Have you never questioned why we know the name of Gaspar’s ship, yet dismiss the existence of the man himself?”

“Can’t say that I have. Thanks,” Cal added for the waitress who dropped off his beer.

“Well, the name of the ship had to have come from somewhere,” Mel stated pointedly. “As they say, there’s always some truth to rumor. You take a little of this and a little of that, and you’ll get the full story. Well, one legend says that Gaspar sent his first mate Lopez back to Spain because Lopez was in love with this woman

there and sick without her. So much so that Lopez named an island after her. What we know as Sanibel Island, off Florida's southwest coast."

"Sounds like naming islands was what they used to do for the women they loved." Robyn's eyes glazed over. Either she was going all dreamy-eyed on them or she was lightly buzzed.

"It really was. Going back to Gaspar's love life," Mel started, "an entry in the diary speaks of a mutiny aboard the *Floridablanca*. It was initiated because a princess was captured from an enemy ship—likely the lady he named Useppa Island after. Well, Gaspar's crew sought to do her harm, but to protect her, apparently he sent her with Lopez to Spain."

"He saved her life." Robyn drank some more of her beer.

"There's treasure out there to be found, Dr. Connor. I feel it in my soul."

"Then by all means, we should jet off and search all of Spain." Cal laughed. No one else shared his sense of humor, and Mel was especially straight-faced.

"I could narrow it down more than that, but first I need to know you're in."

"Why us?" Matthew asked in all seriousness.

"As I said earlier, you find legends. If anyone can find Gasparilla's treasure, it's you—the three of you." Mel let his gaze take in all of them.

Matthew wanted to get caught up in the flattery, but he hadn't seen anything worth pursuing yet. "Maybe if we could see the diary..."

"But I can't show it to you."

Matthew glanced at his friends. "I'm sorry, Mr. Wolf, but without anything—"

Mel stuck his hand in his satchel and came out with a rusty skeleton key pinched between two fingers. "I found this with the diary."

Matthew took it and examined it. Definitely old. Could easily date back to the eighteenth or nineteenth century. It had an intrinsic scrollwork pattern to it. The middle almost looked like a G. "Do you know what it belongs to?"

Mel shook his head. "Not exactly, but according to the diary, it's the key to the treasure."

"Wow, it might as well say, 'Take it to a haystack and—'"

"Cal," Robyn admonished him to stop there.

Cal held up his hands. "I'm just sayin'. Really, the diary could claim anything. It's not like we can verify anything he's saying."

"As I told you, the diary's age has been confirmed. And, yes, I know you'd have to take that on faith. However, if you find it within yourself to do so and trust that it was written by Gaspar's own son's hand, then Gaspar was not only a real and active pirate, but by deduction, it would stand to reason there is a grand treasure out there to be found."

Setting out after a pirate's treasure certainly held more appeal for Matthew than slugging away at his laptop, hoping to strike literary gold, but he had a responsibility toward his publisher. Then again, he worked off a laptop—that meant he could take it with him anywhere in the world. He turned to Mel. "Can you excuse me and my friends for a minute?"

"Ah, sure..." Mel slipped off the bench and returned to the bar area where he had been seated before. Someone else had taken his spot, but he stood behind them.

"You seriously can't be considering this?" Robyn asked.

Matthew's silence was his response.

"The guy's a kook," Cal kicked out.

"I think we should take a trip," Matthew said. "It's been a while since we've had some fun."

"Fun?" Cal said. "Expeditions aren't so much fun as they are dangerous. And this one would be like a wild goose chase."

"You're not fooling anyone at this table, Cal. You love the rush. And yeah, maybe it's a wild goose chase, but isn't the uncertainty part of the appeal? The rush of not knowing? The rush of facing possible death—"

"That I could live without," Cal cut in.

Matthew raised his brows.

"Fine." Cal crossed his arms. "You know me too well."

"Cal has a bit of a point, though," Robyn said.

"Whoa. A whole *bit* of a point. So generous."

"We don't even know this guy," she carried on, "and this diary he claims to have could be a figment of his wild imagination."

"That doesn't explain the key," Matthew countered.

"So he went to a vintage shop," Robyn said. "You can't seriously be thinking that we'd hop on a plane in pursuit of a treasure that might not even exist."

Matthew grinned. "That statement pretty much sums up exactly what we do. And we're good at it. So what do you say? Up for a trip to Spain?"

"You are a dreamer, Matt." Robyn shook her head. "You really want to hop on a plane for Spain, on the word of a man you just met, in pursuit of a mythical pirate's treasure? We don't even know where in Spain."

Her last sentence told him she was curious. He smiled at her. "He did say he could narrow it down."

"His *one* clue." Cal pressed his lips.

"That's all it could take to set us on the right path." Matthew studied his friends' faces.

Robyn shook her head. "It really doesn't matter. I have a job I need to return to, and don't you have to write your book before you're in breach of contract with your publisher?"

"I'll get it done. And you'll be back before your museum misses you. So, what do you say? We'll just find out where in Spain and get going."

Robyn and Cal looked at each other. She sighed, and Cal shrugged.

"Excellent." Matthew looked over to the bar, but there was no sign of Mel Wolf. "Any of you see..." He got up and searched for the spiky hair and tweed jacket among the patrons.

"Easy come, easy go." Cal wiped his hands together as if ridding them of crumbs.

Their waitress came with their food orders.

"Did you happen to see where our friend went?" Matthew asked, hoping she'd tell him he'd gone to the restroom.

"He left. Just a minute ago, if that."

"Do you know why?" The question was out, and he realized how crazy he must have sounded. "Never mind."

The waitress smiled. “Yeah, I’m not in the habit of stopping customers before they leave, asking them where they’re going or why.”

“Makes sense.” He returned her smile, but his heart sank. He’d gone and fallen in love with the idea of a new adventure.

“Enjoy your meals,” the waitress said to everyone and walked off.

Robyn put a hand on Matthew’s, which was wrapped around his glass. “It’s probably for the best. Now I can go back to work, and you can get your book written without any more distractions.”

“Wishful thinking on that,” he said. “There’s always something that can distract me from writing.”

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