

## Chapter Four

# VILLA ISABELLA

All that night and late into the morning, Max dreamed about snarling jaguars prowling the streets of Boston. He was finally awakened by the tropical sun streaming in through the French windows.

For a moment he thought he was in a hotel on vacation. But as he took in the bare white walls and plain wooden furniture of Uncle Ted's guest room, he remembered that his parents were missing in action and his uncle was doing shady deals with trigger-happy Spaniards.

He got out of bed and stepped onto the balcony. The heat hit him like a blast from a blowtorch. A toucan with a beak like an upturned canoe gave a croak of protest and flapped away. A bright green insect the size of a toy helicopter loomed menacingly at him before landing on a purple flower as big as a Frisbee. And everywhere Max looked, yellow butterflies were dancing in the sunshine. Everything was so big and bright and colourful, it seemed unreal.

Even Uncle Ted's house looked like a film set. Villa Isabella sat on a ridge at one end of a sheltered bay. It was an old colonial mansion, built of honey-coloured stones that

glowed in the sun. But despite its blue-painted shutters and flower-decked balconies, it also had the aspect of a fortress.

From the depth of the windows, Max estimated that the walls were two feet thick. He could see a tall, battlemented tower on one corner and, by leaning out as far as he dared, he noted that the lowest floor had arrow slits like a medieval castle.

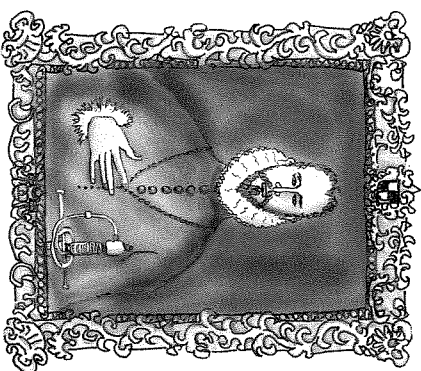
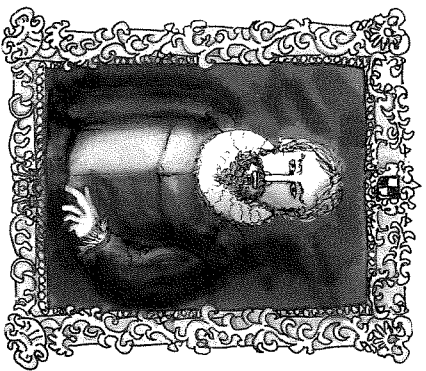
An old stone wall, topped by a walkway and fortified with crumbling guard posts, encircled the villa's grounds. Was that to keep predators out or to keep guests in? Max wondered.

From his second-floor vantage point, he could see over the wall from the bay on one side to the rainforest on the other. Faint animal sounds—whoops and cackles—floated over from the forest. Max scanned it for signs of wildlife, but the tops of the trees were packed tightly together like evil mutant broccoli and he could see nothing move in their impenetrable green depths.

A blast from a ship's horn made him look toward the sea. The bay was wide and horseshoe-shaped, a natural harbour; a big white yacht—surely Uncle Ted's?—floated at anchor in the turquoise water.

Only the beach spoiled the picture-postcard view. Instead of fine white sand, this was black and gritty, strewn with palm fronds, old tires, strips of plastic, and other garbage that had washed up in the storm.

But this was a work zone, not a tourist resort. Along the curve of the bay, about half a mile from the house, there was a large warehouse connected to a pier. A crane was loading crates into the hold of a rusty freighter. This must be the banana business in action. But given the conversation Max had overheard at the hotel, he couldn't help wondering if those



crates contained something more valuable than bananas.

His musings were interrupted by a growl from his stomach. Time to go and find some breakfast.

He got dressed and peered out of the bedroom doorway. His room opened onto a long corridor lined with suits of armour and oil paintings of stern-looking men with pointed beards, all richly dressed in ruffs and capes. They reminded him of that crazy cape-twirling Spaniard in the garden.

Max followed the corridor to the main staircase. His footsteps echoed loudly as he ran down the huge stone steps leading into the great hall.

Wow. He must have passed through this room the night before, but he'd been so tired he hadn't seen it properly. Now its size and scale amazed him.

The great hall was arranged as a reception room with clusters of antique sofas, dark wood tables, and stiff-backed chairs. Against the far wall was an enormous stone fireplace that could have burned a small forest in one go. A coat of arms with crossed swords was carved into the over-mantel.

It would have looked like a castle in medieval Europe,

were it not for the Maya sculptures occupying every ledge, every side table, every niche. In pride of place in the centre of the floor were two gigantic stone heads.

It was only when he stood in front of these heads that Max realized how big the great hall was. The heads were taller than a school bus and yet not out of proportion for the room. As he looked from one hook-nosed face to the other, they seemed to stare right back at him—one with sadness, one with anger.

Max began to feel uncomfortable. There was a sense of tension between the statues that gave him goose bumps. He reached out to feel the stone.

"Please do not touch," came a voice behind him.

Max turned to see an immaculately groomed old man in a black tailcoat.

"Welcome to the Villa Isabella, sir. I am Raul, head butler and household administrator. You slept well, I trust?"

"Yes, thank you," said Max. He turned back to the heads. "Who are these guys?"

"The one on the left is Lord 6-Dog."

"Lord 6-Dog? What kind of name is that?"

"It is the name of a great ancient Maya king who united the cities of the Monkey River and brought a golden age of prosperity to the people of this region."

"And who's Mr. Angry next to him?"

"That's Lord 6-Dog's twin brother, Tzelek the Black Priest."

"What's his problem?"

"In a nutshell, sir, he's a bad loser."

"What happened?" asked Max, looking quickly from one head to the other, as if to catch them blinking.



"It's a classic case of sibling rivalry, sir. When 6-Dog inherits the Jaguar Throne, Tzelek is consumed with jealousy. Determined to wrest the throne from his twin brother, he turns to the dark arts. In their final showdown, Tzelek conjures up a demon army and attacks Lord 6-Dog, who counterattacks with his veteran Jaguar Warriors. It is the greatest battle between good and evil in Maya history."

Max liked the way Raul told the story in the present tense, as if he were a sports commentator and it was all happening right there and then.

"Who won?" he asked.

"It is not over," said Raul cryptically. He rubbed his hands briskly together. "And now, sir, brunch will be served out on the terrace." He pointed to some glass doors farther down the hallway.

Max was heading toward them when, through a half-open door, he noticed a circular room. Thinking it must be the base of the battlemented tower he'd seen from his balcony, he looked inside.

What he saw astounded him.

If the rest of the house was channelling medieval Spain, this room was like something out of a James Bond movie.

With varnished wood panelling from floor to ceiling, it had the sleek, tight feel of a luxury yacht. Plasma screens hanging from the ceiling transmitted security shots of the house, grounds, and warehouse. On the desk were several laptop computers, some night-vision goggles, and an array of high-tech equipment whose purpose Max couldn't even guess.

His eye was drawn to a poster-size aerial photograph showing the locations of various Maya ruins. Max tried to

find the Temple of Ixchel, but there were too many sites and the captions were too small.

On another wall was a diploma from the Royal College of Art in London and some old photographs. There were of Ted and Frank as teenagers, striking cool poses in the jungle, and there was Ted holding a red-haired baby. Uncle Ted had no children, had never been married as far as Max knew, so that baby had to be him—little Max. The thought that Uncle Ted kept his picture on the wall made him feel more at home, and he looked around for any other family mementos.

In front of a window was a brass telescope. It was focused on the luxury yacht he'd seen from the balcony, and Max could just about make out the lettering on the stern: LA ESPADA, CADIZ. *That's a coincidence*, he thought, *same name as that old galleon in Oscar's story*. But this yacht couldn't have been more twenty-first century. It was bristling with electronic masts and radar dishes.

Max was trying to find the zoom for a closer look, when a hand tapped him on the shoulder.

He turned to see Raul standing behind him.

What was this guy's problem? That was the second time today he'd sneaked up behind Max and scared him half to death.

"This is Mr. Murphy's private office, sir," said Raul.

"I was just looking at the yacht," said Max. "Is it Uncle Ted's?"

"No, sir. It belongs to a Spaniard by the name of Count Antonio de Landa—a most unsavoury character, by all accounts. They say he killed his own brother to inherit the family estate. And now, sir, if you don't mind . . ."

Raul ushered Max out of the room, pulled the door

tightly shut, and stalked imperiously back to the kitchen.

Max went out onto the terrace. It was more like an outdoor room, enclosed as it was on three sides by frescoed walls and fronted by a stone balustrade. It was cooled by wooden ceiling fans and shaded by a yellow awning that gave the light an unreal quality, as if everything was inside a tent.

A table, covered by a starched white tablecloth, had been set for two with china plates, sparkling glass, and heavy silver flatware. A newspaper was placed to one side. Even the newspaper looked ironed.

Max took a seat and Raul appeared behind him.

"Tea, coffee, or hot chocolate, sir?"

"Hot chocolate," said Max decisively.

Raul nodded and went inside.

Instantly, Max wished he'd asked for a cold soda instead. He jumped up to follow Raul and change his order but only got as far as the doorway before freezing in his tracks. In front of his astonished eyes, the closed door to the office flew open and Uncle Ted emerged, brushing dust off his shoulders.

How was it possible?

There was only one door to that room, and it had been barely a minute since Max himself had vacated it. Had Uncle Ted climbed in through a window?

Unseen by his uncle, Max crept back to his seat to ponder the problem.

A few minutes later, Uncle Ted strode out onto the terrace.

"Good morning, Massimo," he said, a little frostily. "Raul tells me you've been exploring."

"I was just—"

"I must ask you not to poke around. Raul runs a tight

ship, and I don't want you making work for him. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Max, "but I was only—"

"The matter is closed," said Uncle Ted, as he scanned the newspaper headlines.

Raul brought out a platter of scrambled eggs and smoked salmon, a bowl of freshly sliced pineapple, and a big basket of toast, rolls, and pastries. Max watched him as he set the food down. What a tartlerale. Was he going to report back to Uncle Ted on every little thing? It was like being five years old.

"Help yourself," said Uncle Ted to Max as Raul gave a small bow and withdrew.

Max took a large spoonful of eggs and picked out the salmon. Next, he cut the crusts off a piece of toast and removed all the raisins from a Danish. Then he settled down to enjoy what was left, surrounded by little piles of rejected food.

Uncle Ted set down the newspaper. "I have good news," he said. "I spoke to the chief of police this morning. Your parents have left the camp, so they must be on their way back. Many of the trails are impassable after the storm, but it turns out they have an excellent guide. He's a local archaeologist who was working with them at Ixchel, Herman something-or-other, and, apparently, he knows the jungle like the back of his hand."

"That's great," said Max. "Did the chopper find anything?"

"No, the camp was deserted."

"Was it all neatly packed up?"

"Let's leave the detective work to the police, shall we? We'll get a full report later."

"But was it packed up or not?"

"Since you ask, clothes and papers were strewn everywhere—due to the storm, no doubt."

"Aha!" Max pounced on this clue. "So we know they left in a hurry. Otherwise, Mom would have tidied up. She hates mess."

"I know how she feels," said Uncle Ted, pointedly eyeing the piles of discarded food around Max's plate and the drips of hot chocolate on the white tablecloth.

"If they're on their way back," mused Max, "I wonder why the chopper didn't see them from the air?"

"The tree canopy's too thick," replied Uncle Ted.

"The evil mutant broccoli," muttered Max.

"Excuse me?" said Uncle Ted.

"That's what it looks like from my balcony."

"Ah," said Uncle Ted. "But the broccoli—I mean the canopy—is a good thing for our purposes. It blocks out the sunlight, so not much grows on the ground. Makes it easier to walk through the rainforest."

"You said the trails were impassable," Max reminded him

"The storm has done a lot of damage, but I'm sure they'll find a way through. More toast?"

While Max dissected another Danish, Uncle Ted read the newspaper. They'd been sitting like this in silence for a while when Raul came rushing out. "Sorry to interrupt your breakfast, sir, but you have an urgent phone call." From the way Raul avoided his eyes, Max guessed the call was about his parents. As he sat and waited, he threw crumbs of pastry to the little birds that hopped about under the table.

"The chopper pilot has filed his report," announced Uncle Ted when he came back. "The chief of police told me

to stress that it's probably not significant, but they found a gold hoop earring near the cenote and they wanted me to ask you if Carla—"

"Yes! Mom wears earrings like that!"

"And so do most of the women in San Xavier. It means nothing."

"Where did you say they found it?"

"By the cenote."

"Say-note-eh? What's that?"

"It's the local name for a sinkhole. The jungle's full of underground lakes and rivers. When the roof collapses, you get a cenote. It's like a deep well. The Maya used to think they were entrances to the underworld."

A bell rang in Max's brain. "Didn't the Maya use them for human sacrifice?"

"How did you know that?" said Uncle Ted in surprise.

"I read it in the magazine on the plane."

"That figures. They like to lay the human sacrifice story on thick for the tourists—but I'd advise you to take it with a pinch of salt."

"Do the police think Mom and Dad are on their way back?"

"Absolutely."

"Are they doing anything to find them?"

"There's not much they *can* do. It's the old needle-in-a-haystack scenario. Forensics are going to run a few tests on your father's jacket, but . . ."

Max's blood ran cold. "They found Dad's jacket?"

"Yes, that disgusting old thing with all the pockets."

"But he never takes it off."

"Maybe not in Boston, but it's hotter here—in case you hadn't noticed."

"I've seen him wear it at noon in a heat wave." A note of panic crept into Max's voice. "Was there anything in the pockets?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"That's where he keeps his research notes."

This was bad. His father would never willingly be parted from his jacket. Max tried to calm himself by taking a sip of hot chocolate, but his hands were shaking too much to hold the cup.

"Did you know," said Uncle Ted, "that the ancient Maya were the first to make a drink out of chocolate? They served it on special occasions like we serve champagne."

Max pushed his cup away.

"Why are they running tests on Dad's jacket?"

Uncle Ted tried to sound casual. "It had a mark on it. But I told them, that old jacket was so dirty, it was always covered in stains."

"What mark? What was it?"

"It looked like blood, but—"

"Blood?"

"Don't panic, Massimo, it's not Frank's blood. In fact, they don't think it's human blood at all."

"Not human? I don't understand."

"No one understands yet. Things are never what they seem around here. We must wait for forensics to finish their tests."

"When will that be?"

Uncle Ted shrugged. "Who knows? Things don't move as quickly in San Xavier as they do in Boston."

"Can't you bribe someone?" suggested Max. Uncle Ted raised an eyebrow. "Certainly not."

The ceiling fans whirred lazily in the rafters. A honeybee hovered over a flower. A lizard perched motionless on the balustrade. It was as if time had stood still. Max felt jet-lagged and tired and confused. He was angry at his parents, angry at Uncle Ted, angry at the yellow butterfly that was fluttering in front of his face.

He tried to wave away the butterfly and his hand caught the lid of the chocolate pot, sending the whole thing flying. The pot smashed on the tiled floor. Chocolate dregs splattered Uncle Ted's white shirt, and shards of bone china flew everywhere.

Raul ran out with a dustpan and brush.

Uncle Ted poured some water onto a napkin and dabbed at his shirt. "I must ask you to be more careful while you're staying here, Massimo," he said. "I like an orderly house."

But Max didn't care about a few hot-chocolate stains.

It was the blood on his father's jacket that preoccupied him.

As they sat there, the sky darkened to a purple bruise and raindrops began drumming on the canvas awning. When Uncle Ted finally spoke again, he had to shout to make himself heard above the rainstorm. "There's no sense in sitting around moping, Massimo. You need to keep busy. As of tomorrow, I'm starting you in the banana warehouse."

Max looked at him warily. "How much will you pay me?"

"Hard work is its own reward," replied Uncle Ted.

"You're living here at my expense. You should be glad to earn your keep."

"That's slave labour!" protested Max.

But Uncle Ted didn't seem to hear him. "Breakfast at five tomorrow, and report straight to Lucky Jim in the warehouse."

"Breakfast at five? But it's my summer vacation."

"You have to rise early in the tropics to beat the heat. If you get an early start, you can look forward to a productive day's work."

*Hard work is its own reward? Breakfast at five? A productive day's work?*

Max stared at his uncle openmouthed.

"Something wrong?" asked Uncle Ted.

"You sound like my father," said Max in surprise.

Uncle Ted said nothing. But his face reminded Max of his mother's expression the day she stepped in dog poop on Boston Common.