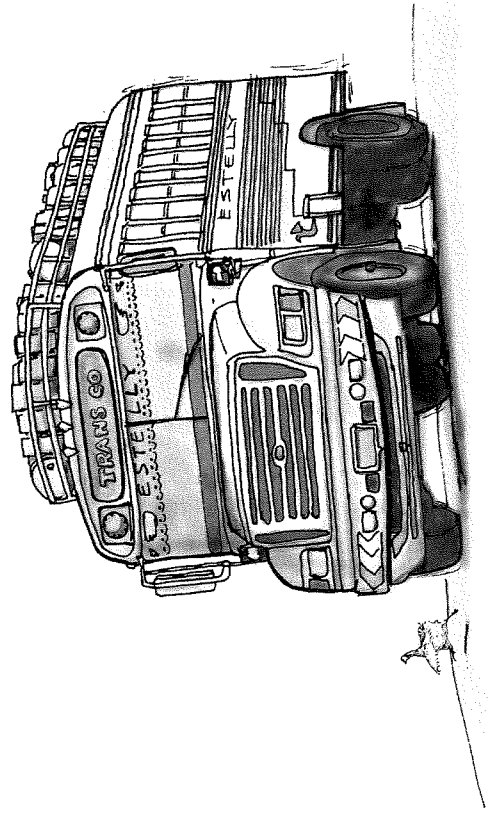


Max's head. "Oscar," he called, "if you haven't spoken to my parents in four days, who told you to meet me at the airport?"

Oscar strained to hear him, and he repeated the question. The little conductor jumped aboard and banged on the side of the bus with his fist. With a blast on the air horn, the driver crashed the gears and splashed out of the parking lot. Max was sitting stunned in the backseat.

It had been hard to hear Oscar's reply, but it had definitely sounded like, "Zia."



## Chapter Three

# PUERTO MUERTO

Oscar was right. Hope had died in Puerto Muerto.

The streets were lined with wooden shacks. Their tin roofs were rusty. Their walls, once gaily painted, were cracked and stained. On nearly every corner was a dimly lit bar where men hunched over empty glasses. Old women in black sat in doorways, but none bothered to look up as the bus went past. Even the scrawny little dogs lay still, their heads on their paws, while flies buzzed halfheartedly around them.

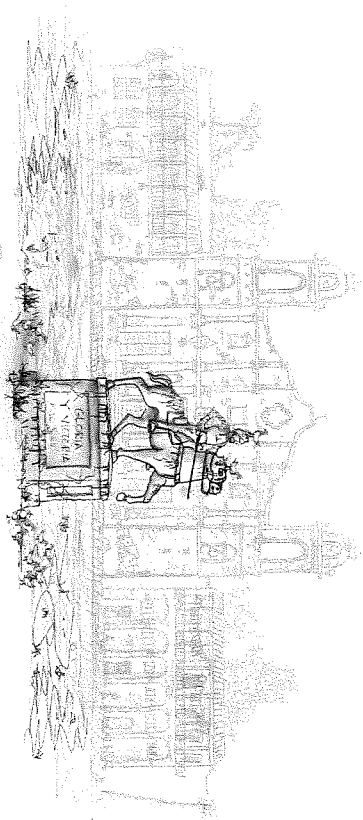
The bus entered a rubbish-strewn square and, with a final squeal of brakes, skidded to a stop in front of a crumbling cathedral and a statue of some long-forgotten Spanish general on his horse.

How the mighty had fallen.

Once the general and his compatriots, their hands stained red with logwood, had built lavish palaces on this square. Once their wives had paraded around it in the latest European fashions.

But now the looters themselves had been looted.

Their palaces were scrawled with graffiti and festooned



with washing lines. Their cathedral was an empty shell. And their general was just a droppings-encrusted roost for the pigeons that scratched a living in the square.

Max jumped off the bus, took a deep breath—and almost choked. The salty sea air was overpowered by a stench of rotting fish and diesel oil. Still, it felt good to stretch his legs. Actually, given those blind corners on the mountain roads, it felt good to be alive.

“*Adios, americano,*” called the little conductor, as the bus lurched off in a grinding of gears. When the cloud of exhaust smoke cleared, Max was left standing alone. There was no one around except two shifty-looking men on the cathedral steps, who were smoking and watching him like cats watching a mouse.

*Uncle Ted, where are you?*

If only he’d asked Oscar for his uncle’s address or phone number. All Max knew about him was that *Ted* was short for *Theodore*, he was Frank Murphy’s older brother, and he’d inherited the family banana business. Max didn’t even know what Uncle *Ted* looked like, although he assumed he had Murphy hair.

Mindful of the two men watching him, Max tried to look

inconspicuous. This worked for approximately five seconds before he was dive-bombed by a swarm of yellow butterflies who had, apparently, never seen a tourist before. They flapped excitedly around him, trying to land on his head, his face, his hands, any piece of exposed skin they could find.

He was still swatting butterflies when he saw the two men walking toward him. A knife glinted in the sunlight.

Max started to run. A big car rolled into the square and stopped right in front of him. It was a shiny new Mercedes with blackened windows. In that squalid little town, it looked as out of place as an alien spaceship.

The butterflies took off in a yellow cloud.

The two men melted into the shadows.

The door of the Mercedes opened, and the driver slowly got out.

He looked like the *Maya* mafia, a block of solid muscle in a black suit, dark sunglasses, and black leather driving gloves. He wasn’t that old, but his twenty or so years had obviously been hard-lived. A long scar ran down his face from his high, sloping forehead to the bottom of one ear. His nose looked as if it had been on the losing end of a fight with an iron bar. From his big bull neck to his barrel chest to his tree-trunk legs, every inch of this guy exuded menace. “Give me your backpack,” he said.

“T-take it,” stammered Max. “Please don’t hurt me. My uncle will be here any minute. . . .”

The rear door of the Mercedes opened.

“He’s here,” said a voice that sounded uncannily like Max’s father.

“Uncle *Ted*?”

A handsome but slightly haggard man emerged from

the backseat. He wore a cream linen suit and a panama hat. A wisp of reddish hair was visible beneath the brim.

His pale blue eyes regarded Max sadly.

"You are Massimo, I presume?"

"My friends call me Max."

"Massimo, this is Lucky Jim," said Uncle Ted, introducing the driver. "You don't want to get on the wrong side of Lucky. He comes from a long line of fierce Maya warriors."

Max swallowed hard. They weren't exactly making him feel welcome. "Have you heard from Mom and Dad?" he asked.

"No," said Uncle Ted. "I was going to ask you the same question." He looked at his watch. "Please get in the car, I'm late for a meeting."

Max slid into the Mercedes. He was stiff and bruised from the bus ride, and his bones sank gratefully into the soft leather cushions. Enveloped in luxury, with the electric windows tightly closed and the air-conditioning gently fanning him, he allowed himself to relax slightly. He sat back and, without thinking, put his feet up against the seat in front of him.

"Feet down!" barked his uncle, getting in next to him.

Lucky carefully wiped the imprint of Max's dusty shoes off the leather seat back before slamming the car door. Max got the impression that, if he could, he would have wiped away every trace of him.

The Mercedes headed out of town, rolling smoothly over rocks and potholes, until they came to a driveway marked GRAN HOTEL DE LAS AMERICAS.

"Do you live in a hotel?" Max asked his uncle hopefully.

"Of course not," snapped Uncle Ted. "I'm meeting a new client here."

Inwardly, Max groaned. All he wanted to do was collapse into a soft bed.

As they rounded a curve in the drive, an imposing colonial-style building came into view. It hadn't seen a coat of paint for a hundred years but, unlike the rest of Puerto Muerto, it managed to be charming rather than depressing.

They drew up at the colonnaded entrance, and a liveried doorman came running over to open the car door for Uncle Ted.

"Can I wait in the car?" asked Max.

"No."

"But—"

"You'll do as I say. There are some dangerous people around."

Uncle Ted pressed a tip into the doorman's hand and strode past him into the hotel. Max followed him through the run-down lobby and out onto a stone terrace overlooking the Caribbean Sea. It was a beautiful spot, with steps leading from the terrace through formal gardens down to a small pebble beach. Uncle Ted and Max sat at a table in the far corner, while Lucky Jim assumed a lookout position in the garden.

They certainly took security seriously in the banana business.

A waiter in a starched white jacket glided out of a side door and set down little dishes of olives, cashew nuts, and tiny cocktail tamales.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Murphy. May I bring your usual?"

"Thank you, Victor."

"And for you, sir?" the waiter asked Max.

"What is there?" asked Max without enthusiasm,

expecting to be offered the vile brown concoction from the bus station café.

The waiter rattled off a list of brand-name sodas.

"I'll have a Coke, please. And vanilla ice cream."

The waiter bowed and was gone.

The clouds were clearing now, and the estuary below sparkled like emeralds in the sun.

"Is that the Monkey River?" Max asked.

Uncle Ted was sitting bolt upright, his eyes darting nervously around the garden as if he was expecting a ninja attack.

"What?" he said irritably.

"I was just asking if that's the Monkey River down there."

"I hope you're not going to plague me with questions while you're here, Massimo; I'm not running a tourist information centre. It was bad enough getting a phone call from that madwoman, telling me you were coming to stay."

"What madwoman?"

"You call her Zia, don't you? I told her not to send you, but she wouldn't listen to me."

Max watched the boats bobbing on the green water. He didn't know what Zia had been thinking, but she'd made a big mistake. "I'm sure Mom and Dad will be back soon," he said.

"Let us hope so," said Uncle Ted.

They sat in silence until Victor the waiter came back with their order.

Max poured half the Coke into his glass and carefully dropped a large spoonful of ice cream into it. Then he closed his eyes and sucked it all down until his straw made loud gurgling noises on the bottom of his empty glass.

When he opened his eyes, Uncle Ted and the waiter were both staring at him, appalled.

"I'm sorry, Victor," said Uncle Ted. "I can only apologize for my nephew's table manners."

Victor smiled indulgently at Max, then, on the pretext of scraping crumbs off the table, he leaned down by Uncle Ted and murmured, "Heard anything from the police yet, sir?"

Uncle Ted froze. He looked at Max out of the corner of his eye to see if he'd overheard. He had.

"The police?" spluttered Max. "Is this about Mom and Dad?"

Victor shot an apologetic glance at Uncle Ted and fled inside.

"Calm down, Massimo," said Uncle Ted. "The chief of police is a friend of mine. I just asked him to send a chopper up to Ixchel to check things out."

"What things?"

"Nothing in particular. Just to have a look round. See if your parents are still there and bring them back if they are. I am concerned that the trails will be blocked after the storm."

There was a shout from the garden.

A flash of steel.

A gardener held up the headless, writhing body of a snake. It was about three feet long, bright red with yellow and black bands.

Uncle Ted gave a low whistle. "It's a coral snake," he said.

"You don't want to get bitten by one of those."

"It's the second one he's found today," said Victor, who'd come to see what all the shouting was about. "The rain seems to bring them out." He called something to the gardener in Spanish and went back inside, shaking his head.

Uncle Ted looked at his watch. "My client will be here in a moment. Until he's gone, Massimo, I must ask you to stay inside with Victor. Off you go, now. . . ."

Victor was polishing glasses behind the bar. He regarded Max with a mixture of sympathy and suspicion. "Are you having a pleasant vacation?" he inquired stiffly.

"Yes, thank you," said Max, sitting at the bar and picking at a bowl of cashew nuts.

Victor's eyes kept darting nervously toward the door onto the terrace, and Max turned to see what he was looking at. "We have postcards," said Victor quickly, as if to distract him. He indicated a small basket next to the register.

Max flicked idly through the cards. They were dogeared and too faded to be recognizable. "Do you know anything about a place called Ixchel?" he asked.

Victor narrowed his eyes. "What did you want to know?"

Max shrugged. "Just tourist stuff."

Victor looked relieved. "Ixchel is one of the five sacred pyramids of the Monkey River. Ixchel herself was the moon goddess. Her name means 'Lady Rainbow.' The ancient Maya thought rainbows were bad omens. Lady Rainbow was greatly feared."

"Why?"

"When mortals angered her, which was often, she would empty her water jar over us, causing terrible floods and rainstorms."

Above them, the sky was clouding over again.

"It does seem to rain a lot here," said Max.

"Lady Rainbow has been very angry lately," agreed Victor.

"The farmers are worried for their crops." He winked at Max.

"Maybe they should make some offerings to her."

"What kind of offerings?"

"I am joking. These days, the farmers get their weather reports from TV."

"What kind of offerings did they *used* to make?"

"Jade, incense, sacrifices, that sort of thing."

"Human sacrifices?" asked Max.

"Sometimes."



Upstairs in the bathroom, Max looked at himself in the tarnished mirror. His face was white as death. Human sacrifices, snakes, tamales . . . he didn't want to stay in San Xavier a day longer than he had to. Maybe when his parents got back from wherever they were, they could all fly to Italy for a proper vacation. They owed him, big-time.

He turned on the tap. After a lot of banging in the pipes, a trickle of brown water dripped out. He splashed his face. The water smelled of drains. He stumbled into the corridor, intending to stick his head out the nearest window for some fresh air. But what he saw made him jump back.

There were men with guns all over the garden. They were all dressed in black. Half of them were pointing their weapons at Lucky Jim. The other half were focused on something that was happening directly under the window.

Max flattened himself against the wall and peered down.

There were two men on the path. One was his uncle. The other was a dark-haired man with a neatly trimmed beard and a moustache that curled up at the ends. Like his bodyguards, he was dressed in black, with a short cape around his shoulders and black leather gloves.

This must be Uncle Ted's client.

The banana business was evidently more cutthroat than Max had realized.

Voices drifted up to the window.

"I understand you have certain objects for sale," the dark-haired man was saying in a strong Spanish accent.

"Objects?" repeated Uncle Ted cagily.

"Let us not play games, Señor Murphy. It has come to my attention that you recently sold a sword, a fine blade of Toledo. I must know where you found this piece."

"I cannot divulge that information."

The Spaniard clicked his tongue impatiently. "Bueno. But you will confirm that it was the sword of Friar Diego de Landa?"

"It was sold as such," conceded Uncle Ted.

"If that sword is authentic, Señor Murphy, it was last seen in the hold of the ship *Espada* that sailed from this very port in 1553 and was lost en route to Cadiz." He pronounced it *cah-deeth*.

"I am aware of the history of the piece."

"Then you will know that the same ship was said to be carrying two important stone carvings?"

"If you say so."

"Señor Murphy, let us get to the point. . . ."

The Spaniard clicked his fingers and one of his bodyguards came forward, carrying a metal briefcase. The guard tripped slightly on the terrace steps and before he could regain his balance, the Spaniard grabbed the briefcase from him, pulled out a gun, and pistol-whipped him across the face. As the guard fell to the ground in pain, the Spaniard kicked him savagely in the stomach.

"Clumsy pig," he screamed.

*This guy's a complete psychol!* thought Max.

The Spaniard resumed negotiations as if nothing had happened. "The stone carving that I seek," he began, before noticing a drop of the bodyguard's blood on his shiny black boots. "*Momentito*," he said, clicking his fingers again. Another guard materialized to wipe away the offending stain.

"Bueno," said the Spaniard. "As I was saying, the stones that I seek are the brothers of this one. It is my wish to collect the full set."

With that, he placed the briefcase on the garden wall and unlocked it. The breeze died down and the birds stopped singing as he threw back the lid.

A faint glow emanated from the case. It was lined with foam, and nestled inside was a glassy black stone about the size of a football. It looked very old and it was crudely carved into the shape of a cat's head with the mouth open, ready to bite. An unpleasant smell, like rotting meat, wafted up to the window.

Uncle Ted's face looked even more deeply wrinkled in the glow of the stone. He spoke in an admiring whisper. "The Black Jaguar of Ah Pukuh . . . lost for centuries . . . But where did you get it?"

The Spaniard snapped the briefcase closed.

"I, too, have my secrets, *señor*. But I see that you recognize the stone. Tell me, do you have its brothers?"

"If I did," said Uncle Ted, "I'd be a fool to sell."

"Everything has its price, Señor Murphy."

A songbird trilled noisily in a nearby tree. The Spaniard wheeled around and shot it dead. "I will give you time to think."

He replaced his gun in its holster and strolled casually over to admire a rosebush in a painted pot.

He picked one perfect red bloom and sniffed it delicately. "Aaah," he sighed. "*Una rosa muy rara*, a rare hybrid grandiflora, if I am not mistaken." He let the flower drop to the ground and crushed it with the toe of his boot.

It lay on the path like a smear of blood.

"It touched me in the heart to hear that your brother and his wife are missing; Señor Murphy. How unfortunate. And your nephew is with you now, is he not? It is to be hoped that he does not also . . . disappear."

Uncle Ted looked like he might punch the guy in the nose, and Max clenched his own fists in sympathy, mentally egging him on.

Then the moment for retaliation was lost as—*bang, bang, bang!*—the Spaniard pumped one bullet after another into the painted flowerpot, his face contorted with rage, until the pot was broken into tiny pieces and the uprooted rosebush fell to the ground. A lizard darted out to hunt for beetles in the spilled dirt, and he would have shot that as well, but he'd run out of bullets. He threw the gun at it and missed.

"Sell me the Jaguar Stone or you will be sorry," he hissed in a fury.

Shocked by the force of the Spaniard's temper, Uncle Ted put up his hands to signal defeat. "May I at least inquire with whom I am to do business?"

In a moment of pure cartoon villainy, the Spaniard threw back his cape, struck out his chest, and looked down his aquiline nose. It was a wonder he didn't twirl his moustache. "Count Antonio de Landa," he announced, making an elaborate bow, "at your service."

"Landa?" repeated Uncle Ted in surprise.

"Yes, Señor Murphy, your ears do not play tricks. My

ancestor was the famous Friar Diego de Landa. So you see, I am merely seeking the return of my family's rightful property."

Uncle Ted's eyebrows shot up as if to dispute that claim, but he quickly masked his scepticism. "Of course, this changes everything," he said. "It will take me a little time to retrieve the object in question, but I will contact you tomorrow to arrange the details of the sale."

"*Hasta luego*," said Landa. He turned on his heel and was gone.

Max took a few deep breaths, then headed for the stairs. As he went down, he saw Uncle Ted come in from the terrace and say something to Victor. Victor pointed up at the staircase.

"Ah, there you are, Massimo," called his uncle. "We can go now; my business here is done."

"Uncle Ted, what exactly is your business?"

"Bananas, of course," he answered.

Out on the terrace, Max could see workmen sweeping up the damage wrought by Landa.

Lucky came in and nodded at Uncle Ted. "All clear, boss," he said.

"Let's go," said Uncle Ted.

It was a beautiful drive along the coast, with banana groves on one side and rolling surf on the other. But Max saw none of it. As soon as his head touched the cool leather of the backseat, he fell fast asleep in the Mercedes.

As they drove along the rutted highway, a rainbow arched in the sky above them.