

Chapter Five

MAY GOES BANANAS

“Here’s only one way to learn the banana business,” said Lucky Jim. “And that’s from the bottom up.”

“Does that mean I get to drive one of those?” asked Max, eyeing the forklift trucks that zoomed around the warehouse moving pallets of green bananas.

“No,” said Lucky, “it means you can clean up the beach. See all the old tires and palm fronds and dead fish washed up by the storm?”

“But that’s a huge job,” spluttered Max as Lucky passed him the rake.

As he glumly set to work, he consoled himself that it was better to be outside in the fresh air than sweltering inside the warehouse, even if all the insects in San Xavier had decided to keep him company.

No matter how much bug spray he used, they attacked him relentlessly. He had so many bites, he looked like a human dot-to-dot puzzle. He was only grateful there were no girls around to witness this deeply uncool turn of events.

As he worked—or more accurately, slacked off—Max

brooded on events at Ixchel. The more he went over things—the bloodstained jacket, the earring—the weirder it all seemed. And then there was the mystery of Uncle Ted. What was he hiding? Every time Max asked to make a phone call or send an e-mail, he was told there was no connection. It was obviously untrue.

The old Max Murphy, the one who had kicked the fridge in Boston, would have made a scene about it, for sure. But some survival instinct made him hold his tongue. After all, Uncle Ted moved in dangerous circles, and Max didn’t want to provoke his anger.

But why was he trying to cut his nephew off from the outside world?

Sometimes, as Max halfheartedly raked the sand, he had a distinct sensation of being watched. He never caught anyone in the act, but he guessed that Lucky Jim had his binoculars trained on him at all times. It made him feel like a performing monkey.

One morning when the rains came and he was running to the warehouse for shelter, he noticed a space under the loading pier. The tide was out and the rocks were dry. It was the perfect hideout. He could sit on the rocks without being seen by anyone. Plus, he’d be able to hear everything that happened on the dock above, which would help him keep tabs on Lucky Jim.

Surrounded by a curtain of rain, Max sat under the pier and thought things through for the billionth time. It was obvious that Uncle Ted was up to no good. But the question was, did he have anything to do with the disappearance of Max’s parents?

His thoughts were interrupted by noises above him.

He realized that the downpour had stopped and work had resumed on the dock.

He heard his uncle's voice.

"It's all hands on deck tonight, Lucky. We load at two a.m."

"No worries, boss, the shipment is ready."

"Splendid! And how's that nephew of mine shaping up?"

"I'm sorry to say this about your own flesh and blood, boss, but he's as lazy as a three-toed sloth."

Both men laughed heartily.

"Bit of a spoiled brat, eh?"

"He's not used to hard work, boss, that's for sure."

"He's an only child—I think he usually gets his own way."

"Should I go easier on him, boss?"

"Absolutely not. It could ruin everything, him showing up like this. We have to keep him out of the house, at all costs. Raul caught him snooping around the office the other day—and you know what that could lead to. Work him till he drops, Lucky—make sure he's too tired to cause trouble."

"Whatever you say, boss."

Max was shaking with rage. So his uncle thought he was a spoiled brat, did he? And cleaning this stinking beach was just a ruse to keep him out of the house? Well, Uncle Ted's game was up.

Max would expose him for the crook he was.

There was obviously something incriminating hidden in the office. Max thought back to the day he'd looked around. Had he noticed anything strange? Not really. The only strange thing had been the way Uncle Ted had come out of the office without Max seeing him go in.

And, just like that, Max knew what he was looking for.
A secret door.

Maybe it led to the battlemented tower.

Maybe there was a money-laundering company up there. Or a passport-forging operation. Or—the idea struck him like a knock on the head—maybe, just maybe, his parents were being held prisoner up there.

Now Max was tingling with anticipation.

If they were loading a shipment at two a.m., he'd make his first search tonight. Everyone would be out of the house long enough for him to have a good look around. A spoiled brat indeed! For once, Max was proud of the anger that burned in his veins and spurred him on to vengeance. Uncle Ted was going to regret the day he'd ignited the wrath of Max Murphy!

That afternoon, Max worked with a new energy and enthusiasm. Even Lucky Jim noticed his efforts and signalled his approval from the pier. Max waved to him cheerily. And as he raked, he laid his plans.

Straight after dinner, Uncle Ted excused himself, saying he needed an early night.

Big fat liar, thought Max.

"Sounds good," he said. "Me, too."

Once in his room, he got ready for action. He found a torch in the side pocket of his backpack (*Thanks, Zia!*) and changed into a dark T-shirt and jeans. Then he set his alarm clock for quarter to two and lay down on the bed to get as much rest as possible before zero hour.

When the alarm went off, he felt as if he'd just gone to sleep. He forced himself out of bed and staggered to the window.

No movement at the pier.
He looked up and down the coast.

Still nothing.

Maybe the rendezvous had been cancelled.

Maybe Uncle Ted really did make it an early night.

The minutes ticked by.

Max was just about to get back into bed, when he realized that a shadow on the water was actually a boat slowly and silently making its way to the pier. This was it. His big chance. He guessed he had at least twenty minutes before they finished loading and came back to the house.

He stuck his head out of the bedroom doorway. All was still. The only sound was the beating of his own heart and the tick of an antique clock. He crept into the corridor, past the suits of armour, past the disapproving frowns of the long-dead Spaniards, and down the big stone staircase to the great hall.

Uncle Ted's huge collection of Maya sculptures shimmered in the moonlight. With the furniture receding into the darkness, they seemed to hover in the air like ghosts. A faint chatter of insects outside the window fell quiet as Max entered. He felt as if he'd walked in on a secret meeting, presided over by the two great stone heads.

Max hesitated. The heads looked even more alive tonight. Luminous in the moonlight, they seemed to glow from within. He told himself that their animated expressions were just the flickering shadows of the palm fronds at the window.

But they were looking straight at him.

And they did not look pleased to see him.

"Excuse me, guys," he said under his breath, and steeled himself to walk past them.

On shaking legs, he reached the door to his uncle's office.

It was closed.

Worse than that, it was locked.

No, wait, it was just stuck.

He gently eased the old door open with a creak that seemed to reverberate through the house. He froze, listening for any sound or movement. Nothing. He breathed again. But time was passing. He had to hurry.

Quickly. Get inside and close the door.

Where to look?

He didn't dare switch on his torch in case they saw him from the dock. So with only the moon for light, he started searching the room. He tapped walls, looked behind shelves, lifted rugs for a trapdoor, but found nothing.

What had he missed? How can you hide a whole door?

He sat down on a bookcase that ran under the window and took one last look. He yawned and shivered at the same time. It was cold in this room.

Time to abort the mission and go to bed.

He put a hand on the edge of the bookcase to push himself up and, as he did so, the rush of cold air took his breath away. It was coming from directly behind him.

Wide awake now, he got down on his hands and knees to inspect the woodwork. There was a crack where the bookcase joined the wall. He pulled at the bookcase and felt a slight movement, just enough to tell him that he'd found his secret door. Now he had to find the lock.

Heart thumping, he took the books off the shelves and felt around inside the bookcase. His fingers closed on a small lever. He pushed it down and, with a click, the shelf unit swung away from the wall. He'd done it!

Still on his hands and knees, he was looking straight down

into a narrow steel staircase that spiralled into the bowels of the earth.

Down?

This was not what he'd been expecting at all. He'd been looking for an entrance to the tower, not the dungeons.

But a secret door was a secret door.

Spurred on by the spirit of revenge, he took a few steps down and pulled the bookcase back into position behind him. When it clicked shut, dim green lights came on to illuminate the stairwell. There was no sound but a faint dripping. Down and down he went, trying not to slip on the wet steel treads. With every step, the temperature dropped another few degrees.

At the bottom of the staircase it was as cold and clammy as a tomb.

He stepped under a small archway and into a tunnel hewn out of the rock. All he could hear was the soft hum of machinery and the dripping of water. The tunnel seemed deserted, but he could see arched openings at regular intervals all the way along. Anyone—or anything—could be inside them.

He crept down the tunnel and looked through the first archway. It opened into a large room, dimly lit by rows of computer screens. The walls were papered with charts and maps. Long metal tables supported stacks of computer hardware and electronic boxes covered with dials and switches. Cables and wires snaked across the ground and lay heaped in coils. Was he dreaming? There must have been a million dollars' worth of equipment in there.

The next archway revealed a locker room, packed with

camouflage gear and wet suits, and after that came a smaller tunnel that sloped steeply downward.

Max followed it for about twenty paces before he tripped on something. The beam of his torch revealed several rusty iron rings embedded in the cobbles. As he circled them, trying to work out what they were, he saw water lapping at his feet. Ah, they were boat moorings. The rest of the tunnel was flooded, and Max guessed it led to the open sea.

He retraced his steps back up to the main tunnel.

What was next? he wondered. A weapons cache? An underground firing range? A submarine dock?

But it was none of those. In fact, the next room was more extraordinary than anything Max could ever have imagined.

He was standing in the entrance to an Aladdin's cave.

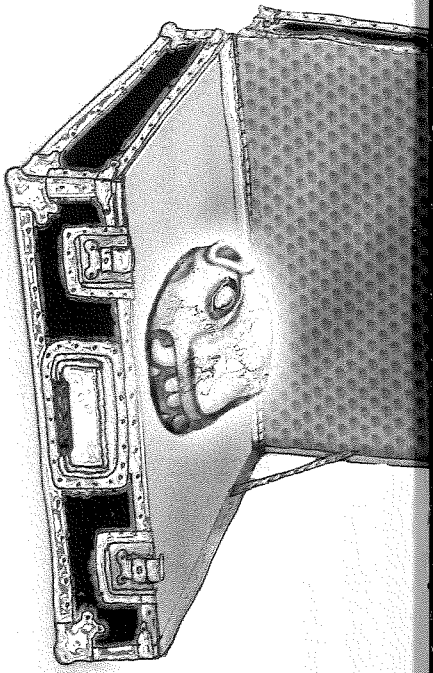
The long vaulted space was lined with shelves. On them, nestled in foam rubber and laid out as carefully as a museum display, was a magnificent array of Maya artefacts as well as pieces of antique armour and weaponry.

Max stepped in to have a closer look. Nearer the doorway, the pottery was chipped and the swords were broken and rusty. But the farther back he went, the more perfect—and, presumably, more valuable—the artefacts became. At the far end, displayed on double thicknesses of foam, were pieces of jade jewellery, inlaid masks, ornately painted bowls, and beautifully carved stone figurines.

Max had seen it all before.

How many times had his parents dragged him around museums, oohing and aahing over this kind of stuff?

He hated it.



He was just turning to leave and go back to the techno room, when he saw a small metal suitcase on a high shelf. It seemed to be calling to him. Without thinking, he reached up for it.

It was heavier than he expected, and he nearly fell backward as he pulled it down. Then he flipped open the latches and lifted the lid.

A warm breeze blew out of the case and filled the air with the earthy smell of jungle. Inside the case, nestled in foam, was a head, a cat's head, carved in bloodred stone. The style was primitive, but the head was so full of life and energy, it almost seemed to snarl.

At that moment, Max felt metal on the back of his neck. "Freeze."

He knew that voice. It was Lucky Jim. And he didn't sound like he was joking.

"Lucky, it's me, Max Murphy, I—"

"No tourists allowed down here."

"But I'm not a tourist, I'm—"

"Now walk. Or I'll blow your head off."

Lucky Jim pushed and prodded him back to the flooded tunnel, all the while mumbling into a walkie-talkie.

"Sit," he said, pushing Max down onto the wet cobbles. "Put your hands behind your back." Max felt cold steel around his wrists as Lucky handcuffed him to a boat mooring. A vein as thick as a jungle vine throbbed in Lucky's forehead. "You're in big trouble, boy," he said.

Max was thinking fast. He looked up at Lucky Jim. "Are you really descended from a long line of Maya warriors?" he asked.

"What if I am?"

"So why do you allow Uncle Ted to loot your treasures? This stuff should be in a museum. Don't you want your children to see the amazing things the Maya were doing when Europe was still in the Dark Ages?"

Max thought it was a brilliant speech for the spur of the moment, and he waited expectantly for Lucky to realize the error of his ways. But Lucky showed no trace of shame. Instead, he drew himself up to his full man-mountain height, folded his arms, and sneered down at Max.

"If I ever have kids," he said, "I'd want to keep them as far away from this stuff as possible. I want them to break free of the past."

"B-b-but what about their heritage?"

Lucky Jim was beyond anger. He was so angry he was almost calm.

"Heritage? If you want heritage, go to one of those Maya theme parks in Mexico. You can watch a Maya show, eat Maya food, have your picture taken with a Maya warrior—"

the complete Maya experience. It won't be the real thing, of course, because you tourists don't want the real thing."

"What's the real thing?" whimpered Max.

"You really want to know?"

Max nodded.

"Time for a history lesson," said Lucky Jim, bending down until the pulsing vein on his forehead was inches from Max's face. "Those old Maya may have been good at pottery and math, but they were ruled by violence and superstition. Problem is, they're still alive. And they're still trying to run things around here. You can call that heritage, but I call it a dangerous reality."

"You're crazy!" blurted Max.

Lucky Jim laughed like a crazy person. "You tourists don't get it, do you? Maya time is different from your time. Our world is different from your world."

He sat down and leaned back against the tunnel wall.

"Take those pyramids in the jungle, like the one your parents were working on. You tourists wouldn't be so quick to climb all over them if you knew how many doors to the underworld they conceal. And those doors are still open. Your parents knew that. . . ."

"What else did my parents know?" whispered Max.

Lucky Jim grabbed Max by the neck of his T-shirt and pulled him close.

"*Bahlamtuuno'ob*," he growled.

"The Jaguar Stones?" asked Max. But before he got his answer, there was a sound of approaching footsteps.

Lucky Jim let him go and stood up. "I've seen some bad things in the jungle," he said as he backed away, "but I wouldn't like to be in your shoes now."

As Lucky Jim's body . . .

got louder until Uncle Ted stood over his terrified nephew. "Got a little lost on our way for milk and cookies, did we?" he said. "I'm disappointed in you, Massimo. I distinctly remember asking you not to poke around. The only question now is what to do with you. . . ."

Max said nothing. There was nothing he could say. He'd been caught red-handed.

"Lucky thinks we should dump you in the ocean . . . tell the police you went looking for your parents in the jungle and never returned. It's an interesting idea, don't you think? The undertow would carry your body halfway to Cuba before the sun comes up."

Max stared at him in disbelief. How could his own uncle, a man who had held him in his arms as a baby, talk to him this way? "Now I understand why my father has always hated you," he spat.

"To hell with your father," said Uncle Ted. "It's your own skin you need to worry about."