

**Seas the Day One Last Time**

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*For my two boys, Harrison and Oliver.*

## Chapter 1

Roger stepped off the wavy path that encircled Kitchen Woods and weaved his way deep into the forest. He ducked under low-hanging branches, leapt over tangled bushes, and let the familiar scent of damp earth and pine needles pull him further in. As he reached the heart of the thick wood, a grin spread across his face.

Memories stirred. The first ship, *Seas The Day*, taking shape plank by plank beneath his hands. The quiet determination, the thrill of creation. And more than that, this was where he met Polly.

Roger pushed himself through one final bush and there she was, grinning back, perched high above on the deck of her ship, *Seas The Day Again*. A massive thing built from the trees from this very wood, sitting smack in the middle of a forest where no ship had any right to be. Beside her squawked Peanut, her parrot, flapping his wings.

“Oy, Roger,” Polly hollered, letting down the rope ladder.

Roger smiled and gave a wave back before leaping onto the ladder and pulling himself up to the deck. He did it with no effort at all. The pirate life had done wonders for Roger. His adventures on the high seas had kept him fit and strong.

Returning home to spend time with his family had done him a world of good, leaving him refreshed and grounded in ways he hadn’t

realized he needed. He spent a couple of weeks with his mum and dad, catching up properly after far too long apart. It felt different this time, like he was soaking up every conversation, every meal, every quiet afternoon in the back garden in a way he hadn't before.

His mum made his favourite meals, fussing over whether he was eating properly while away. They talked. They laughed. They argued over card games. His dad convinced he was cheating, while Roger maintained it was nothing more than skilful play and sharp strategy.

Then when the time came for him to leave, his mum hugged him a little tighter than usual.

"Off again," she murmured, shaking her head. "You don't sit still for long, do you?"

Roger smiled, guilty, but fond. "You wouldn't want me to."

She sighed, smoothing his collar like she had when he was a boy. "Just don't get yourself thrown overboard, alright?"

Roger laughed. "No promises."

And with that, he was off again.

He climbed on to the deck of *Seas The Day Again* with a big smile, a new haircut, and a smooth, cleanly shaven face. It was good seeing Polly again. Time with the family was nice but adventures with Polly was his life, and he loved it.

“About time you got here, Roger,” Polly teased, hands on her hips.

“Nice to see you too, Polly,” he replied.

Polly looked excited, skipping from toe to toe. As soon as Roger stood up on deck, she ran over to him and hugged him.

“You ready for our next adventure?” she asked.

“Yes. You?”

“Yes!” she shouted. “To South America!”

Polly turned the valves on two cannisters and ignited the gas. Two hot air balloons began to inflate. The red and yellow striped material of the balloons slowly bulged as they filled with the hot air.

While Roger was visiting his mum and dad, Polly was reading up on the Spanish invasion of South America and the Aztecs, mainly to learn about the Aztec gold and treasures. Polly’s theory was, there’s plenty of lost gold left over to find. She called Roger and spoke about her theory and he agreed, and now with Captain Redtash out of the picture, there was nobody around to stop them. Captain Redtash being the ruthless pirate that Roger and Polly had crossed paths with more than once, who vanished without a trace after their last encounter, never to be seen again.

As soon as the red and yellow balloons inflated, they lifted the *Seas The Day Again* off the ground and up above Kitchen Woods,

carrying the ship over towns and countryside, all the way to the English Channel. When the deep blue of the seas came into view, Polly turned the valves of the cannisters and watched the hot air balloons shrink. While the ship descended from the sky, Roger marvelled at Polly's knack for planning. From her daring ideas to her quick execution, she'd become the kind of pirate who could captain any ship, or hot air balloon.



“Hold on,” yelled Polly.

Roger grabbed a rail and his knuckles whitened as he braced for impact.

Gush.

Waves sprayed over the sides and onto the deck. It reminded Roger of riding the log flume.

“A bit of a rough landing, wasn’t it?” said Roger.

“I know. Exciting, wasn’t it?” said Polly.

“Err, if you say so,” said Roger, unsure if that was true. He preferred a soft, gentle landing, with hardly any splashes but Polly had become quite the thrill seeker since becoming a pirate.

They cut up the hot air balloons and turned the material in enormous sails for their ship. It was a big job that left them completely famished. By the time they hoisted the sails, dusk was settling on the horizon and their bellies began to rumble, so they headed below deck to raid the pantry. They opted for a tin of beans and sausages each, and some seeds for Peanut. Polly opened up Peanut’s cage and he flew onto her shoulder.

“Who’s an ugly boy, SQUAWK,” squealed Peanut.

“Great,” said Roger, sarcastically. “A month of listening to Peanut. Can you teach your parrot some manners, please?”



“I’ve tried,” replied Polly. “But he’s not interested. I’ve taught him some new tricks though. Wanna see?”

“Go on then,” said Roger, unenthusiastically.

“Roger smells! SQUAWK!”

“That’s not one of them,” said Polly, her face going slightly red, nearly matching her hair.

“I know. I’ve heard that one before,” said Roger.

“Okay, Peanut. Here!” She prodded at the table with a finger and Peanut flew off of her shoulder and onto the spot she prodded at.

“Roger smells, SQUAWK!”

“Does he have to say that I smell after every trick?” asked Roger.

“No. He usually doesn’t.”

Polly pulled a foam ball from her pocket, the size of a ping pong ball, and threw it across the room.

“Fetch,” ordered Polly.

Peanut swooped down from the table and snatched the ball in his beak. Then he flew back up onto Polly’s shoulder and dropped the ball into Polly’s waiting hand.

“Roger smells, SQUAWK!”

“Are you sure he doesn’t have to say that I smell after every trick? He seems intent on saying it.”

“I’m sure. Just ignore that bit,” suggested Polly.

She stuffed the foam ball back into her pocket and began rummaging through the other. After a few moments, she brandished a tiny bicycle, holding it up like a prize.

“Watch this,” she said as she placed it on table. “Peanut wanna ride?”

“SQUAWK! No. Peanut wanna peanut. SQUAWK!”

“You can have a peanut after your ride,” said Polly.

Peanut dropped down to the table and stepped onto the tiny bicycle, holding the handlebars in his beak. Immediately, he gripped the pedals with his claws and pushed them down with surprising precision, making the wheels spin and the bicycle move forward.

“Ring the bell,” commanded Polly.

“Bring, bring,” squawked Peanut.

“Would be more impressive if he didn’t have stabilisers,” pointed out Roger.

Peanut stepped off the bicycle and looked up at Polly, waiting for a treat.”

“At least he finished the trick without saying that I smell,” said Roger.

“I know. Good boy, Peanut,” said Polly as she pulled a peanut out of another pocket and fed it to him.

Peanut gripped the nut tightly in one of his talons, then lifted it to his beak and began to nibble.

“What do you say, Peanut?” asked Polly.

“Roger smells. SQUAWK!”

“Close enough,” said Polly.

“Hey. You shouldn’t encourage him.”

Polly shrugged. “He can do useful things too. Look, I’ve brought *Twister*.” She opened the cupboard door to reveal many board games. “It’s going to take about a month to get to South America, so I stocked up on board games to help pass the time. And *Twister*’s my favourite. Fancy a game?”

“Sure,” said Roger, “but who’s going to do the spinning? We can’t both play and spin the spinner at the same time.”

“Watch this.” Polly placed the spinner on the table and prodded at it. Peanut waddled over to the spinner, grabbed the arrow in his beak, and spun it. Roger and Polly watched the arrow spin round until it stopped.

“Left foot yellow, SQUAWK!”

Roger looked at Polly in amazement.

“Now, that’s a talent,” he said, impressed.

“Roger smells. SQUAWK!”

“Okay. Maybe it’s not that impressive.”

Roger put his left foot on yellow and told Polly that it was her turn.

The time flew by. Polly's idea to bring board games turned out to be a great one. They played *Monopoly*, *Kerplunk*, *Battleships*, *Connect-4*, *Pictionary*, *Yahtzee*, *Scrabble*, and Roger's favourite, *Pop-up Pirate*. They only fell out once during the entire journey to South America, and that was over a game of *Monopoly*. Polly refused to let Roger pay his rent late, meaning Roger lost all his money and the game. It was the first and last time they played that game.

## Chapter 2

"Land ahoy!" yelled Roger, standing in the crow's nest with the gold telescope his grandpa had gifted him on his eighth birthday, pressed tightly to his eye. From the cabin below, Polly heard his shout and rushed to the deck.

"Are you sure?" Polly called out, shielding her eyes from the sun. "It's a bit soon."

"Yes, over there," he said, pointing ahead. "But it's not South America, it's a tiny island."

“We’re not interested in tiny islands, Roger,” Polly grumbled.  
“Remember the map? It’s South America or...”

“Wait!” Roger interrupted, his voice climbing with excitement.  
“I think I see a rowing boat on the shore.”

Polly stopped mid-complaint. “A rowing boat?” she echoed, squinting towards the island. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, that’s what I said. A rowing boat. On the shore!”

She sighed. “No, Roger. I mean *are you SURE?*”

“Yes, Polly. On the shore!” he shouted, his voice unwavering.

Polly gave up with an exasperated shrug. “Fine. Wind in your ears again, is it?” she muttered, though a flicker of curiosity danced across her face.

*It had better not be another rock shaped like a boat,* she thought, sighing as she prepared to investigate.

She spun the wheel, steering the ship towards the direction Roger had indicated. The salty breeze tugged at her hair as she squinted into the horizon, where the faint outline of land grew sharper with every wave they crossed. Roger had climbed back down from the crow’s nest, bouncing on the deck with excitement. The ship glided forward, slow and steady like a drifting iceberg, towards the island. They didn’t want to get too close to shore and crash the ship so they

dropped anchor a short distance away and rowed the rest of the way in their own rowing boat, that was tied to the side of the ship.

The island was little more than a small patch of woodland, smaller even than Kitchen Woods, and surrounded entirely by sand. Roger rowed steadily until the boat scraped against the shore. Together, he and Polly stepped out and hauled the boat farther up the beach to ensure the waves couldn't pull it back into the sea.

"Look, footprints!" Polly exclaimed, gesturing at a pair of tracks.

"A man, I reckon. The prints are a little bigger than mine," said Roger, crouching to inspect them.

"Could be a child in grown-up boots," Polly teased, giggling at her own joke.

"Possible, but not likely," Roger replied, shaking his head. "Come on, let's follow them."

They trailed the footprints along the sand, winding around the edge of the island. After a couple of minutes, Polly slowed and glanced around. "Hang on... I think they're leading us back to where we started."

"Hmmm. Maybe," Roger muttered, frowning.

They pressed on, and before long, the familiar sight of their own rowing boat came into view.

“Yep. They go in a circle,” Polly said, crossing her arms with a triumphant smirk.

“Not over there, they don’t.” Roger pointed. “They head into the woods.”

“Ahoy there!” yelled a voice from beyond the trees. Polly and Roger froze, squinting towards the bushes and branches, but they couldn’t see where the voice had come from. The sound hung in the air, bouncing between the trunks like a ghostly echo.

“Over here,” came the man's voice.

A tall figure emerged from behind a bush, rising slowly to his full height. His dark eyes flickered with curiosity, framed by shoulder-length curls that tumbled around his sun-kissed face. Thick stubble shadowed his jaw, giving him a rugged edge. He wore a sand-coloured shirt, its fabric slightly wrinkled from travel, and shorts that had seen their fair share of adventure.

“Sorry, nature called,” he said, zipping up his shorts and buckling his belt. With a confident stride, he stepped out of the woods and extended a hand.

“Hi, I’m Jack Crow.”



“Uh... we’d rather not shake, thank you,” Polly replied, giving an uneasy nod towards the bush that had doubled as his toilet.

“Oh, right. Sorry,” Jack said, hastily wiping his hand down the side of his shorts. “Haven’t had company in a while. Been stranded here for a week. My ship sank.”

“Oh no,” Roger said sympathetically. “What happened?”

“My own fault, really,” Jack admitted. “I fell asleep at the helm and hit a rock. Woke up underwater. Managed to swim up to my rowing boat and make it to this island. Been here ever since.”



“Well, Jack. You’re safe now. I’m Roger and this is Polly,” introduced Roger, flashing his friendliest smile. Polly waved, still not wanting to shake his hand.

“Oh, thank you,” Jack said, his eyes sparkling with gratitude. “How can I ever repay you?”

“It’s nothing,” said Roger. “You don’t have to do anything for us.” Polly nodded in agreement.

Jack’s eyes lit up as if a brilliant idea had struck. “I know!” He beckoned them to follow him to his rowing boat, his movements brimming with excitement.

“This bottle washed ashore the other day.” He knelt down and pulled out a weathered green bottle from under the seat. “There’s a treasure map inside.”

Roger and Polly exchanged wide-eyed glances, their excitement mounting. Jack continued, his voice dropping to a near whisper, as if sharing a secret. “It’s a map of the island of Cayo Santiago, and look... ‘X’ marks the spot.”

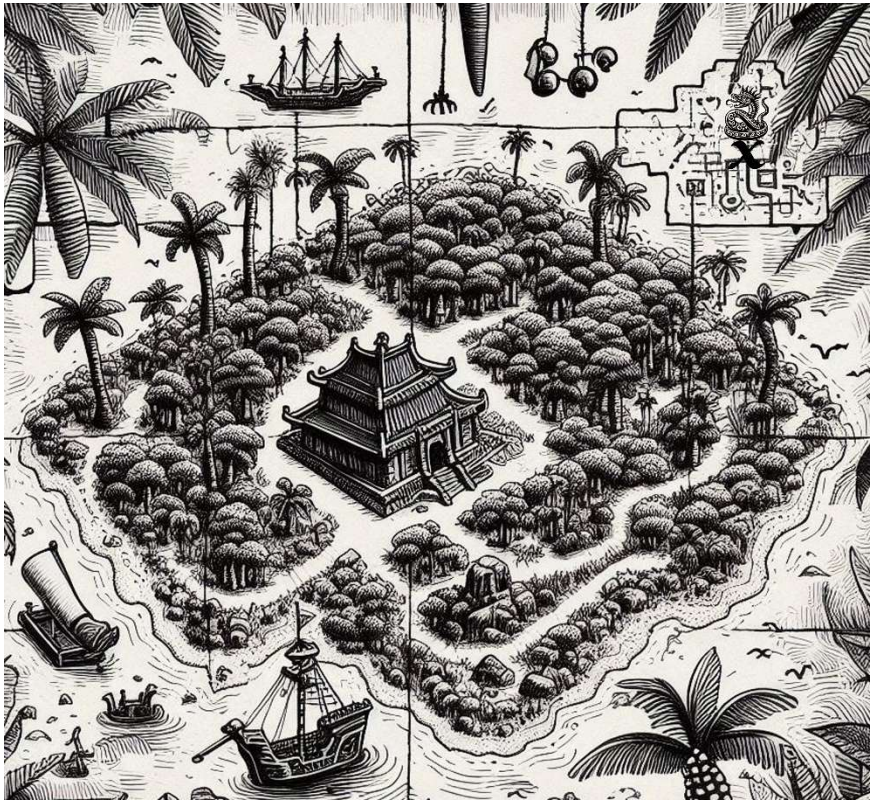
Polly and Roger squinted through the green glass of the bottle. Sure enough, there it was. A bold ‘X’ etched onto the map like a promise of adventure.

“We could find the treasure,” Jack suggested, his voice buzzing with anticipation. “And split it three ways.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Polly said with a determined nod.

Roger glanced at Jack’s rowing boat thoughtfully. “Row your boat to our ship, Jack, and we’ll tie it to the side.” Then he shifted his gaze to Jack with a sheepish look, his hand scratching nervously at the back of his neck. “But first, may I use your loo?”

Jack laughed and gestured towards the bush with a sweeping arm. “Be my guest,” he said, chuckling.



All three of them rowed back to the *Seas The Day Again*. Jack in his small, weathered rowing boat, with Polly and Roger following in their even smaller one. The rhythmic splash of oars against the water echoed between them, accompanied by the occasional creak of wood. Once they reached the ship, they climbed aboard, their boots clunking against the wooden deck.

Working together, they secured the rowing boats to the ship's side with thick, salt-stiffened ropes, pulling tight knots to ensure the boats wouldn't drift away. Polly tugged hers twice for good measure, while Jack wiped a bead of sweat from his brow.

With everything secure, Roger stepped to the helm, grinning as the sails unfurled above them with a snap. The ship tilted slightly as it caught the wind, the scent of the sea filling the air. They were bound for the island of Cayo Santiago, their hearts thrumming with the promise of adventure ahead.

"This is a remarkable ship," Jack said, running his hand along the smooth, polished wood. His eyes wandered over the intricate craftsmanship; admiration evident in his gaze.

"Thanks," Polly replied, her chest swelling with pride. "Built it myself, every plank and beam." The hint of a smile tugged at her lips

as she stood a little taller, basking in the compliment. “Come on. I’ll show you around.”

With enthusiasm bubbling over, Polly led Jack on a tour of the ship, her steps light and purposeful. She pointed out the gleaming wooden deck, worn smooth by the sea’s salt spray, and the crow’s nest perched high above, sturdy enough to weather a storm.

“These sails,” Polly said, her voice brimming with joy, “are made from hot air balloon material. Lightweight but tough as old boots!”

Jack nodded, impressed, running his fingers over the unusual fabric.

Down below, Polly introduced him to the dining room with its long table bolted to the floor, the snug kitchen that smelled faintly of spices, the bedrooms lined with bunk beds, and finally the pantry, its shelves stocked with essentials and a few oddities. A jar of pickled bananas catching Jack’s eye.

“Wow. This is truly amazing,” Jack said, his voice full of genuine awe as he admired the ship’s intricate details. Something in the corner of his eye caught his attention. He tilted his head, curiosity sparking. “What’s that under the cloth?”

Polly smirked knowingly. “That’s Peanut. My parrot.”

Roger groaned, cutting in with a warning. “Trust me, you don’t want to meet him.”

Suddenly, a voice squawked from beneath the cloth, sharp and indignant. “Roger smells! SQUAWK.”

Jack’s eyes widened, and then his face broke into a grin. He erupted into laughter, clutching his sides as the squawk echoed around them. “Peanut’s got quite the personality!” Jack managed to say in between chuckles.



Polly slipped the cloth off Peanut's cage, revealing her bright-feathered parrot. She swung the door open with a flourish, her grin widening.

"That's a handsome parrot," Jack said, leaning in for a closer look.

"Who's a pretty boy? SQUAWK!" Peanut retorted loudly, his head tilting at an angle that seemed full of attitude.

Jack's face lit up. "Oh, you are!" he replied, chuckling as Peanut fluffed his feathers and hopped confidently out of the cage. With a quick flutter, Peanut landed on Polly's shoulder, perching gracefully as though he owned the ship.

"Can he do any tricks?" Jack asked, intrigued.

"Not really," Roger mumbled, folding his arms.

"Yes, loads!" Polly shot back, nudging Roger's side with her elbow as she reached into her pocket. Triumphant, she pulled out a tiny bicycle, its wheels gleaming.

"Do you carry that with you everywhere?" Roger asked with raised eyebrows.

Polly stuck her tongue out at him in response, refusing to dignify the question with an answer. Peanut squawked in agreement, the parrot seemingly sharing her disapproval.

Peanut showed off all of his tricks. Jack clapped enthusiastically with every move, his laughter ringing out like music. He was absolutely captivated.

“That’s was amazing,” Jack cheered, beaming as Peanut took a dramatic bow, his feathers flaring like a performer basking in applause.

“And that’s not all,” said Polly. “Do you like *Twister*?”

### **Chapter 3**

The three new friends, and Peanut, were well on their way to the island of Cayo Santiago. Their days on the ship were filled with laughter, games, and songs, as the excitement of their adventure buzzed through the salty air. They feasted under the stars, watched the sun melt into the horizon each evening, and dreamed aloud about the riches waiting to be discovered.

“What will you spend your treasure on?” Polly asked one evening, leaning against the ship’s railing, her hair glowing like fire in the sunset.

Roger leaned back against the mast, a grin tugging at his lips. “A grand ship makeover,” he declared, gesturing around them. “Better

sleeping quarters, a water filtration system, even a library. I've always thought this ship could use more books."

Polly smiled thoughtfully. "I'd give mine to charity," she said. "Or maybe several charities, depending on how much we find. Imagine the lives we could change."

Jack Crow, sprawled on a barrel with a playful glint in his eye, chimed in. "A circus. I'd start my very own circus."

"A circus?" Roger asked, raising an eyebrow.

"That's right. It's in my blood. My dad was a ringmaster. So was my grandad. And my grandad's dad before him." Jack straightened up, painting the air with his hands. "Clowns, trapeze artists, animals doing tricks... just like Peanut."

At the mention of his name, Peanut squawked and flapped his wings, as if rehearsing. Jack chuckled, shaking his head.

"I love the circus," Roger said with a grin.

"I didn't when I was younger," Polly admitted, folding her arms. "They're dangerous. No health and safety. How are tightrope artists allowed to walk along a rope that high up without a harness?"

Roger tilted his head thoughtfully. "I think that's the trick, Polly."



“You might enjoy the circus now,” Jack said, leaning forward with a spark of enthusiasm. “There’s a fantastic one in Rio de Janeiro. It’s right on our way. We should stop by.”

Roger nodded eagerly. “That’s a brilliant idea.”

Polly frowned, her scepticism lingering. “I’m not sure.”

Jack flashed a reassuring smile. “I promise you, Polly, it’s perfectly safe.”

For a moment, she hesitated. Then, with a reluctant nod, she said, “Alright. Let’s do it.” said Polly.

## **Chapter 4**

As they sailed into Rio, their pirate ship became an unmistakable spectacle. The sight of the imposing vessel gliding towards the beach made heads turn and jaws drop. People on the shore stared in wide-eyed disbelief, their activities forgotten. Beach volleyball matches paused mid-serve, football games froze mid-kick, and joggers slowed to a halt, sweat-soaked and staring.

Roger, Polly, Peanut, and Jack dropped anchor just before the sand and clambered into a rowing boat to reach the shore. The blazing sun bore down on the scene, the heat shimmering off the turquoise

water. The beachgoers, dressed in shorts and bikinis, gathered in curious clusters, murmuring about the unusual arrivals. All eyes followed the pirates as they stepped onto the sand, with Polly's shoulder-bound parrot squawking.

Jack, ever the showman, gave the crowd a jaunty wave. "Don't mind us," he called out cheerfully, his grin broad enough to rival the sunshine.



The beachgoers glanced at each other, shrugged, and returned to their games and sunbathing. A few chuckled lingering looks but soon resumed their bustling beach life.

“Welcome to Copacabana beach,” Jack announced proudly. “I used to play here when I was a child.”

Polly turned to him, surprised. “You’re from Rio?” she asked, wondering how this hadn’t come up during their time sailing.

Jack nodded and gestured towards a hill in the distance, dotted with small wooden houses nestled together. “I grew up right over there, in the community.”

Polly squinted, shielding her eyes from the sun. “It looks so full of life,” she said, her voice thoughtful. “I bet there were always people around, ready to lend a hand or share a story.”

Roger tilted his head, a glimmer of curiosity in his eyes. “Hard to believe someone raised here could end up out on the high seas,” he said. “I reckon the waves must’ve called to you from over the hill.”

Jack chuckled, his expression softening as he took in the familiar sight. “It’s where I learned how to get by.”

They made their way through Rio’s lively streets, which were thronged with tourists from every corner of the globe. Polly drew curious stares; a woman strolling through the city with a parrot perched on her shoulder wasn’t an everyday sight.

Roger frowned. “I don’t know why you brought Peanut along. I doubt the circus will let us in with a parrot on your shoulder.”

Polly opened her mouth to explain how they had once left Peanut on the ship, only to have Captain Redtash steal both the ship and the bird. Before she could, Jack cut in with his usual charm. “It was my idea. Circuses love animals. Trust me, they’ll let us in.”

After walking a mile, they turned a corner and came face-to-face with the circus tent. A breathtaking masterpiece of red and gold.



Fireworks and flames lit up the sky, casting a glow over the structure that towered like a fortress of wonder. The sheer scale of it amazed them; it could easily fit ten thousand people, rivalling the size of half a football stadium.

They joined the shortest queue they could find, watching as circus workers gradually ushered people through the gangways. The chatter of the crowd mingled with the scent of street food and the vibrant rhythms of carnival music.

At last, they reached the front of the line. The ticket assistant opened his mouth to ask for payment, but his eyes widened in recognition when he saw Jack.

“Jack?”

Jack broke into a grin. “It’s me.”

The assistant rushed forward to embrace him. “Great to see you! How long’s it been?”

“Oof. Maybe a year or two,” Jack replied with a laugh.

“Well, come on in, on the house, of course. You and your friends.” The assistant glanced at Roger, Polly, and Peanut. “Nice parrot.”

“Thank you,” Polly said warmly.

“Thank you! SQUAWK!” Peanut added, puffing out his chest.

The assistant blinked in astonishment. “Woah. It talks.”

Jack leaned in with a conspiratorial grin. “That’s not all,” he said with a wink.

The assistant shot him an impressed look, handed over their tickets, and waved them towards the entrance. “Enjoy the show! We’ll catch up later, Jack.”

Inside the circus tent, a kaleidoscope of sights and sounds greeted them. People milled around with drinks in hand, chatting animatedly, while carnival music pumped through the speakers. The atmosphere was electric, alive with excitement and energy. As the gang searched for their seats, even Peanut bobbed his head and whistled along, lost in the festive mood.

“Before we find our seats, I just need to pop in here,” Jack said, striding towards a door marked *Staff Only* without hesitation.

Polly frowned, pausing in her tracks. “Jack, we can’t go in there,” she said, her voice tinged with concern.

Jack waved off her worry as he pushed the door open. “It’s fine, see?” He stepped through without a second thought.

Roger and Polly, with Peanut perched on her shoulder, exchanged uncertain glances before following him inside. Beyond the door, a tall man stood in conversation with two performers. A small man and a small woman, both only slightly shorter than Polly. Their matching outfits shimmered under the dim lighting: a glittering,

skintight spandex ensemble patterned like a galaxy, deep blue swirled with black and purple, flecked with white like distant stars.

The tall man, with dark eyes and curls tumbling to his shoulders, was dressed in a striking red jacket, holding a black top hat in one hand and a long whip in the other. He turned to look who had entered the staff room.

“Jack!” he exclaimed.

“Jorge,” Jack replied, opening his arms before pulling him into a firm hug.

“It’s great to see you,” Jorge said, his voice warm.

Jack gestured towards his companions. “Let me introduce you to my new friends. This is Roger and Polly.”

Jorge nodded, then turned to the two small figures beside him. “And these are the Sam twins, Samuel and Samantha. They’re a brother-and-sister trapeze act.” His gaze flickered to Polly’s shoulder, eyes lighting up in amusement. “Hey, nice parrot.”

“Thanks,” Polly said, stroking Peanut’s feathers.

“He does some amazing tricks,” Jack added with a grin.

“Oh, really?” Jorge’s eyes widened. He licked his dry lips, intrigue clear in his expression. “Would love to see that, but I have a show to run. Catch you after?”

“Of course,” Jack answered swiftly, speaking for them all.

## Chapter 5

Polly, Roger, and Jack were given front-row seats. Above them, the towering tent stretched so high it seemed to disappear into the sky. Every seat was occupied, and the air buzzed with a deafening chorus of voices as the crowd chattered excitedly.

“It’s one minute past, look!” Polly said, flashing her watch at Roger and Jack. “They’re late.”

“Jorge is just building the tension. He’ll be out any min...” Jack began, but before he could finish, the lights snapped off, plunging the tent into absolute darkness.

Gasps rippled through the crowd. Then, bam! A single spotlight flared to life, illuminating the grand entrance at the edge of the circus ring.

A loud trumpet blared, not entirely tuneful, piercing through the silence. The ground trembled. At first, they thought it was the sheer excitement of the crowd, the stomping and jostling of eager spectators. But then, emerging from the shadows, the largest elephant Roger and Polly had ever seen, strode into the spotlight.

Roger felt his seat shudder with every step the beast took as the vibrations ran through his spine. The elephant lifted its trunk and



trumpeted a mighty, ear-splitting sound. Those closest to the ring scrambled to cover their ears, faces twisting in astonishment.

And atop the colossal creature stood Jorge. His arms stretched wide, his red jacket billowing, whip cracking through the air like a bolt of lightning.

He spoke into the mic strapped to his cheek, his voice booming from the speakers scattered around the tent.

“Ladies, gentlemen, and parrots. Welcome to the biggest circus in the world!”

The crowd erupted into cheers as the elephant lumbered towards the centre of the ring.

“Please give a warm welcome to Norma, the largest elephant you will ever see.”

Applause thundered through the tent as Norma rose onto her hind legs. Gasps replaced cheers as the audience froze, fearing they had startled her, until they realized it was part of the act. Jorge sprinted up her back, steadying himself on her massive shoulders as she remained upright. Suddenly, two clowns dashed into the ring, their wild costumes a riot of colour. One, short and round, wore striped suspenders that stretched over his barrel chest, his face painted in exaggerated glee with a bulbous red nose that wobbled as he ran. The other, tall and lanky, sported oversized polka-dotted trousers that

flapped as he sprinted, his hat, a comically tiny top hat, threatening to bounce right off his wild mop of curly hair. Their absurdly large, squeaky shoes sent little honks into the air with every step as they hurried forward, rolling a giant multicoloured beach ball. One built for elephants.

With a mighty shift, Norma lowered her front feet onto the ball, forcing Jorge to step back and adjust his balance atop her broad back. He cracked his whip through the air, and Norma, with remarkable precision, used her feet to roll the ball forward, climbing onto it and holding steady.

Jorge began his countdown.

“Three... two... one...”

He launched himself forward, twisting through the air in a double somersault before landing, flawless, inches from Norma’s towering form.

“Ta-da!”

The crowd erupted, cheers, whistles, applause crashing like a wave. Norma, still perched atop the ball, rolled it backward, carefully steering with all four feet as she gracefully exited the ring.

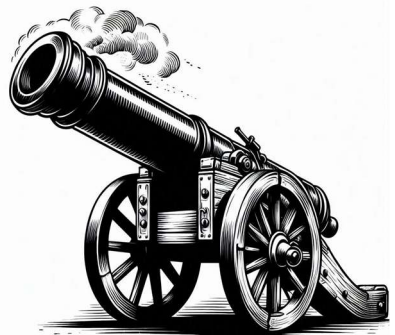
Jorge took a deep bow, waiting for the crowd to settle.

“Thank you,” he said into the mic. “Now, please put your hands together for the gravity-defying, amazing Sam Twins!”

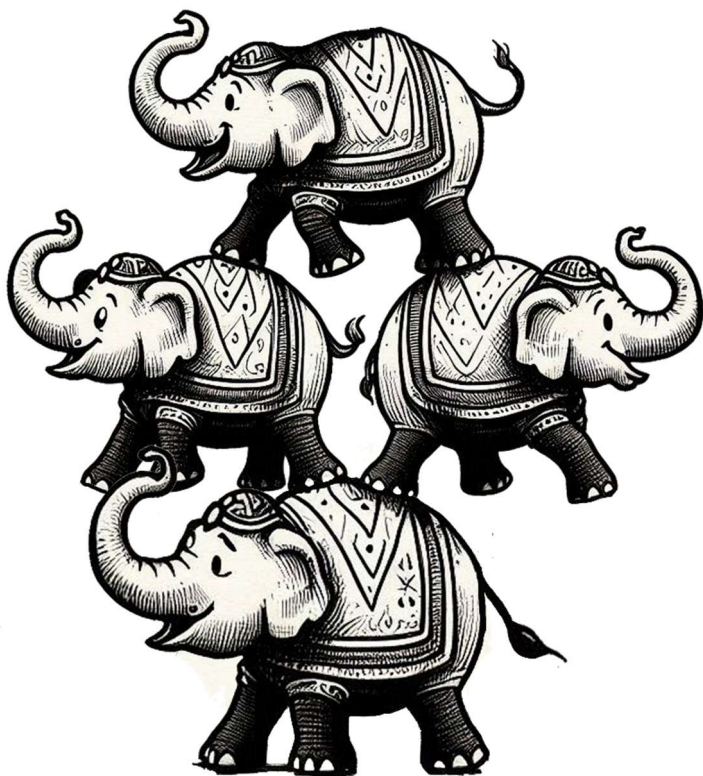
The cheers surged once more as the trapeze artists sprinted into the spotlight.

The show was astonishing. The twins flew through the air, twisting in somersaults and flips, catching each other in seamless, gravity-defying displays before plummeting towards the ground, only to be snatched back into flight at the last second.

More acts followed. Clowns stormed in dressed as firefighters, wielding oversized hoses that sprayed water on each other, the ring, and, of course, the unsuspecting crowd. Lions leapt into the air, executing perfect backflips. Then came Penny, the flying penguin, launched like a human cannonball, soaring through the air before splashing down into a pool of water fifty feet away.



Bareback zebra riders galloped past, weaving patterns through the ring. A bear in a tutu twirled in a surprisingly elegant dance. And then, the elephant pyramid. Towering above them all, Norma stood at the base, holding up a formation of mighty elephants stacked high, their trunks raised in triumph.



For the grand finale, the Sam Twins returned, this time with a brilliant blue macaw perched on their arms.



“Ladies and gentlemen, for the final part of the show, we need a volunteer,” they said in perfect unison.

Hands shot up across the audience as the spotlight swept the crowd, before stopping on Polly. She hadn’t raised her hand.

“We have a volunteer. Please make your way to the ring,” the twins announced, their voices merging once again.

The audience roared and clapped while Polly glanced around, baffled, double-checking that her hand wasn't in the air by mistake. Roger shrugged. Jack, with a sly grin, gave her a gentle nudge forward.

"It'll be fine," he assured her.

Polly stepped into the ring with Peanut perched on her shoulder. The blinding spotlight forced her to shield her eyes. Then, flames erupted before her, forming a blazing ring of fire. Heat licked at her face, and Peanut flapped his wings, uneasy. She instinctively stepped back, easing away from the blaze to keep herself, and Peanut's feathers, from burning. One of the Sam Twins raised a hand, signalling the audience to quieten. The excitement settled into anticipation.

"As I fly through the air, Hyacinth the blue macaw will swoop to me, take this peanut from my mouth, soar through the ring of fire, and land on our volunteer's shoulder, while my sister catches me on the opposite trapeze."

A chorus of "oohs" rippled through the crowd before silence fell. The Sam Twins climbed their ladders at opposite ends of the ring while Hyacinth perched at the edge of the spotlight, waiting for the act to begin.

Samuel and Samantha began to swing, gripping their trapezes with the backs of their knees, each ascent taking them higher and higher. Samuel bit down on the peanut, swung twice, then released his hold. He soared forward, arms outstretched, cutting through the air like *Superman* in flight. Hyacinth sprang from her perch, her wings unfurling as she glided towards him. With precise timing, she clawed at the peanut, plucking it cleanly from Samuel's mouth before swooping downward and slicing through the ring of fire. Flames reflected off her shimmering blue feathers as Samantha reached out, catching Samuel's hands, and pulling him onto her trapeze in one fluid motion.

Hyacinth headed towards Polly, who instinctively braced herself as the macaw swooped in. She waited for the gust from its wings and the sharp but gentle grasp of claws on her shoulder, but nothing came. She opened her eyes just in time to see Hyacinth veer sharply upward. Peanut launched from her shoulder without warning and chased after the macaw.

"Peanut!" Polly shouted.

But he continued to flap furiously, climbing higher and higher, following Hyacinth towards the ceiling, towards a small gap in the tent's peak. Hyacinth slipped through the opening and into the world beyond. Peanut shot after her. And then, both birds were gone.



Silence gripped the audience. No applause, no murmurs. Just rows of wide-eyed spectators watching Polly, who was still calling for Peanut. Jorge rushed into the centre of the ring.



“Ladies and gentlemen, that is the end of the show. Thank you very much for coming, and have a safe journey home.”

The lights snapped on, flooding the tent with stark, artificial brightness. The magic of the performance vanished in an instant, replaced by the harsh glow that made everything feel plain ordinary. As the audience stirred, a clown entered, hauling a fire extinguisher and blasted foam over the flickering ring of fire. Roger and Jack hurried towards Polly; concern written on their faces. She stood frozen, staring at the tiny hole in the ceiling, waiting. Waiting for Peanut to come back.

“What just happened?” Roger asked.

“Err... I don’t know. She’s never done that before,” Jorge admitted.

Roger rested a hand on Polly’s shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Polly finally tore her gaze from the ceiling and turned to Jorge.

“Will they come back?” she asked.

Jorge hesitated, then offered a reassuring smile.

“You never know. But if they don’t, I’m sure they’ll find somewhere safe and be happy together. Hyacinth has never flown off, and Peanut must like her enough to follow.”

Polly considered that. “Hmmm.”

The thought that the pair might be happy together, wherever they were, made the sadness feel just a little lighter.

Before saying their goodbyes, the Sam Twins led Polly and Roger behind the scenes, winding through the heart of the circus, the bustling backstage. Performers hurried past, adjusting costumes, practicing routines, and sharing jokes as they tidied and packed up for the evening. But Polly barely paid attention. Her mind was elsewhere, replaying the moment Peanut had disappeared into the night sky.

She walked through the animal enclosure in a daze, barely reacting when a striped zebra nudged Roger curiously, or when the bear in the tutu shuffled into view, adjusting the frilly garment with an air of undeniable pride. It gave Polly a brief glance before striking an elegant spin on the spot, utterly unfazed by the backstage commotion. The lively energy of the circus felt distant, like a fun party she wasn't really part of anymore.

Then, near the cannon setup, she spotted Penny, the penguin who had soared through the air earlier that night. Penny waddled back and forth, flapping her wings with theatrical flair, chattering at the clowns attempting to teach her how to honk a squeaky rubber nose. Polly smiled, watching Penny. Something about her, the energy, the mischief, felt familiar. It reminded Polly of someone.

Meanwhile, Jack had wandered off with Jorge, discussing something in hushed tones near the main entrance. Roger wasn't sure what, but judging by Jorge's animated gestures, it involved something daring.

After a while, the three of them said their goodbyes to the circus and returned to the ship. It didn't seem like the birds were coming back, and the longer they waited, the heavier Polly's sadness grew. Eventually, they decided it was best to move on, to continue their adventure.

"I'm going straight to bed," Polly announced the moment she stepped onto the ship's deck.

The night sky had fully arrived, stars scattered high above like fairy lights. Beautiful, but too faint to illuminate anything. Polly switched on her torch, the small beam guiding her as she shuffled to her quarters. Fully clothed, she collapsed onto her bed. She didn't sleep straight away, she shone the torch onto Peanut's empty cage, staring at it in silence until, eventually, exhaustion pulled her under. She drifted into a dream about the circus; one she wouldn't remember come morning.

Roger took the helm, sailing north through the quiet night. Jack did his best to stay awake beside him, but eventually, his eyelids grew

too heavy and he slumped against the mast, falling asleep beneath the dim glow of the stars.

## Chapter 6

The sea stretched wide and calm as the ship sailed north, leaving Rio far behind. Polly leaned against the railing, staring out at the rolling waves. The wind barely stirred, and the quiet rhythm of the ocean did little to ease the heavy feeling in her chest. Peanut was gone. She kept telling herself he'd be happy, wherever he was, but that didn't stop the ache. Even Roger, who had often grumbled about Peanut's cheeky remarks, especially the ones about how he smelled, seemed strangely subdued. He had caught himself a few times, expecting to hear Peanut's squawk, only to be met with silence.

The first day at sea dragged. Jack pulled out *Buckaroo*, hoping to pass the time, but Polly played half-heartedly. She placed her pieces on the donkey when prompted, setting it off every time, barely reacting to her losses, as if the game didn't matter.

"Come on, you're supposed to look angry when you lose," Jack teased, nudging her arm.

Polly only managed a weak smile before turning her eyes back to the water.

By the second day, Jack and Roger had had enough. Polly wasn't herself. And if she wasn't going to snap out of it on her own, then they'd have to step in. Roger leaned over the ship's wheel, whispering plans to Jack, who nodded along, his grin growing wider with every word.

That night, as Polly trudged towards her quarters, she noticed something strange. Lamps flickered across the deck, casting a warm glow. Music, something lively, began playing from somewhere near the mast. And then, a scent filled the air... something delicious. Polly had to investigate. She switched on her torch, followed the music, the aroma, the strange energy in the air, and then...

“SURPRISE!”

Roger and Jack threw their arms up as Polly stepped onto the deck. A table, assembled from old barrels, stood in the centre, piled high with food. Fruits, warm bread, and even something that smelled suspiciously like cake.

Polly blinked. “What is this?”

“A celebration!” Jack announced, spinning towards the table.

“Because you've been sad, and that makes us sad, so we had to fix it.”

Roger scoffed. “It’s not just about that. We had to celebrate Peanut too. He’d want us to. And, more importantly, he’d want cake.”

Polly laughed. A real, genuine laugh. It had been days since she had felt something other than sadness. She stepped forward, taking a seat at the table as the music picked up. And slowly, finally, she let herself enjoy the night. The evening was a blast. They laughed, joked, and danced. Roger told stories about Peanut and all the times the parrot had called him names.

“He was a menace,” Roger said with a smirk, launching into the tale of how he met Peanut long before Polly did. Back then, the pet store owner had insisted the parrot couldn’t talk. But when Roger leaned in and asked, “Who’s a pretty boy?”, Peanut had replied, “Not you.” That was the first insult. Then came the second: “Plonker.” Roger hadn’t bought Peanut that day. But, by pure coincidence, Polly did, months later.

The feast had been a success. Polly, Jack, and Roger ate until they could barely move, their bellies full to bursting. Plates were scraped clean, cups emptied, and every last morsel of cake devoured. Polly slumped back in her chair, pressing a hand to her stomach.

“I can’t eat another bite,” she mumbled.

Jack leaned back with a satisfied sigh. “I think that’s the most food I’ve ever eaten in one sitting.”

Roger stretched, letting out a small groan as he stood. “You two go get some rest. I’ll tidy up.”

Polly shook her head. “You don’t have to...”

“I insist,” Roger interrupted, already stacking plates. “I won’t sleep knowing there’s a mess.”

Jack chuckled. “You do realise this is a ship, right? It’s always a mess.”

Roger only grunted, gathering up the dishes. Polly wasn’t about to argue. Her limbs were too heavy, her mind clouded with exhaustion. She got to her feet, stretched, and shuffled towards her quarters. Jack followed, dragging his feet as he made his way below deck to his bed. Within minutes, the ship was silent. Roger finished his cleaning, wiping down the makeshift table, securing loose items so they wouldn’t roll in the night. He gave one last glance at the empty deck, the moonlight casting soft shadows over the wooden boards, before heading to bed himself.

As the night deepened, the ship drifted steadily north, its sails catching the soft ocean breeze. Polly barely stirred in her sleep, tucked beneath a blanket, the faint hum of the waves lulling her deeper into slumber. Jack, curled in his bunk, let out a quiet snore, his arm flopped over his pillow. And Roger, the last to close his eyes, finally let himself rest.

Morning came with the smell of salt and the distant cry of something... unusual. Polly stirred first, her eyes blinking groggily against the soft light streaming through the porthole. It wasn't the usual quiet ocean she had expected. There was noise, chirping, rustling, strange sounds that weren't waves or seabirds. She sat up, rubbing her face. Then Jack's voice called from above deck.

"Polly! Roger! Come look at this!"

Polly swung her legs over the edge of her bed and hurried up, Roger right behind her. The sight that greeted them was unlike anything Polly had seen before. Cayo Santiago stretched before them, green and wild, its trees thick with movement. Monkeys. Dozens, maybe hundreds, darted between branches, leaping from limb to limb, their chatter filling the air. Polly stood at the railing, wide-eyed. Jack grinned.

"I think we found our destination."

## **Chapter 7**

The morning air was thick with humidity, clinging to Polly's skin as she changed outfits. Cayo Santiago loomed ahead, dense with tangled trees and the restless movement of its residents, monkeys.



Everywhere. Chattering, scrambling, watching. Roger tugged at the ropes, steadying the ship in the shallows. “We need to be ready before we step foot in that jungle,” he said.

Jack nodded, flipping open the old rucksack he had borrowed off Roger. “Alright, what do we actually need?”

Polly held up the rolled-up map, retrieved from the green bottle Jack had found weeks ago. She smoothed it out across the wooden planks, tracing a finger over the faded ink.

“This should get us to the treasure.”

Roger crouched beside her, studying the markings.

“If we don’t lose it. Or get ambushed. Or...”

“Or get mugged by monkeys,” Jack cut in, smirking.

Polly sighed. “That’s actually a possibility.”

They had watched them from the deck, the monkeys darting between branches, their little hands grasping anything within reach.

Roger exhaled. “Alright. Defensive measures.”

Jack grinned. “You mean... bananas?”

Polly tossed him a look. “No. We’re not bribing them.”

Still, they packed a handful just in case. Along with rope, a flashlight, some dried snacks, a pocketknife, and, on Roger’s insistence, a slingshot.

“For emergencies,” Roger had said, fastening it to the side of his belt.

By the time their supplies were packed, the island loomed even closer, the waves lapping at the ship’s hull. Jack slung his rucksack onto his back. “Ready?”

Polly stared at the tangled green ahead, gripping the map a little tighter. “Let’s do this.”

They stepped to the edge of the boat, ready to make landfall.

“I’ll lower the rowing boat,” Roger said, moving towards the ropes.

“Use mine,” Jack interjected. “It’s bigger.”

He was right. His boat was the largest, meaning it would fit all three of them more comfortably. Roger untied the boat and let it splash into the sea, then climbed down after Jack and Polly.

The row to shore was short, the waves steady beneath them. Jack and Polly jumped out first, dragging the boat onto the sand as Roger secured the oars. A small group of monkeys gathered, their noses twitching, eyes gleaming with curiosity.

“They can probably smell the bananas,” Polly muttered.

“Let’s keep them hidden for now,” Roger said. “We don’t know if we’ll need them later.”

Polly nodded. “Maybe slow movements. And no eye contact.”

“Understood,” Roger and Jack said in unison.

Polly squinted at the treasure map, then glanced at the dense jungle ahead. “Just getting my bearings.”

The jungle swallowed them almost immediately. Vines curled like grasping fingers, and the humid air clung to their skin, thick with the scent of earth and damp leaves. Polly took point, gripping the treasure map in one hand as she pushed forward through the undergrowth. Roger and Jack followed, Jack keeping an eye on their supplies while Roger scanned the treetops, paranoid about their growing audience. The monkeys had not dispersed. If anything, more had joined them.

Polly paused, frowning at the map, its faded ink barely legible under the dappled light filtering through the canopy. She tilted it slightly, squinting at the markings. That’s when a rustling came from the branches above. A small monkey dropped down onto a low-hanging vine, holding something in its tiny hands. A leaf. It held it up and squinted at it, its little brow furrowed in intense concentration.



Polly stared. “Is it... is it pretending to read?”

Jack leaned in, amused. “Looks like it’s figuring out its own route to the treasure.”

Roger exhaled sharply. “Unbelievable.”

The monkey turned the leaf sideways, then upside down, as if testing different orientations. After a moment, it looked at Polly expectantly, chattering something incomprehensible.

Jack grinned. “You should explain it to him.”

“Jack,” Polly muttered, rolling the map tighter. “We’re not teaching the monkey how to find the treasure.”

The monkey clutched its leaf tighter and scurried back into the trees, disappearing into the dense foliage.

“That’s worrying,” Roger murmured. “It knows something.”

Jack laughed, adjusting the strap on his rucksack. “Yeah, well, as long as it’s not leading a whole...”

A loud screech cut him off. Jack barely had time to react before a monkey swooped down, landing on the path in front of him. There was a beat of silence, a moment where Jack thought, foolishly, that maybe the monkey was just curious. Then it reached out, grabbed his rucksack, and took off running.

“HEY!” Jack lurched forward, nearly tripping over the roots. “It’s got the bag!”

Polly clapped a hand over her mouth to smother a laugh, while Roger let out a resigned sigh. “I knew this would happen.”

Jack took off after the monkey, crashing through the undergrowth, barely keeping sight of the little thief darting between trees like an experienced fugitive.

Polly and Roger hurried after him. “Jack, don’t lose the supplies!” Polly called.

“I’M TRYING,” Jack shot back.

Up ahead, the monkey scampered onto a low branch and swung itself higher, settling onto a thick limb. Then, with a dramatic flourish, it opened the rucksack. Polly and Roger skidded to a stop beside Jack, all three of them watching, dumbfounded. The monkey tilted its head, rummaging through the bag, then, before their very eyes, slid the straps over its shoulders.

Jack gaped. "It's wearing it."

The monkey looked down at them, eyes bright, expression smug. A proud little explorer. A monkey-sized adventurer.

Roger pinched the bridge of his nose. "This is *actually* happening."

Jack took a step forward, arms out. "Alright, buddy. Let's..."

The monkey immediately dropped onto all fours and bolted.

Jack let out a frustrated noise. "ARE YOU KIDDING ME?"

Polly choked on a laugh as Jack sprinted after the tiny backpack-wearing thief.

Roger shook his head. "I bet this island's cursed."

Polly followed after Jack, trying to keep up. Jack crashed through the greenery, dodging vines, leaping over roots, completely ignoring the fact that his chase had drawn attention. More monkeys dropped from the trees, chattering excitedly, watching the ridiculous pursuit unfold.

“So much for slow movements,” thought Roger.

Jack lunged forward, almost grabbing the bag. The monkey leaped higher, laughing, a proper, mocking screech, and kept running. Jack groaned, bracing himself against his knees. “This is humiliating.”

Polly jogged up beside him, breathless. “We can negotiate.”

Roger arrived last, hands on his hips. “How do you suggest we do that?”

Polly considered for a second. “I mean... we did bring bananas.”

Roger paused. Then, with great reluctance, he pulled one from his pack. The monkey noticed instantly and stopped running. Roger raised the banana slightly. The monkey twitched. Then, slowly, carefully, Roger placed it on the ground. Silence. The monkey dropped onto all fours, cautiously creeping forward. Polly gestured discreetly for Jack to move. He did. The monkey snatched the banana, stuffing it into its mouth greedily. Roger lunged. The rucksack was ripped away in one fluid motion. Jack let out a triumphant “HA!” as Roger stumbled back, securing their supplies. The monkey screeched, offended. Then, with almost deliberate mischief, it flung the banana peel at Roger’s face.

Roger sighed. “I hate this island.”

They regrouped, dusting themselves off, securing their supplies, and trudging forward once more. It was almost peaceful, until Roger muttered, “I hope nothing else gets stolen.”

As soon as he finished talking, there was a rustle and a quick, sharp movement in the corner of his eye. Roger turned and a monkey swung past, clutching something. His slingshot. There was a beat of silence. Jack inhaled. “Roger.”

Roger’s expression was a storm waiting to break. “I am going to lose my mind.”

Polly, to her credit, was trying not to laugh again. Then the chaos truly began. The monkeys, previously just mischievous thieves, now had weaponry. Fruit flew through the air.

Roger dodged sideways, barely avoiding a mango to the head. “ARE YOU SERIOUS?”

Jack cackled as Polly scrambled behind a tree for cover. “Roger, this is exactly why we needed defensive measures.”

“Jack,” Roger gritted out, “I am currently under siege.”

Polly peeked out, watching the monkeys reload fruit into their new stolen weapon. “We have to move. Now.”

Roger huffed, ducking behind cover. “Alright. Plan?”

Jack threw his hands up. “Run?”



They ran. Dodging the hailstorm of fruit. Bananas, mangoes, even a pineapple at one point. They crashed through the jungle, sprinting towards the centre of the island. It was only when the ruins came into view, crumbling stone barely visible between vines, that they finally stopped.

Polly wheezed. "We made it."

Roger was covered in fruit pulp.

Jack wiped his face. "You look fantastic."

Roger didn't respond. Polly looked up at the ruins, tilting her head slightly. "Well. It's not much of a temple anymore."

Jack sighed. "Great. We survived monkey warfare for this."

Roger swiped fruit off his jacket. "I am never coming to this island again."

Polly took out the treasure map and squinted at it once more.

"Alright," she murmured. "Let's see what we're working with."

## **Chapter 8**

The ruins stretched before them, crumbling stone swallowed by vines, weathered by time. The jungle had done its best to reclaim the temple, leaving only fragments of walls and broken pillars jutting out

like ancient ribs. Polly unrolled the treasure map, smoothing it against her knee as she squinted at the faded ink.

“This place looks nothing like the map,” Jack muttered, kicking a stray rock.

“That’s because the map shows the temple as it was,” Polly said. “Before it became... this.”

Jack folded his arms. “So how do we use it?”

Polly traced a finger over the map. “It’s a floor plan. We just have to figure out how much of it still exists and where the treasure could be hidden.”

Jack leaned in. “That’s assuming we can still access whatever part of it holds the chest.”

Roger eyed the ruins suspiciously. “And assuming it’s not buried under a collapsed wall.”

Polly ignored him, scanning the map. The main chamber was marked at the centre, its faded ink surrounded by cryptic Aztec inscriptions. The text was unreadable, but next to it, a crude symbol was drawn. A coiled serpent with a jagged crown.

“This symbol,” she murmured. “It’s important.”

Jack frowned. “And what does it mean?”

Polly shook her head. “I don’t know. But it’s marked near the centre of the temple, which is where the treasure should be.”

Roger exhaled. “Great. So, we follow the map, work out where the main chamber is, and hope something still resembles a door.”

Jack clapped his hands together. “Love a simple plan.”

They navigated through the ruins, carefully stepping over broken stones and tangled roots, comparing the remaining architecture to the floor plan. The layout was still somewhat recognisable, where walls had crumbled, low foundations remained. Steps led downward,



half-buried under moss and fallen debris.

“This could be it,” Polly said, tapping the map. “The central chamber.”

Jack ran a hand over the nearest wall. “I don’t see a door.”

Roger pointed to an archway, barely visible beneath creeping vines. “There.”

They worked quickly to clear the entrance, pushing aside vines and crumbling rock until the way was clear enough to slip inside. The chamber beyond was surprisingly intact. Faded carvings decorated the stone walls, intricate patterns winding across the surfaces like the remnants of a forgotten language. Polly turned her attention back to the map. “There’s supposed to be a puzzle.”

Jack surveyed the chamber. “Well, it’s not going to be in English.”

Roger stepped forward, running his fingers over one of the carvings. “These symbols... they match the ones on the map.”

Polly followed his gaze, tracing the same markings on the paper. “They do.”

Jack sighed. “Fantastic. So how do we solve a puzzle when we can’t even read it?”

Polly studied the chamber. If the treasure was meant to be hidden, it wouldn’t just be sitting in the open. There had to be a mechanism, a pressure plate, a hidden latch, some kind of ancient system designed to keep it buried until the puzzle was solved. She stepped closer to the wall, running her hands lightly over the carvings. Her fingers paused at a particular section where the stone felt... different. Less worn, almost smoother than the rest.

“This might be something,” she said.

Jack peered over her shoulder. “What do we do with it?”

Polly pressed against the stone experimentally. Nothing happened.

Roger let out a breath. “There’s got to be more to it.” He turned, scanning the walls. His gaze landed on a set of small protruding stones arranged in a seemingly random fashion.

“Okay,” he said, stepping closer. “This feels like a puzzle.”

Polly frowned. “It matches the symbols on the map.”

Jack narrowed his eyes. “So, what do we do? Push them in the right order?”

Roger shrugged. “Only one way to find out.”

Polly compared the stones to the markings on the map, taking her time to study their arrangement. Then, carefully, she reached forward and pressed the first stone.

Nothing.

She pressed the second.

Still nothing.

She pressed the third.

A deep, low rumble vibrated through the floor.

Jack froze. “Oh.”

The rumbling grew louder, dust shaking from the walls as something shifted beneath them. Jack took a cautious step back. “What did you do?”

Polly lifted her hands. “Pressed the rocks.”

The ground trembled, and then, with a sharp grind of stone, a section of the wall slid open. Behind it, a dark recess. And within that recess, barely visible in the dim light, a chest.

Polly let out a breath. “We found it.” She stepped forward carefully, brushing away loose debris until she could reach the chest. Its surface was worn, the wood darkened with age. She hooked her fingers behind it and pulled it free.

“Right, give it here,” said Jack

“What?” said Polly, confused. She tightened her grip on the chest. “What do you mean, ‘give it here’?”

Jack shrugged, stepping closer. “I mean, hand it over.”

Roger narrowed his eyes. “Jack. What are you doing?”

Jack sighed, almost bored. “Look, we all knew this would happen eventually.”

Roger scoffed. “Did we?”

Jack reached for the chest. Polly yanked it back instinctively.

“Jack, you’re being ridiculous.”

“No,” Jack said, tilting his head. “I’m being practical.”

Before either of them could react, Jack flicked his wrist, sending something flying towards Roger's face. Roger barely had time to register what was happening before...

*Thwack.*

He staggered backward, stunned. His hand flew to his cheek. "Did you just... did you just sling-shot me with a banana?"

Jack twirled the slingshot casually. "Yep."

Polly lunged forward. Jack sidestepped smoothly, letting the tension build in the slingshot band before letting another shot loose.

*Thwack.*

Polly yelped, stumbling back.

Roger rubbed his cheek furiously. "Ow! That *hurts!*"

Jack grinned. "Yeah, well. Desperate times."

Polly glared at him. "You're literally armed with bananas and a slingshot. *Bananas!*"

Jack shrugged. "And it's working, isn't it?"

Roger lunged. Jack was ready. He spun, slipped behind Roger, and in one swift motion, grabbed the rope from his rucksack. Before Roger could regain his footing, Jack had looped it tight around his arms and pulled, forcing them against his sides.

Roger let out a frustrated growl. "You..."

Polly moved next. She reached for the chest, but Jack was faster, dragging the rope around her as well. In seconds, he had them both tied against the thick trunk of a tree, the knots cinched tight.

Roger struggled. "Jack, you absolute traitor."

Jack adjusted the straps on the chest, slinging it against his back. "It's not personal."

Roger fumed. "It feels personal."

Jack flashed him a grin. "Well. Maybe a little."

Polly growled, twisting in the ropes. "You're going to regret this."

Jack sighed dramatically. "Maybe. But for now, I've an island to leave."

He turned, adjusting his rucksack, and strode into the jungle.

Roger let out a frustrated breath, staring after him.

"Unbelievable. That's my rucksack!"

Polly shifted against the ropes, testing the knots. "Focus, Roger. There're bigger things here. Like, how do we get out of this?"

Roger exhaled sharply. "Don't know. Any brilliant ideas?"

Polly looked around, scanning the jungle. The monkeys were watching. Still. Silent. Eyes glinting with curiosity.

Roger frowned. "Oh no."

Polly tilted her head. "Hold on."



Roger groaned. “Polly, no.”

But Polly had already made up her mind. She took a breath, looked directly at the monkeys, and said, “Would you like a banana?”

Roger closed his eyes. “We’re doomed.”

## **Chapter 9**

The jungle was closing in around them, thick with restless movement, the distant chittering of monkeys threading through the humid air. The ropes dug into Polly’s wrists, coarse and unyielding, biting against her skin with every useless tug. The more she struggled, the tighter they seemed to cinch, a cruel mockery of her attempts at freedom.

Roger let out a frustrated breath beside her, shifting as much as the bindings allowed. “This is ridiculous. There’s no way we’re getting out of this.”

Polly scanned the dense greenery, searching for something. Anything, that might help them. But all she saw was endless jungle and the temple ruins rising like a forgotten graveyard of stone. Jack was out there somewhere, chest in tow, vanishing deeper into the trees with every passing second.

“We have to find him,” Polly muttered, refusing to let herself sink into despair.

Roger scoffed. “Oh yeah? And how exactly do you propose we do that? In case you didn’t notice, we’re tied to trees.”

Polly exhaled sharply, shaking her head. “There’s always a way. We can’t just sit here.”

Roger sighed, tilting his head back against the rough bark. “I mean, we might *have to* sit here.”

Polly shot him a sharp look. “Come on, Roger. We don’t give up. If there’s one thing Jack should know by now, it’s that we’re going to catch up to him.”

Roger huffed. “Jack *should* also know that I don’t appreciate being sling-shotted in the face with bananas. But, here we are.”

Polly wriggled against the ropes again, but the knots held firm. The jungle floor was damp beneath her boots, the earth softened by a wet summer and creeping vines. The eerie stillness of their surroundings made it even worse, there was nothing but the lingering echoes of monkey calls, the slow drip of water from the branches above, and the muffled crackle of unseen movement.

They were stranded. Jack had outmanoeuvred them. And the treasure? It was slipping further out of reach. Roger let out another defeated sigh. “Unless an actual miracle happens, I think we’re stuck.”

Polly clenched her jaw. “Something *will* turn up.”

Roger laughed dryly. “Oh yeah? Like what? A conveniently placed machete? A helpful jungle guide? Maybe a secret passage that magically frees us?”

Polly narrowed her eyes. “Something. Just... wait.”

Roger shook his head. “Yeah, okay. I’ll just sit here and wait for our salvation to stroll out of the trees.” He groaned, shifting against the ropes. “This is ridiculous. There’s no way we’re getting out of...”

A sudden rustling interrupted him. Polly turned her head, blinking at the small figure emerging from the foliage. The leaf-reading monkey. It stared at Roger intently, gripping its crumpled leaf in one hand like a sacred text. Then, with great purpose, it reached out and tugged at the ropes.

Roger flinched. “No... NO, STOP IT.”

The monkey pulled harder.

Roger let out an undignified noise. “GO AWAY.”

Polly choked on a laugh as the monkey adjusted its grip, its tiny hands tightening around the rope.

Roger squirmed. “It’s PLAYING TUG OF WAR WITH ME.”

The monkey screeched in delight. This was clearly a game now. Roger twisted, trying to shoo the creature away. “STOP. WHAT ARE YOU EVEN... NO.”

With one final, enthusiastic yank, the monkey succeeded. The rope slipped loose. Roger froze. Polly stared. Roger flexed his arms. “Wait. Am I...”

The monkey chirped, proud.

Roger blinked. Then, as realization dawned, his expression shifted into pure euphoria.

“I’M FREE!”

Polly huffed. “You could untie me now.”

But Roger wasn’t listening. He was already digging into his bag, triumphantly pulling out a banana.

“For you, little guy,” he said, offering it reverently.

The monkey snatched it up, stuffing it into its mouth with absolute glee. Roger beamed, overcome with generosity. He reached into his bag again, this time pulling out *all* the bananas. Polly narrowed her eyes. “Roger.”

Roger turned, eyes sparkling with reckless enthusiasm. “I’m giving them *all* bananas.”

The jungle stirred. Monkeys emerged from the trees, eyes locking onto the bounty in Roger’s hands.

Polly exhaled. “Roger, don’t.”

But it was too late. Roger threw his arms wide. “BANANAS FOR EVERYONE!”

Absolute chaos erupted. Monkeys swarmed, scrambling over each other, snatching bananas from his hands like seagulls fighting over a dropped chip at the seaside.

Roger laughed, utterly delighted. “LOOK AT THEM! THEY LOVE ME!”

Polly groaned. “Roger, UNTIE ME BEFORE YOU GET SWALLOWED BY MONKEYS.”

Roger barely heard her over the joyous screeching of his new companions. Still, between bites, one monkey turned, tilting its head at Polly’s ropes. It chirped. Then, carefully, it reached forward and started tugging. The knots loosened. Polly sighed, rolling her shoulders as she stood. “Finally.”

Roger turned, triumphant. “THEY LOVE US.”

Polly dusted off her sleeves. “We need to find Jack before your fan club decides they want more than bananas.”

Roger looked around at the sea of monkeys, still enthusiastically devouring his peace offering.

He nodded solemnly. “Fair point.”

And with that, they took off into the jungle, Roger now accompanied by a few loyal monkey followers, much to Polly’s horror.

## Chapter 10

Roger and Polly crashed through the jungle, tangled roots clawing at their ankles, branches whipping their arms as they sprinted towards the shoreline. Every heavy breath burned in their lungs; every footfall sent a shock through their weary legs. They had to catch Jack before he left the island, but deep down, they knew they were already working against the clock. It had taken them too long to escape. Too long to shake off the betrayal. Too long to let their heads clear enough to think. Jack had planned this and he was ahead of them.

And while urgency pressed them forward, in a moment of ridiculous generosity, Roger had dumped every last banana into the hands of their new monkey allies. Now, those very same monkeys trailed them through the trees, hooting, chittering, and leaping from branch to branch.

Polly threw a glance over her shoulder. “Did you have to give away *all* the bananas?”

Roger, gasping for breath, barely spared her a glance. “Yes. I got carried away.”

One of the monkeys swung down onto a low-hanging vine beside Roger and held out its tiny hands expectantly. Another scrambled onto a branch above Polly, slapping its mouth as if trying to

summon another banana by sheer determination. Their hopeful little faces were almost convincing.

"We don't have any more," Polly told them. She turned to Roger. "This is your fault," she said, exasperated.

The monkeys ignored her completely, still trotting behind them, eager and convinced their new banana provider would eventually cough up more.

Roger and Polly broke free of the jungle, crashing onto the sand in a flurry of movement. The tide lapped lazily at the shore, indifferent to their urgency. And then they saw it. The rowing boat was gone. Polly skidded to a stop, panting. Roger doubled over, hands on his knees, heart hammering in his chest. The ship. Their ship, was still there, anchored just fifty yards out. Polly straightened, frowning. "Doesn't Jack know how to sail?"

Roger stared at the empty water where the rowing boat should have been. "He must not. Or he has a different plan. If we hurry, we might still catch him."

There was no time to think. No time to hesitate. Polly pointed to the sea. "Into the water. Now!"

Roger grimaced. "Aren't there sharks?"

"Possibly," Polly admitted. "And jellyfish. So, swim fast."

That was enough incentive. They bolted for the waves, splashing into the water without another word, the sea rushing up to drag them towards the deep.

On the shore, the monkeys came to an abrupt stop. They watched, silent now as Roger and Polly thrashed through the waves, kicking and gasping, struggling towards the ship. One monkey sat down, scratching its head. Another folded its arms, looking thoroughly unimpressed with this turn of events. A third tilted its head and let out a long, defeated sigh, clearly realising its banana supplier had just vanished forever. Their tiny monkey expressions ranged from confused to downright devastated. Polly ignored them and focused on the ship ahead.

Roger groaned through clenched teeth. "I don't want to get eaten today."

"Swim faster, then," Polly snapped.

They reached the ship and hauled themselves onto the hull, hands slipping against the damp wood as they clambered up onto the deck. Jack wasn't here. Roger spun in a tight circle, scanning every shadow, every rope, every corner of the ship. "No way. No way he rowed out alone... right?"



Polly wrung out her soaked shirt, hair dripping onto her shoulders. "Or he had an accomplice and got picked up in another ship."

Roger frowned. "But Jack hasn't seen or spoken to anyone..."

Then he felt something odd in his pocket. Roger reached in and pulled out a fish. Polly stared at him while he held up the dripping creature in stunned silence.

Polly blinked. "I hope that's not your emergency snack."

Roger sighed, walked to the side of the ship, and threw the fish back into the sea. But his fingers brushed against something else in his pocket. A torn scrap of damp paper. He pulled it out, flattening it in his palm. A circus stub. Polly leaned in close, reading the faded ink. The corners were frayed, soaked with seawater. But it was unmistakable.

Roger narrowed his eyes. "Except the circus..."

Jack had spoken to many people at the circus.

Polly met his gaze. "That's where he went. He must be there."

Roger's lips pressed into a grim line. They had to get back to Rio. Without hesitation, he and Polly sprang into action, untying the ropes, hauling up the anchor, and adjusting the sails. The ship lurched forward, cutting through the waves as they set a southward course, the salty breeze whipping against their faces.

Neither spoke much as they sailed, both too focused on steering the ship, adjusting the sails, and ignoring the thoughts of Jack's betrayal.

They took turns. One keeping watch, adjusting course, tending to the sails, while the other caught brief moments of rest. Sleep was shallow, conversations short, and the anticipation unbearable. After three relentless days at sea, the familiar coastline of Rio de Janeiro emerged on the horizon, its sprawling beaches glowing under the early morning sun.

They pulled towards Copacabana Beach, aiming for the shore with slightly less precision than necessary. The ship lurched forward, skidded, then groaned as it wedged itself deep into the sand. Roger stared at the predicament. "That's a problem for later."

Polly didn't argue. They jumped down from the ship, landing hard in the damp sand before bolting across the beach, kicking up trails behind them as they ran. From the beach, they burst onto the crowded streets, weaving through vendors, dodging carts stacked with fruit, and narrowly avoiding a man balancing a precarious tray of coconuts. Voices shouted around them. Street performers called out their routines, musicians plucked guitars, and merchants called out to people, trying to sell their goods. Fresh fruit, colourful fabrics, and shiny trinkets, all while waving their hands to get attention, but Polly

and Roger barely heard any of it. They pushed forward, slipping past throngs of tourists and locals, their lungs burning, their legs aching. A startled vendor yanked his cart back just in time to avoid Polly crashing straight into it, and Roger nearly lost his footing dodging a stray dog darting across the road.

They turned a corner and... the circus had been here. Had been! But as they reached the clearing, their worst fear was confirmed. It was gone. The circus had been set up right here before. It should have towered ahead of them. The vibrant tents, the flickering lanterns, the sound of laughter, the distant echo of performers practicing their routines. Instead, nothing. The clearing was empty.

Polly breathless, scanned the space where the circus had been.

Roger looked around wildly. "Where, where is it? Where's the circus?"

Polly clenched her fists, frustration bubbling beneath her skin.

"Gone. Vanished, without a trace."

Their one lead had disappeared. Roger turned in a slow circle, eyes darting to the streets beyond the beach, hoping to catch some shimmer of red fabric, a hint of a tent still being dismantled, a performer lagging behind. But there was nothing.

Polly swallowed hard. "They must have packed up and moved."

Roger groaned, dragging a hand down his face. "Where?"

Polly clenched her jaw. “We find out.”

The hunt wasn’t over. It had just gotten harder.

## **Chapter 11**

Roger and Polly stood in the sand, staring at the beached ship. It loomed above them, utterly immovable, its hull wedged deep into Copacabana’s golden shoreline like a stranded whale.

Roger sighed. “We have no plan.”

Polly crossed her arms. “We can’t push it. We can’t drag it. What are we supposed to do? Wait for high tide and hope the ocean takes pity on us?”

Before Roger could answer, movement at the edge of the beach caught his eye. A familiar figure, one neither of them had expected to see again. Roger froze, blinking hard. Polly frowned, confused, then followed his gaze. Sitting in a deck chair, just beyond the crowd, wearing an offensively bright Hawaiian shirt, was Captain Redtash. The pirate menace of their last two adventures. The very same peg-legged, hook-handed villain Roger had escaped from twice, stealing his hook both times.

And yet, there he was. On holiday. It was unmistakably him: the red face, the bushy red moustache, the wooden peg for a leg, the shiny hook for a hand.

Roger's brain short-circuited. "That's... impossible."

Polly, still squinting, barely managed a response. "He's wearing flip-flops over his peg leg."

Before they could process this new reality, two figures stepped into view beside Captain Redtash. His companions, standing close, as if they had been part of this absurd scene the whole time. A thin, wrinkled old man, with long grey hair spilling from beneath a captain's hat, squinting into the sunlight. And beside him, a tall, broad-shouldered man, dressed in crisp linen. His long blond hair immaculate and his enormous white teeth practically reflecting the sunlight. He carried himself like a man who never had to try too hard to get what he wanted. The man recognised them instantly. His eyes lit up.

"Roger! Polly! Tally-ho!" Barnaby strode towards them, grinning.

Roger couldn't move. Polly barely breathed.

Barnaby motioned to Captain Redtash. "Can you believe it? Found him floating around the ocean in a barrel. Had to rescue him,

he's Pops' brother after all. He's good now. Finding his long-lost brother changed everything. Nothing better than family, eh?"

Polly felt her grip on reality slip.

Captain Redtash's expression soured immediately. "I am NOT 'good,' I am simply taking a break."

Barnaby ignored him completely. Pops eased into a deck chair beside Captain Redtash, squinting at Roger and Polly as if trying to place them in a long-forgotten memory.

Barnaby smiled at him. "These are Roger and Polly."

Pops squinted. "Eh?"

Barnaby pointed. "Roger and Polly. Old friends. Remember?"

Pops looked them up and down, brow furrowing, then muttered, "Don't remember them."

Roger opened his mouth, but Barnaby was already moving on. Barnaby flashed his blinding smile. "How are you two, anyway?"

Roger still wasn't fully processing any of this.

Polly pointed at Captain Redtash. "Him? On holiday? With a family?"

Barnaby threw an arm around Captain Redtash's extremely stiff shoulders. "Oh, don't be fooled, he's still angry about everything, but hey, he's trying! It's Pops that turned him around. Family heals all wounds."

Captain Redtash scowled, muttering something unintelligible under his breath. But then Barnaby noticed the beached ship.

“Oh, you’re in a right predicament here, aren’t you?” Barnaby scratched his chin, looking at the massive hull stuck in the sand.

“Lucky you ran into us, then.”

Roger finally snapped back to reality. “Wait. Are you saying...”

Barnaby grinned. “My superyacht can pull your ship back into the water.”

Polly exhaled sharply. “Are you offering to help?”

Barnaby grinned wider, his teeth practically shining in the sun. “Of course! I’m always here for friends! Let’s get you floating again! Tally-ho!”

Roger looked at Polly, as if hoping she’d confirm he wasn’t hallucinating. Polly met his gaze, as if wishing she were. Of all the possible ways to get their ship off the beach, Captain Redtash’s unexpected family vacation was NOT one they had considered.

“Fetch the yacht, Pops. We need it to help these old pirates out,” instructed Barnaby.

“Pirates!” shrieked Pops, jolting upright. He sprang from his deck chair, fists raised, hopping from one foot to the other, battle-ready. “Let me at them. I’ll show them a thing or two!”

“No, Pops. Settle down. Just fetch the yacht, please.”

Pops hesitated, still bouncing slightly. “Oh, okay.” And he shuffled off, out of sight.

Barnaby turned back to Roger and Polly with an easy grin, flashing his blinding white teeth. “So, what brings you here?”

Roger was still processing Captain Redtash in a Hawaiian shirt, but Polly answered smoothly. “It’s a long story.”

“Basically, the circus,” Polly added. “But it’s moved on.”

Barnaby raised an eyebrow. “The circus?”

He rustled through his back pocket and pulled out a folded flyer. Vibrant, slightly crumpled. “This one?” He held it out.

Polly snatched the leaflet, scanning it. It had dates and cities, a full itinerary of their tour.

“Yes, that’s the one.” She traced a line with her finger. “And it looks like it’s moved to Buenos Aires.”

Roger exhaled sharply. “That’s where we need to go next?”

Barnaby whistled. “All the way to Buenos Aires? Wow. Must be quite the circus.”

Roger shook his head. “No, you don’t understand. We think they might know where the man who stole our treasure went.”

Polly crossed her arms. “He tied us up and ran off. We were rescued by monkeys.”



Barnaby blinked. Then grinned. “Tied up? Rescued by monkeys? Sounds amazing. I think you need to tell me the whole story.”

And as they waited for Pops to return with the superyacht, Roger and Polly filled Barnaby in on everything. Rescuing Jack, reaching the circus, Peanut’s disappearance, following the treasure map, finding the chest, getting robbed and tied up, being freed by a mischievous monkey, and finally sailing back to Rio.



Barnaby was fully caught up just in time for a thunderous horn blast, sending startled seagulls flapping into the sky. Roger flinched. Polly sighed. Pops had arrived, pulling the yacht's horn with far too much enthusiasm. He leaned over the rail, eyes scanning the beach like a man on a mission.

"I've arrived! Where are the pirates? I'll run 'em over!"

Barnaby exhaled sharply, rolling his eyes so hard it was a miracle they didn't fall out.

"There are no pirates, Pops."

Pops narrowed his eyes. "That's just what a pirate would say."

"Just come and fetch us in the tender."

Pops vanished for a few minutes. Then, with a mechanical hum, the side of the superyacht slid open like a drawer. A sleek speedboat rolled out with Pops at the wheel, now sporting a cap that read 'Speed Demon.'

The moment Pops turned the key, the engine revved. Within seconds, he pulled up to the beach, waiting for Captain Redtash and Barnaby to climb aboard before zipping them back to the yacht, moving with such ridiculous speed that Roger barely believed what he was seeing.

Another few minutes later, Barnaby was standing proudly at the yacht's wheel, beaming like a man about to do something impressive.

He clapped his hands together. "Tally-ho, friends! Let's get this fine vessel back to sea."

Roger and Polly had already started wrapping thick ropes around the stranded ship's hull, working quickly in the wet sand. The sun beat down on them, their shirts already sticking to their backs as they hauled the coarse ropes, securing them tightly around the bulk of their ship.

Meanwhile, Captain Redtash and Pops stood on opposite sides of the operation, both muttering their own opinions about how best to do it.

"A true sailor would use brute strength and grit," Captain Redtash growled. "I say we dig around the hull and push."

"Nonsense! The only proper way to free a stranded ship is to cook for it," Pops declared.

Polly stopped mid-knot, blinking. "Did I just hear Pops say 'cook for it'?"

Pops continued, wise and confident. "Make a fine seafood dish. Call upon the spirit of the ocean itself! And when it sees your effort, it will return your ship to the waves."

Captain Redtash threw his hands up. "That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard in my entire life."

Pops ignored him entirely, already rummaging through a mysterious bag, pulling out a chef's hat, which he placed firmly on his head, replacing the 'Speed Demon' cap.

Roger dragged another length of rope towards the ship, shaking his head. "We don't have time to *cook for it*. We need to move."

Barnaby, already testing the yacht's engine, called back cheerfully, "Let me know when we're ready, chaps! This beauty has enough power to pull a mountain, let alone a marooned ship."

Polly tied off the last knot, wiping sweat from her forehead. "Ready."

Roger climbed up onto the ship, double-checking the tension in the ropes. "Okay, Barnaby. Just start slow," he yelled.

Barnaby shot Roger a thumbs-up, practically vibrating with excitement. The yacht's engines roared to life, the ropes tightened, and the beached ship groaned under the force. Sand shifted, the hull trembled, and for a moment, it looked like nothing was happening.

Then, movement.

Polly's heart jumped into her throat as the ship lurched slightly. Barnaby pushed forward, increasing speed, the yacht straining against the weight of the vessel. The ropes creaked, the sand shifted further, and then...

CRACK.

The ship jerked violently. Captain Redtash grabbed hold of a railing, glaring at Pops. “This is NOT how I would have done it.”

Pops, unbothered, stirred a pot of something mysterious in a saucepan, mumbling a seafood blessing to the waves. Roger and Polly held their breath as the yacht dragged the ship forward inch by inch, until finally, the hull slipped free from the sand, rolling heavily into deeper water.

Barnaby let out a triumphant whoop. “Success!”

Captain Redtash grunted, shaking his head. “It could have been done better.”

Pops sniffed his broth. “Still think my method had merit.”

## **Chapter 12**

Roger was just about to cut the ropes, ready to set their ship loose in the water, when Barnaby bounded to the yacht’s railing, grinning.

“I’ve an idea!” he called out, voice full of excitement. “How about we keep the ropes on and you ride with us on the yacht? We’ll tow your ship all the way to Buenos Aires! It’ll be faster, and besides, we’d love to come along and help you track down this elusive thief.”

Roger and Polly paused, exchanging a look. Polly wiped sweat from her forehead. “You want to tag along?”

Barnaby flashed his white teeth. “Absolutely! Adventure! Treasure! Justice! Tally-ho!”

Roger grinned. “Alright. Let’s do it.”

Polly shrugged. “Why not? Could be fun.”

Barnaby threw his arms wide. “Splendid! Welcome aboard, my seafaring companions.”

Roger and Polly climbed over the ropes and onto the deck of the superyacht, leaving their ship to be towed behind them like a faithful pet.

Dinner on the superyacht was always an event. Every time they had company, Pops treated mealtime as a theatrical performance, launching into wild stories of pirate battles while dramatically jumping onto the table and wielding a fork while engaging in imaginary sword fights with an unseen enemy.

“You should’ve seen it!” Pops bellowed the first evening, balancing on one foot atop a chair. “There I stood, outnumbered! Seven pirates before me! Eight behind! And I had nothing. NOTHING but a single spoon and my wits!”

Captain Redtash, already unimpressed by everything happening, scoffed. “You expect me to believe that nonsense?”

Polly smirked. “A spoon, Pops?”

Pops brandished a ladle. “A mighty spoon! A weapon only the bravest dare wield!”

Captain Redtash groaned, stabbing at his food. “This ship is cursed with fools.”

Barnaby, meanwhile, was eating all of this up, clapping his hands together. “Spectacular! Did you win?”

Pops grinned, tapping his fork against Barnaby’s wine glass. “Of course I won! But not before I stole his hat.”

Roger pressed his lips together, choosing not to engage in the debate. He had quickly learned that questioning Pops’ historical accuracy was a never-ending battle.

Captain Redtash muttered, “I should’ve stayed in Rio.”

And then out of nowhere, Pickles struck. The tiny black-and-white blur of Pops’ pet penguin had been lurking beneath the table all evening, waiting for the perfect moment. Without warning, Pickles launched himself onto the table and snatched Pops’ fork right out of his hand. Pops froze mid-swordfight, blinking. “What in the seven seas?”

Pickles, balancing on his tiny feet, brandished the fork in his beak, flapping his wings dramatically.

Barnaby gasped in delight. “He’s challenging you to a duel, Pops!”

Captain Redtash leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, utterly disgusted. “You’re telling me we have a fork-fighting penguin now? Wonderful.”

Roger could only watch in stunned silence as Pops and Pickles engaged in the world’s most ridiculous duel. Fork versus spoon. Penguin versus old sailor. The duel ended only when Pickles lost interest and waddled away, taking Pops’ fork with him, presumably as some kind of trophy.

Pops sighed dramatically, collapsing into his chair. “A worthy opponent.”

Captain Redtash shook his head. “This is why you’re not a real pirate.”

Barnaby wiped tears of laughter from his eyes. “Spectacular. Truly spectacular.”

Polly watched Pickles disappear towards the deck, where he had successfully managed to steal an entire bread roll. “You should probably check where he’s stashing all of his stolen goods.”



Pops folded his arms. "Let him have his victories. He'll return them when the time is right."

Captain Redtash rolled his eyes. "That is NOT how theft works."

But Pops had already moved on, launching into another tale about the time he supposedly defeated an entire fleet of pirates using only a tea kettle.

After days of Pops' performances, Pickles' crimes, Barnaby's relentless enthusiasm, and Captain Redtash's endless grumbling, the superyacht finally cruised into Buenos Aires, cutting through the waves as the glowing city lights stretched across the horizon. Roger stood at the railing, watching as the skyline grew closer. Polly joined him. "Well. We made it."

Barnaby threw an arm around both of them. "The adventure begins! Tally-ho!"

Behind them, Captain Redtash stood with his arms crossed, scowling at the city ahead. "You lot have fun. I'll be here, enjoying the peace."

Meanwhile, Pops was frantically searching the yacht for his missing chef's hat, while Pickles sat innocently atop a pile of stolen cutlery, the hat perched smugly on his tiny head.

## Chapter 13

The streets of Buenos Aires pulsed with energy. The evening air buzzed with voices, carrying the scent of sizzling street food as it mingled with the sea-swept air drifting in from the harbour. Music echoed from open windows, laughter spilling onto cobbled streets.

Roger, Polly, and Barnaby pushed their way through the crowd, weaving past bustling vendors and dodging bicycles. They had left Pops and Captain Redtash on the yacht to keep an eye on Pickles, though Captain Redtash had also insisted he needed a nap.

The three of them walked the streets in search of the circus tent.

“It can’t be that hard to find,” Roger mused. “The tent is absolutely massive.”

Barnaby pulled the circus leaflet from his pocket, unfolding it to check for an address. Polly gazed forward, then did a double take. A familiar figure was walking towards them.

She pointed. “Is that...?”

Roger looked up. Their eyes locked on the unmistakable figure of Jack, moving closer. Out of pure luck, they had found him. Jack spun on his heel and darted between market stalls, his dark coat whipping behind him, the gold-trimmed edges catching the sunlight.

He glanced over his shoulder, his expression tightening as he saw them give chase.

“After him!” yelled Roger.

Polly surged forward, her boots slamming against stone, Barnaby right behind her, his linen shirt flapping in the wind. They pushed past startled pedestrians, knocking over a basket of bright oranges, sending them rolling into the streets. A vendor shouted after them, waving a fist. Jack ducked into a narrow alley, his boots skimming across the cobblestones as he wove between stacked crates. For a split second, he vanished into the shadows, then shot out the other side, slipping through the entrance of the circus.

Roger skidded to a stop; his breath sharp. The circus loomed before them, lights twinkling along the grand red-and-gold entrance, the sound of trumpets and drums rolling through the air. A towering striped tent rose high, banners fluttering, the scent of sawdust and roasted peanuts thick in the atmosphere.

Barnaby grinned. “Let’s get him!”

They sprinted past the ticket booths, crashing through the velvet entrance flap. The circus was in full swing, a packed audience roared as the Sam Twins flipped high above the ring while elephants paraded in polished gold headdresses and clowns ran around with custard pies.

Roger barely had time to react before Jack shoved past a row of stunned audience members, sending chairs scraping across the floor as he bolted towards the backstage corridors. Slipping behind the scenes, he disappeared through the maze of dressing rooms. Polly raced after him, nearly tripping over a basket of clown shoes. Barnaby leapt over a barrel, grinning as if he were enjoying the pursuit more than the mission itself. They tore through rows of costumes, kicking up clouds of sawdust, startling a flock of doves that burst into the air like living confetti. Jack twisted through the corridors, dodging performers, until finally, he burst out onto the main ring. And there, standing under the spotlight, was Peanut.



Polly gasped, grabbing Roger's arm. "Peanut! Look!"

Perched beside Jorge the ringmaster, Peanut stood poised, ready to dazzle the circus crowd with his tricks.

Jorge stepped forward, looking upset. "What on earth? We're in the middle of a show, Jack."

Jack gave a curt nod towards Polly and Roger.

Jorge glanced back, his expression shifting. "Oh."

With a practiced ease, he flipped on his mic, forcing a smile as he addressed the audience. "Ladies and gentlemen, we're just going to take a brief intermission!"

A chorus of groans rippled through the crowd.

"Please, come this way," said Jorge as he guided Roger, Polly, Barnaby, and Jack out of the ring, towards his dressing room.

Roger's breath was shallow, every muscle in his body tight. "You planned all of this, didn't you? You were his accomplice! You're how Jack got off Cayo Santiago."

"Accomplice? I'm his big brother," said Jorge.

Polly's pulse pounded. "Brother?"

"Yes. Brother and mastermind. The moment Jack told me about your parrot, I knew Hyacinth could lure him away, leading him straight to me once you were gone. As for the treasure at Cayo

Santiago? That was my idea for Jack to take the chest, leave you stranded, and wait for my ship to collect him.”

They had planned everything. The kidnapping of Peanut, the theft of the treasure, and Jack’s getaway. The moment he stole the chest and left Roger and Polly tied up, Jorge was already on his way to collect him. Every step had been orchestrated.

“We’re taking Peanut,” Polly growled.

“And the chest,” said Roger.

Jorge gritted his teeth. “We’re in the middle of a show.”

“I don’t care,” yelled Roger.

He lunged forward, shoving past Jorge and sprinted towards the chest in the corner of the dressing room. Polly and Barnaby burst into the ring. Polly scooping Peanut into her arms, clutching him tightly. Barnaby, for reasons unknown, had decided to climb onto an elephant, waving wildly. “I’ve always wanted to do this.”

The crowd erupted into chaos. Jorge and Jack shouted, calling for backup, but it was too late. Roger hurled the chest under his arm and sprinted, just as the stampede began. Hyacinth the macaw squawked, flapping her vibrant wings and knocking over a lantern. The zebras panicked, galloping wildly. The bear roared, bounding off its pedestal. The elephants? They ran. And Penny the penguin, caught in the whirlwind, slid across the sawdust on her belly, narrowly

dodging a charging zebra before launching herself onto Roger's boot—clinging on for dear life. Roger barely spared a glance downward before scooping her up in his other arm, cradling her against his side as he tore through the chaos. Penny squawked triumphantly, entirely unbothered by the bedlam unfolding around her.

Polly sprinted towards the exit, Peanut clinging to her shoulder, while Roger ran beside her, the treasure chest and Penny bouncing against his sides. Barnaby, still atop the elephant, bobbed wildly as he and the stampeding animals barrelled through the crowds, sending chairs, banners, and performers flying in all directions.



Jack and Jorge raced after them, their furious voices lost in the stampede. The streets erupted, pedestrians shrieked, vendors scattered, market stalls toppled as zebras sprinted through alleyways.

Hyacinth screeched overhead as Barnaby, Polly, and Roger raced towards the harbour, lungs burning, Penny and the chest clutched tightly under his arms. The yacht was in sight. Pops and Captain Redtash stood at the railing, jaws slack. Pickles, wearing Pops' chef's hat, blinked.





“Would someone open the ramp?” Roger yelled.

Pops leapt onto the deck, grabbed the controls, and sent the boarding ramp swinging down just as Polly jumped aboard, Peanut clinging to her shoulder. Roger hauled the chest onto the deck, his arms screaming, Penny squawking indignantly as she wriggled under his grip. Barnaby, still on the elephant, bounded onto the yacht, followed by the other elephants, the zebras, and a bear in a tutu.

They closed the ramp and the yacht’s engines roared, pulling away, leaving Jack and Jorge fuming on the docks, shouting into the night as Hyacinth swooped past them, squawking in defiance, and landing on the railing of the yacht. Roger collapsed to the floor, breathing hard, finally loosening his grip and letting Penny drop onto the deck with an indignant squawk. Polly laughed while gripping Peanut close.

Barnaby, still atop the elephant, sighed. “I liked that circus.”

Pops shook his head, crossing his arms. “You could have just bought tickets.”

Roger groaned. “Too late now.”

And with that, the yacht sailed towards the horizon, with Peanut back where he belongs, the treasure finally theirs, and a boat full of animals.

“This is not a ship,” moaned Captain Redtash. “This is an animal sanctuary on water.”

## **Chapter 14**

Roger rested his hands on his hips, surveying the absolute disaster they had brought upon themselves.

“So... what exactly are we supposed to do with all these animals?”

The deck was a zoo. Elephants swayed near the railing, zebras inspected the rigging, tugging at stray ropes with their teeth. Penny slid about on her belly, narrowly missing hooves, and the bear was alarmingly close to the galley. Peanut sat on Polly’s shoulder, eyeing the chaos, while Pickles pinched a teaspoon off the dining table and waddled away smugly.

Barnaby, grinning, spread his arms wide. “A traveling circus!”

Roger raised an eyebrow. “You mean the one we just escaped from?”

Barnaby shrugged. “This time, we OWN it.”

Pops rubbed his chin. “You know, elephants are very trainable. What if we form an elite pirate squad? Sneak attacks on enemy ships. No one expects a stampede of elephants at sea.”

Roger blinked. “You want war elephants? On a boat?”

Pops nodded sagely. “A tactical advantage.”

Captain Redtash, arms crossed, was seething.

“NO. We are NOT keeping them. We are NOT running a circus. We are NOT leading an elephant fleet into battle. We are getting them OFF THIS YACHT.”

Roger sighed. “Okay, genius. What’s your idea?”

Captain Redtash gestured dramatically. “We sell them. Find a port. Name our price.”

Polly looked horrified. “We are NOT selling them!”

Captain Redtash threw his hands up. “Then what?! Because I refuse to live on a floating barn!”

Roger rubbed his temples. This was going nowhere. Meanwhile, Pickles had successfully stolen another spoon.

Polly suddenly perked up. “Wait. Cayo Santiago.”

The crew stilled, glancing at her.

“We release them there. The monkeys live in the trees, but there’s plenty of fruit, fresh water, and space for all the animals.”

Roger considered this. “It’s actually... not terrible.”

Barnaby grinned. “Monkeys and zebras. A utopia.”

Captain Redtash exhaled sharply. “Fine. ANYTHING that gets them off the yacht. The elephants are starting to stink.”

And so, with the ship still tied to the yacht, they sailed towards Cayo Santiago.

## **Chapter 15**

The sun hung low over the horizon, casting golden light across the waves as Barnaby’s superyacht ploughed forward towards Cayo Santiago. Roger leaned against the rail, watching the open sea ahead with a rare moment of quiet contemplation. Then came the scream of pure rage.

“GET DOWN HERE, YOU FEATHERED MENACE!”

Roger closed his eyes and sighed. The quiet had been nice while it lasted. Down on the main deck, Captain Redtash was losing his mind. Peanut had perched triumphantly on the mast, Captain Redtash’s hat now resting atop his head like a crown. Barnaby watched with amusement, casually biting into an apple. “Looks like he’s claimed command.”

Captain Redtash whipped around. “I WILL NOT take orders from a parrot!”

Peanut tilted his head and screeched back, “What a plonker! SQUAWK!”

Roger had seen many ridiculous things in his life, but a full-blown power struggle between a pirate and a parrot was high on the list. Captain Redtash muttered under his breath, stomping away, only to stop dead when he spotted Pickles. The penguin stood perfectly still, staring at him. In his beak was Captain Redtash’s boots. Captain Redtash’s eye twitched.

“Put. That. Down.”

Pickles blinked slowly, then turned and waddled off, boot still firmly in his grasp. Roger rubbed his temples. “We are barely an hour into this voyage, and it’s already a disaster.”

Polly sighed, glancing at the zebras. They were restless, shifting their weight, eyes darting as if the rocking of the ship had personally offended them.

Pops frowned. “You think they get seasick?”

Barnaby leaned forward. “Only one way to find out.”

One zebra snorted aggressively, took a wobbly step, and promptly kicked an entire barrel overboard. Roger jumped back, narrowly dodging the barrel.

“Yes. Yes, they get seasick.”

Pops sighed. “Well, that’s unfortunate.”

Then, just as things seemed to be settling, a low rumbling rolled through the deck. Roger turned towards the elephants, who had begun sniffing towards the lower deck, clearly hunting for something.

“They want water,” said Roger.

Pops blinked. “...They can drink the ocean.”

Apparently, the elephants disagreed. Without warning, they charged. The massive creatures thundered across the deck, knocking everything in their path aside, crashing through crates, scattering supplies, until they tumbled directly into the yacht’s water supply. Water exploded upward, flooding the lower deck instantly. Captain Redtash, standing just outside his cabin, let out a strangled yell.

“WHAT IN THE NAME OF ALL THAT IS SALTY?”

One elephant turned, stood directly in front of Captain Redtash’s door, and refused to move. Captain Redtash froze, narrowed his eyes, and slowly inhaled.

“...I am going to lose my mind.”

Roger barely had time to react before another disaster erupted. Hyacinth had just discovered she could unlock things. Storage rooms swung open, supplies spilled out, and, worst of all, Hyacinth nearly

unlocked the yacht's anchor mechanism. Roger lunged forward, barely catching her before she pulled the final latch.

“NOPE. Absolutely not.”

Hyacinth squawked in protest, but Roger shoved grapes into her beak, bribing her into silence. Then, just when Roger thought things couldn't possibly get worse, Pops walked up, looking pale.

“The bear's taken the kitchen.”

Roger stared at him. “...What do you mean, the bear's taken the kitchen?”

Pops gestured weakly towards the galley. Roger peered in. There sat the bear, lounging in the middle of the floor, holding a fish in one paw.

Pops crossed his arms. “He refuses to leave unless I cook for him.”

Roger groaned. “And you agreed?!”

Pops shrugged. “He looked very persuasive.”

Roger buried his face in his hands. Then came Captain Redtash again, who had finally escaped an elephant blockade, only to witness another absolute disaster unfolding.

Captain Redtash breathed deeply. “Roger.”

Roger slowly turned. “...Yes?”

Captain Redtash's voice was dangerously calm.

“Why is there a zebra chewing on the helm?”

Roger stared. The zebra was indeed chewing on the ship’s wheel.

Barnaby stifled laughter. “He’s taking control. Respect it.”

Captain Redtash tilted his head to the sky, as if searching for patience. “WHY?”

At this point, Roger was done. “We are almost there. Just hold it together.”

The crew somehow managed to keep the chaos barely contained, until finally, through the madness, the island of Cayo Santiago appeared in the distance. Roger let out the deepest sigh of relief he had ever released. Polly beamed. Barnaby waved excitedly. Pops stretched his arms. Captain Redtash collapsed onto the deck, utterly exhausted.

And just as they neared the shore, Hyacinth, swooped down...

...grabbed Captain Redtash’s spare boot...

...and dropped it straight into the ocean.

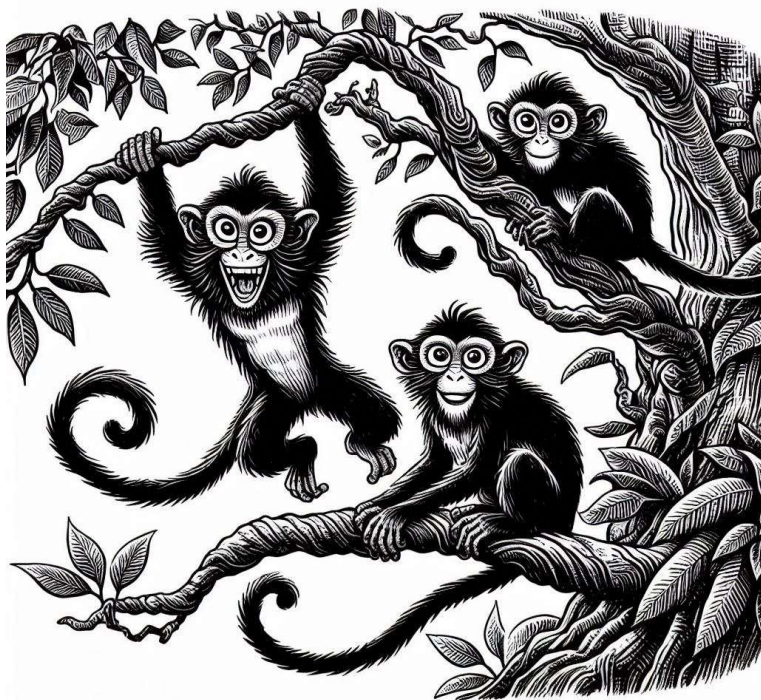
Captain Redtash screamed in pure, unfiltered rage. Polly patted his shoulder. “Think you’re going to need some new boots.”

Roger grinned, watching the shore approach.



## Chapter 16

The air over Cayo Santiago shimmered with heat, the salty breeze carrying the chatter of mischievous monkeys from the treetops.



Roger wiped sweat from his brow, staring at the chaotic scene unfolding before him. Zebras balked at the unfamiliar terrain, elephants huffed in protest at leaving the yacht, and Penny, the death-defying flying penguin, stepped onto the deck, squinting at the chaos

unfolding around her. She took in the monkeys looting supplies, the zebras attempting to sprint in opposite directions, and Pops bribing a monkey with a banana.

Then the heat hit her.

With zero hesitation, Penny turned and waddled straight back onto the yacht, heading for the walk-in refrigerator. On the way, she saw Pickles casually swipe another teaspoon, tucking it away like a tiny burglar before trotting after her.

Polly and Barnaby were already hard at work, coaxing the more cooperative animals ashore. The zebras were restless, their hooves skidding against the damp sand, while Peanut remained firmly perched on Polly's shoulder, watching the spectacle unfold with disinterested curiosity. Hyacinth refused to leave Peanut's side, squawking in protest whenever Polly tried to usher her towards the trees.

"I think it's safe to say she's sticking with us," Polly admitted, giving up.

Roger groaned. "Wonderful. Another feathery menace."

Polly grinned. "She's got personality."

Roger muttered something unintelligible, too preoccupied with the real nightmare. The elephants. The towering creatures eyed the island with suspicion, stubbornly refusing to leave the deck. Their

trunks swayed; their massive feet planted firmly on the yacht's surface as if they had collectively decided they lived here now. Roger stared at them in utter exasperation. "How do you convince an elephant it's time to move?"

Barnaby, leaning casually against a crate, shrugged. "A gentle conversation? Maybe some peanuts?"

Before Roger could shoot back a retort, the mischievous monkeys made their move. A horde of them erupted from the treetops, bounding onto the yacht with untamed enthusiasm. They climbed the rigging, swung from the masts, and immediately targeted the supplies. Roger barely had time to react before one of them snatched Pops' hat straight off his head.

"Oh, absolutely not." Pops lunged after the thief, but the monkey was already halfway up a palm tree, waving its stolen prize triumphantly. Pops had to bribe the monkey with a banana to get it back. He snatched it out of the monkey's hand and shuffled as fast as he could back on the yacht, as far away from the monkeys as possible.

The ensuing chaos was inevitable. The zebras, already skittish, panicked, bouncing off trees. The elephants, startled by the sudden invasion, let out thunderous trumpeting calls. The bear, who had been peacefully lounging, decided he was now angry. Crates tumbled, ropes

snapped, and for a solid ten minutes, it was an all-out war between man, beast, and monkey.

And then, Jack and Jorge arrived. The rival ship seemed to materialize out of nowhere, its sails snapping as it caught the wind and surged towards shore. Roger stiffened, eyes narrowing as Jack and Jorge leapt onto the beach with unmistakable confidence.

“Well, well, well,” Jorge drawled, dusting off his sleeves. “Fancy meeting you here.”

Polly shot him a glare. “You followed us?”

Jack smirked. “Couldn’t just let you get away, could we?”

Roger’s grip on the nearest crate tightened. “Let me guess, you’re here for the animals?”

Jorge gestured grandly towards the utter pandemonium. “We want the circus back. And, seeing as you lot have made such a mess of it, I think it’s best we take control.”

Before Roger could spit back a response, Jorge sprang into action. Not with brute force, but with precision. He launched himself forward, his movements fluid as an acrobat, rolling seamlessly past Barnaby and popping up directly behind him. With a lightning-fast tug, he snatched a length of rigging rope and looped it tight around Barnaby’s arms.

Jack was no slower. He vaulted effortlessly onto a tree branch, then flipped downward with ridiculous elegance, landing behind Polly before she could react. He hooked his arm around hers in one swift motion, twisting into a practiced manoeuvre that sent her off balance.

Roger barely had time to register the chaos before Jorge pulled out another rope, kicked off from a tree trunk like a springboard, and twisted mid-air to land squarely in front of him. Before Roger could react, Jorge flicked the rope around his wrists with a showman's flourish, tying him down before his feet even touched the sand.

Polly, Roger, and Barnaby stared in stunned disbelief at their restraints.

Barnaby blinked. "Did I just get hogtied by acrobatics?"

Jorge grinned, bowing slightly. "We're professionals."

Jack dusted off his sleeves, smirking. "And now? We're taking the animals back."

Roger struggled against the restraints. "You think you can just waltz in and..."

A deafening trumpeting blast cut him off. Jack and Jorge turned just in time to see Pops and Captain Redtash riding in on elephants. The scene was glorious. Pops, sporting a cowboy hat, gripped the reins like a seasoned warrior, and barrelled towards them with determination. Captain Redtash, his expression somewhere between

pure fury and utter disbelief, looked like a man questioning every life choice that had led him to this moment.

“I HAVE HAD ENOUGH OF THIS NONSENSE!” Captain Redtash bellowed as the elephants charged.

The moment was instantaneous. Jack and Jorge’s victory dissolved faster than they could react. The elephants, coordinated and vengeful, scooped them straight off the ground with their trunks. Jorge let out a very undignified yell as the elephant rolled him up like a burrito, hoisting him high above the deck. Jack didn’t fare much better. His struggling amounted to nothing against the sheer strength of his captor. Pops and Captain Redtash did not stop until Jack and Jorge were tied up and secured on the yacht.

Jack and Jorge, thoroughly restrained and fuming, lay sprawled on the deck of the superyacht. The battle was won, and the island belonged to the animals now. But Pops and Captain Redtash were not done yet. Still mounted on their elephants, they scanned the chaos for Polly, Roger, and Barnaby. Captain Redtash squinted at the treeline, grumbling. “Where’d those three get off to now?”

Pops adjusted his cowboy hat, tugging the reins. “Tied up, most likely.”

Captain Redtash let out a long, suffering sigh. “I told you this entire operation was madness.”

Pops scoffed. “Oh, please. We just successfully executed an elephant cavalry charge. I’d call that a masterpiece.”

Captain Redtash threw up his hands. “It should not have worked!”

The elephants plodded through the undergrowth, their riders bickering the entire way. After several minutes of heated debate about the ethics of pirate-led animal relocation, they spotted Polly, Roger, and Barnaby, thoroughly tied up, looking thoroughly unimpressed.

Barnaby raised an eyebrow. “Nice of you to drop by.”

Pops grinned. “Took the scenic route.”

Captain Redtash didn’t wait. He dismounted with exasperation, muttering about retiring permanently, and began loosening the ropes. Polly flexed her wrists once freed, shaking her head. “Let me guess, you two spent the whole ride arguing?”

Pops adjusted his hat. “We call it strategic discourse.”

Captain Redtash huffed. “I call it nonsense.”

With their group finally reunited, the adventure was wrapping up. But, somehow, Pops and Captain Redtash were still debating the logistics of transporting elephants by boat as they returned to the superyacht on foot.

The battle was won. Roger, Polly, and Barnaby, finally freed, watched the defeated villains with a mixture of relief and amusement.

Barnaby leaned towards Roger. “I gotta say, war elephants? Might be onto something.”

Roger groaned. “Don’t encourage Pops.”

Captain Redtash exhaled the longest sigh in human history. “I need a vacation.”

With Jack and Jorge securely bound, the crew did one last round to ensure the animals were happy in their new home. The mischievous monkeys remained as problematic as ever, but the elephants seemed content, the zebras had finally stopped trying to charge every palm tree in sight, and the bear, still in its tutu, had found a nice shady spot to lounge.





As the sun dipped lower over the island, it was time for farewells. Polly and Roger stood aboard their ship, Peanut and Hyacinth perched on the railing, watching the others make their final preparations.

Pops and Barnaby were returning home to the Falkland Islands, ready to leave the chaos behind. And Jack and Jorge weren't escaping justice. They sat securely tied up on the yacht, glaring at the waves. Barnaby was taking them straight to the authorities, ensuring their mischief finally caught up with them.

Pops crossed his arms, nodding towards Roger. "You lot better stay out of trouble."

Roger smirked. "No promises."

Barnaby waved cheerfully. "See you in the next adventure! Tally-ho!"

Roger exhaled. "Not if I can help it."

With sails catching the wind, Polly, Roger, Peanut, and Hyacinth set off.

As the yacht faded into the endless blue, Roger leaned back against the helm, releasing a final sigh. He glanced at Polly and muttered, "Polly, I swear, I'm retiring after this. No more adventures. ...Probably."

Polly smiled. "Sure, Roger. Sure."

## Epilogue

Captain Redtash was done. Between the elephant cavalry charges, the ridiculous circus performers, and the monkey-related disasters, he had barely survived the chaos of Cayo Santiago. Now, as the ship sailed towards the Falkland Islands, all he wanted was peace, quiet, and absolutely no surprises. Unfortunately, Pickles was aboard. And Pickles thrived on destruction. Pickles had two priorities. Cause problems. Steal shiny things, and one shiny thing that got Pickles' attention was Captain Redtash's hook. He had been eyeing up that prize for a while now, but he couldn't just waltz up to Captain Redtash and snatch it from him. He wouldn't get away with it. He needed a plan. He needed practice. So, he set his sights on a smaller target. The galley.

Sliding past Barnaby, who was grumbling about sea charts, Pickles zeroed in on the drawer of spoons. He nudged it open, beak twitching with excitement. Success! Just as he snatched a spoon, Pops appeared in the doorway. Pickles froze mid-crime and Pops stared. Pickles stared back.

"Drop it," Pops sighed.

Pickles did not drop it.

Pops crossed his arms. "I will confiscate your entire teaspoon collection."

Pickles reluctantly set the spoon down.

Pops pointed at him. "Get out."

Pickles waddled away, deeply offended. Denied his precious spoon, Pickles set his sights on Jack and Jorge. The two sat slumped against the mast, securely restrained, utterly miserable.

Jack sighed. "This is humiliating."

Jorge scowled. "This is your fault."

Jack was about to argue, but then Pickles arrived. The penguin squinted at them, then pecked Jorge's boot.

Jorge hissed. "Get away from me."

Pickles, unmoved, pecked the boot again.

Jack smirked. "He likes you."

Jorge growled. Pickles tilted his head, then, in one swift motion, snatched Jack's belt buckle and ran. Jack yelled in outrage as Pickles vanished below deck, triumphant.

Jorge wheeze-laughed. "Okay. That was actually funny."

Pickles took the belt buckle and placed it atop his pile of stolen cutlery. Pleased with his collection, he still felt it needed adding to.

Penny, watching from the corner, waddled up, casually flicking a teaspoon into the pile without a word. Pickles froze while Penny blinked at him. A slow, knowing look passed between them.

Captain Redtash just wanted sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, Pickles appeared.

On nap attempt number 1, Pickles knocked a cup over, stared at Captain Redtash, then left without explanation.

On nap attempt number 2, Pickles stood at the foot of Redtash's bed, watching him sleep, and accidentally burped, stirring Captain Redtash once again.

On nap attempt number 3, Pickles pecked the big toe of Captain Redtash's good foot to see if he was asleep yet. He wasn't so Pickles hid it under a barrel, and pretended nothing happened.

Finally, Captain Redtash was deep in sleep, utterly exhausted. His hook sat on the bedside cabinet, gleaming in the moonlight. Pickles approached. This was it. His moment.

He reached for the hook...

It tipped forward, nearly tumbling, but Pickles caught it expertly before it hit the floor.

He'd got it.

Now for the escape.

Pickles shuffled backward, hook grasped firmly in his beak, and slipped into the corridor. He had done it.

As Pickles pondered his next move, a deep, horrified shout erupted from the cabin.

“WHERE IS MY HOOK?!”

Captain Redtash was awake.

Pickles didn't hesitate; he ran.

Captain Redtash burst into the hallway; eyes wild. He scanned the ship in panic, then spotted Pickles, hook clutched tightly in his beak, staring back at him.

There was a long pause.

Then, pure pandemonium.

Captain Redtash lunged. Pickles sprinted.

Pops wandered into the hallway, blinking sleepily. “You two better not break anything.”

Pickles dove under a table and Captain Redtash lunged after him, only to catch his foot on something sliding past at precisely the wrong moment.

Penny.

Out of nowhere, she slipped out on her belly, skidding right into Captain Redtash's ankle. He barely had time to react before he

tumbled forward, crashing into a chair and landing in a heap on the floor.

Groaning, Redtash rolled onto his back, staring at the ceiling in exhausted disbelief as Pickles waddled away victoriously, hook clutched firmly in his beak.

Captain Redtash sighed in absolute defeat.

“Seriously,” he muttered. “I am so tired of that bird.”

## **The End**

