

THE JOSHUA FILES

INVISIBLE CITY

M. G. HARRIS

 **DARKWATER**

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For Josie and Jacob

*'Any life is made up of a single moment:
the moment in which a man finds out,
once and for all, who he is.'*

Jorge Luis Borges

The Reporter

MARCH 24th

Ancient prophecy of doom – but at least it's after the Olympics!

An ancient prophecy that the world will end on Dec 22, 2012, was on the minds of visitors to an archaeology exhibition in Mexico this week. Visitors to the Museum of Anthropology in Jalapa, Veracruz, Mexico, were astonished by a display that claimed to be part of an ancient Mayan machine.

"It was just incredible," said Angela Winstone, a schoolteacher from Brownsville, Texas. "I always suspected that the Maya were more technologically advanced than we've given them credit for. This totally confirmed that for me. And it really makes you take that 2012 prophecy a whole lot more seriously."

The exhibition, which closed just two days after opening, included two large fragments of metallic material inscribed with Mayan hieroglyphic writing.

"The Maya weren't supposed to have developed such advanced metal-working," added a British visitor, anthropology student Marcus Tennant. "This is either a very clever hoax, or else there's a lot more to the Maya than we ever knew."

Photographs of the exhibits have not been made available. Deputy Director Dr Adriana Velasquez commented, "It's not clear at this time how the pieces came to be included in the exhibition, which was meant to only display artefacts found in the Orizaba

region of Mexico. The Mayan kingdom didn't even stretch as far as Orizaba, here in Veracruz. Obviously, this is someone's idea of a joke."

We weren't able to speak to the museum's director as, in a rather unusual move, comments from Dr Xavier Bernal have been embargoed under an order from the Mexican government.

Oxford University professor Andres Garcia, a renowned Mayan scholar, told this paper, "From what I've heard within the museum, staff simply took material from the relevant storeroom without checking. Nobody knows how those metal objects got there. I haven't seen the alleged artefacts, so can't say whether they're real or not. It seems unlikely, though. I'm certainly surprised that the Mexican government has become involved."

The ancient Maya, whose empire of pyramids and stone-built cities stretched from Mexico to Guatemala, Belize and Honduras, reached the height of their civilization around 900 AD ... and then disappeared mysteriously, abandoning their grand cities, falling back into the jungle.

Their "Long Count" calendar ends on 22 December 2012.

Is this the Mayan date for the end of the world?

Some within the "new age" community disagree. "22/12/12 is about rebirth, the dawning of a new era of consciousness," claims Gabe Goodge, author of 2012 – Preparing for Rebirth.

Hoax or not, should the worst happen ... at least we'll still get to enjoy the London Olympics, which take place in July 2012!

Chapter 1

BLOG ENTRY: A WALKING CONTRADICTION

I need a place where I can get rid of all these things going on in my head. Things you don't want to talk about. Things your friends, your family don't want you to talk about.

Hence this blog.

I didn't use to be like this, mooching around on my own, writing down my deepest, darkest thoughts. It wasn't even that long ago that it happened – a couple of weeks back, I was just another guy at school. OK, probably not the cleverest or strongest, definitely not the best-looking or most popular, but apart from that I don't think I had a single complaint in the world.

The thing was, I didn't know it. I thought my problems were a big deal.

Well . . . I had no idea.

There was this phone call and people are telling me I need to go home early. So I'm on my skateboard and down the road.

Never thinking it through. Never guessing that somewhere up the street, a storm was brewing. I sailed towards it, practically singing.

Innocent. *Stupid.*

It's capoeira night. Capoeira is this cool Brazilian martial art that I've been learning for almost two years. Our teacher, "Mestre" Ricardo, takes a call on his mobile and calls me out of the *roda* – a circle we make around the two players who "fight." He tells me to get my stuff, to go straight home. At the time I don't really notice, but later I remember something about the look in his eyes.

Mestre Ricardo is a former soldier. Not an easy guy to worry would be my guess. The way he looks at me is something I've never seen from him, never dreamed I'd see: pity.

I remember every detail about the skateboard ride home, over the bridge, the college towers behind me, big puffs of marshmallow cloud in a blue sky reflected in the lead-paned windows. It's the last memory I have where I'm really happy.

I arrive home to find my mother perched on the living room sofa. Jackie from next door, she's there too, holding Mum's hand. As soon as Mum stands up, I can tell she's been crying. Her face is a colour closer to grey than her normal English-rose pink. There's a smile of affection on her lips – it looks forced. The ends of her hair are wet, like she's just washed her face. She tries to kiss me, and I shrink from her touch, pull back to look into her eyes.

She's actually shaking, won't even look at me.

She can't.

A chill seeps into my blood. Dread floods through me. A suspicion grows, a tiny seed of horror in the deepest recesses of my mind. It's such a heart-stopping idea that I can't even bring myself to take it seriously.

Mum begins. "Josh, sit down; there's some bad news, I'm afraid. Terrible, terrible news."

She doesn't get any further, though; she's overwhelmed by tears. Her palms go up to her face,

cover her eyes. She sinks back down on to the sofa. Jackie takes hold of both my hands, which feel rough, cold and huge in her small fingers.

Between Mum's sobs I make out, "The Cessna plane your dad was renting in Mexico. It went down. And . . . Josh, I'm so sorry. So sorry, but . . . he's dead."

Then it's like I'm disconnected from the moment. Bodily I'm still there, holding hands with my middle-aged neighbour, nodding slightly. But somewhere deep inside I begin a scream of rage and disbelief. I can hear that Jackie is talking, but she seems distant, remote. Mum's face is nothing but a blur as I struggle to grasp what I'm hearing.

Then the screams in my head finally catch up with my mouth. It's as though I'm possessed. I start shouting: "*What? What?!*"

Both women try to hug me, but I shake them off. I can't take it in. Then I'm punching the living room door, yelling at them, "No, no, no, no, no." For an instant I catch the fear in Mum's eyes at my sudden violence.

But within seconds I've stopped, already exhausted. I feel sick. My legs actually buckle slightly underneath me. I slump on to the couch. When I glance up, I notice a shimmering haze around Mum and Jackie. I'm shocked, trembling, numb. Mum grabs hold of me, holds on tight, but all I can think is how her arms aren't long enough for a proper hug. And I wonder: how it would have been if Mum, not Dad, had died? Would Dad's arms be long enough? At the thought of losing Mum too, I burst into tears.

Yet there's this hard little kernel of me that's still ticking over. Still able to look on the bright side.

Wait a bit . . . what if it isn't him?

I'm full of questions. How can they be sure it's my dad? Maybe Dad changed his mind about hiring that plane. Maybe it's some other bloke.

"No, Josh, no," Mum murmurs. "The detective who came round – DI Barratt – says the Mexican police are sure it's him. Your dad hadn't been seen for three days, since he hired this plane."

I shake my head, thinking furiously. Trying to find any loophole. "No. Not Dad. Just cos he's gone missing . . . he could be camping near some ruins. They can't be sure without proof. Have they got proof? What is it they do – they look at dental records, don't they? Yeah, I've seen it a million times in films. I bet the dental records will show it's not my dad."

"I'm sorry, love," Jackie explains kindly. "It wasn't that simple. Wish it was, poppet."

"What . . . why not?"

Mum holds my hand. They exchange a look. Mum nods at Jackie. Very slightly.

"Your dad's plane hit a tree. A branch. Would have shot through the windscreen at God knows what speed. He had no chance, Josh. No chance at all."

"What?! Just tell me," I insist, through my tears. "What aren't you telling me?"

Jackie straightens up; her voice steels, becomes faint, distant, cold.

"He was decapitated," she says. "In the plane crash. There is no head. Just your poor dad's burned, broken body."

I take a few moments to absorb that. I'm already beginning to join Jackie in that remote place.

That's where I need to be now. Somewhere else. Anywhere.

Death would have been instantaneous, she's quick to assure me. *Better hope so*. The thought of something like that happening slowly is unbearable.

There was no sign of foul play. No severed fluid lines, nothing suspicious. The best guess from the Mexican police is that he fell asleep at the controls, lost altitude, plunged to his doom.

My emotions start to shut down. Movements become purely mechanical. Would I like some tea? I'm nodding, asking for milk and two sugars.

Like it matters.

I wish I could stop the TV scenes that begin to play through my head. Two sympathetic policemen at the door, the phone call from the hospital, the phone call from abroad. On TV, I've seen bad news delivered lots of ways. Now it's my turn.

Jackie seems to know just what to do. She has nerve; in the midst of our little storm, she holds firm. She's all gentle Irish humour as she makes us hot buttered toast. She serves us thick slices with mugs of sweet, milky tea. She turns on the TV. We watch a whole film, but later I don't remember a single detail. I keep glancing at Mum, wondering what we do now. Am I supposed to hug her? Or what?

I know what Dad would say: *Son, you take care of your mother, you got that?*

Mum's eyes look glazed, staring. After my initial outburst, things are calm. We take it quietly then.

Later, when I go to bed, I get to thinking. I can't stop wondering about something Jackie said; something I hardly noticed at the time.

So far, the Mexican police haven't actually found his head. The rest of his body was burned beyond recognition. They are sure of two things: it was the plane Professor Andres Garcia rented, and his luggage was found thrown clear of the crash.

That's where it begins, that's the root of the matter. Call it what you like: doubt, suspicion, a hunch.

I don't believe it. Not "can't." I'm pretty sure that I could if it only felt true. But something doesn't feel right. Dad has only been flying for three years. I know he's still cautious, plans every detail.

There's no way he'd fall asleep at the controls.

There has to have been some horrendous, monumental mistake.

BLOG ENTRY: THE JOSHUA FILES

So here's the thing – everyone thinks I'm crazy.

Well, it's weird. When people reckon you're going a bit barmy, they don't actually use words like *barmy*, *crazy*, or even *psycho*. They say things like *normal grief response* and *therapy*.

What's really baffling my mum and her friends is that I'm not even getting "barmy" right. Maybe she'd prefer it if I were crying loads, or just sitting staring into space. But it's like there's a sign taped to my forehead: *Does not fit the textbooks*.

All I'm doing is looking at the circumstances of this plane crash and asking a few questions that don't seem to interest anyone else.

1. Dad told Mum and me that he was going to Cancuen in Guatemala. Some Mayan king was murdered there hundreds of years ago. So . . . why was Dad's plane found hundreds of miles from where he'd rented it and hundreds of miles from Cancuen?

2. Why did the local newspaper not have a single witness who saw the plane come down?

3. Why did that same local newspaper carry eyewitness reports of a major UFO sighting close to where they said his plane had come down?

Seems to me, you get some information like that, you should ask some serious questions. Maybe wonder about the truth of statements like “Dr Andres Garcia crashed his Cessna in the jungle of southern Mexico and suffered fatal injuries on impact”.

Why am I the only one wondering about this? Seems totally normal to me. But the more I go on, the more Mum thinks I’m losing it.

What is it with UFOs, anyway? Why are you automatically a headcase just because you say you’ve seen a UFO? So many people nowadays have – it’s not hundreds of people; it’s hundreds of thousands. From all backgrounds, all ages, all types of braininess. UFO sightings are rampant; you can’t ignore something that so many people see.

I took those three facts about my dad’s plane crash and I put them together like this: what if that body belongs to someone else? What if Dad wasn’t in the crash at all? What if he was abducted by the UFOs? What if he isn’t dead, just missing?

Mum’s first reaction, I have to say, was very reasonable. She said, “OK. Let’s assume that there really was a UFO. What about the body in the plane? What about the luggage? No one else was reported missing, just your father.” Then she gave me a big hug and said, “I understand, sweetheart; you don’t want this to be true. Neither do I. It’s unthinkable, unbearable.” Then she slowly began to cry, and it was me who had to comfort her.

Which I can do, because now I'm not so sure that he's dead.

Comment (1) from TopShopPrincess

Hey Josh. Notice you say on your profile that you're from Oxford. Me too. Us UFO-philes should stick together. I saw a UFO once, you know. It was at night; my dad was driving me home after a party and there it was, for just a few seconds, hovering in a field. Dad said all he saw were the lights of an airplane. But he didn't get a proper look cos he was driving. It hovered all right, then swung into the air and shot off. Planes don't do that – at least, no plane I ever saw did. If you say you think your dad was abducted, then I believe you.

Reply

Thanks, TopShopPrincess. (I'm guessing you're an Arctic Monkeys fan, right?) It's good to know there's one person out there who believes me. The guys at school think it's a laugh. I only mentioned it once and I never will again.

Comment (2) from TopShopPrincess

Too right! Arctic Monkeys rule!

BLOG ENTRY: AEROMEXICO PILOT FILMS UFOS IN CAMPECHE!

I've been spending a lot of my time looking through UFO sightings reports. It's amazing what you can find on the Web. People I might once have called "nutters", logging up hours online to post information, rumours, opinion. I can't get enough of it. If I keep looking, I might find the one report that will lead me to Dad. It's not unheard of. People often get abducted in groups. Years later, they find each other again. No connection in their normal lives, but they know each other, somehow. I'm not talking about déjà vu. This is real. Total strangers who know stuff about each other that they couldn't know if they hadn't met.

If Dad was taken along with anyone else, there might be hope.

We heard about the plane crash a few days back. I've been tracking rumours in the UFO boards. Now they've hit the mainstream news.

So I'm not just going on the words of some random UFO fans. A commercial airline pilot with Aeromexico is one of my key witnesses!

Aeromexico Pilot Films "UFOS"

"In the late evening of June 15, a commercial airline pilot flying Aeromexico Flight 231 filmed six unidentified flying objects in the skies over southern Campeche state, a Defense Department spokesman confirmed.

In a sighting that bears an uncanny resemblance to the widely reported event of March 2004 – in which pilots of the Mexican airforce filmed eleven UFOs – a videotape made widely available to the news media shows the bright objects, some sharp points of light and others like large headlights, moving rapidly in what appears to be a late-evening sky.”

Comment (1) from TopShopPrincess

I looked up the news stories you blogged. Awesome! I can't believe you've actually got airline pilots backing you up on this one.

Reply

For all the good it does! Remember, I'm working against total scepticism here. Mum's argument, basically, goes like this:

1. The plane was found on the nineteenth of June. The corpse was at least three days old, but could have been older. So we don't know for definite that the crash was on the fifteenth, the day the UFOs were sighted.
2. People are always spotting UFOs in Mexico. The stories amount to nothing.
3. If the body wasn't Dad's, then whose was it? No one else was reported missing.
4. Dad could have planned another trip, not just to central Guatemala, but to somewhere in Campeche, Mexico. There are lots of Mayan ruins in Campeche.

Comment (2) from TopShopPrincess

Hmmm. Well . . . not being funny or anything, but your mum does have a point.

Reply

Maybe so, TopShopPrincess, but she's wrong about UFOs. They haven't only been around since the 1940s. They go way back. There are ancient Sanskrit manuscripts from India that talk about flying-saucer-type objects. Ancient Sumerian clay tablets 4000 years old with carvings of flying machines. UFOs – they're ancient history.

Chapter 2

While I'm reading TopShopPrincess's response to my blog post, I notice my mother standing in the doorway. She's wearing her dressing gown – again. She's scarcely been out of the house since we heard about Dad. I wonder if she'll ever get back to teaching history to those rich kids at the college.

"Mum, you have to look at this," I say, waving her over. "A pilot for Aeromexico spotted those UFOs too. Fifteenth of June. Almost the same day they think Dad's plane crashed. What if they got it wrong; what if his plane went down on the fifteenth?"

Despite herself, Mum can't resist looking. She stands, reading over my shoulder as I hold my breath. Is this it? Finally, the point at which she takes me seriously?

After a few minutes, she says in a tired voice, "Read the bottom line of the report, Josh. 'Mexico has a long history of fanciful UFO sightings, most of which are dismissed by scientists as space debris, missiles, weather balloons, natural weather phenomena or hoaxes.'"

"God, that is SO patronizing!" I shout.

She just stares blankly at me. "I'm getting tired of this, Josh. When's this going to stop?"

"Why won't you even talk about it?"

Mum explodes. "Because it's preposterous! People don't get abducted by aliens! UFO sightings . . . they're just some trendy zeitgeist thing. It's a mythology, a modern mythology!" Then she sighs, sinks down on to the bed, runs one hand through her hair, exhausted and desperate.

"Please, *please* listen to me, Josh. We both know what happened to your father, and as ghastly, as

unforgettably horrible as that was, we have to learn to live with it!"

"What about the fact that his plane was in northern Campeche . . . in Mexico? Dad was supposed to be in central Guatemala, the place where they found the murdered Mayan king. That's hundreds of miles away!"

"Josh, he makes these trips all the time," she says wearily. "He doesn't give me every single detail. That's why he always goes out to Tuxtla first and rents his cousin's Cessna. Otherwise it takes ages, driving all over the place, or else it costs a fortune on commercial flights. That's how it is with Mayan archaeology. All the new discoveries are in the middle of nowhere."

And she goes on to say more stuff, but I've stopped listening. Instead, I think about what she said just a few seconds earlier.

"You said 'makes these trips'. 'Rents his cousin's Cessna'. You're talking like he's still alive. Is that what you really think too, Mum?"

Mum shakes her head very sadly. "No. But I can wish it, can't I?"

There's a knock at the door. We're not expecting anyone. I can sense it – something's wrong. Mum feels it too. Nervously, I open the door.

It's a copper. He introduces himself as Detective Inspector Barratt of Thames Valley Police.

"It's about Professor Garcia," he says, standing at our doorstep. "The Mexican police have been in touch. And I'm sorry to say it's rather bad news."

The head wasn't burnt to a crisp like the rest of him. It had been sliced off before the fire, which started in the crashed plane.

Barratt tells us, "The Mexican investigators reckon that wild animals must have made off with the head. They found it miles away, features ravaged, decomposed beyond any recognition. According to the

coroner, the dental X-rays are conclusive; a match with Professor Garcia.”

He goes on; there were something called *hyaloid fractures* – the hyaloid is a little bone deep in the throat that often breaks during strangulation. And *petechial haemorrhages* – tiny broken blood vessels in the eye, another classic sign of strangulation. Taken together, they point to one thing: murder.

Listening to DI Barratt, I feel like a lizard is slowly crawling along my spine. It’s the most horrible and yet the most thrilling thing I’ve ever heard. Now our pain isn’t just a twist of fate but something malign, something intended. There’s a prickling of the hairs on my skin. Even the air around us seems to be charged. I look across at Mum, and I can’t read her expressionless face. But her knuckles are white to the bone.

Barratt lets that news sink in for a few minutes, then carries on. As things turned out, Dad hadn’t been seen at Cancun for four days before his death. On 12 June, he’d flown out of Cancun, told the other archaeologists he’d be flying back to Mexico. They’d assumed he meant Tuxtla, where he’d hired the plane. But the police had talked to the plane-hire guys. Dad hadn’t been there either. At first, no one knew where he’d gone for those missing four days.

The Mexican detectives were certain that Dad was dead before the plane crashed, probably even before it took off – strangled to death, maybe by whoever flew the plane. The theory is that a second man was in the plane with Dad – he probably doused Dad’s dead body with lighter fluid, then parachuted out. Since no witnesses have come forward saying anything about the crash or any parachutist, it’s likely that the incident took place at night. They’re putting the date of death at 16 June, based on the examination of the crash remains. It’s a theory that works with the facts.

Then last week someone came forward. An anonymous tip-off. There'd been talk of a secret night-landing in a small beachside town.

"A place called Chetumal," Barratt says. "Do you know it?"

Mum shakes her head. "No. I mean, yes – I've heard of it. Never been."

"Well," Barratt begins solemnly. "There was a late-night meeting. So we've heard. The kind of small-town gossip police hear all the time. But this time it ties everything together."

"Do the police out there have any suspects?" Mum asks. Her voice seems artificially flat.

Barratt coughs. "They do, Mrs Garcia. I'm afraid so. They've already made an arrest. It's going to be another shock for you. I'm very sorry."

We wait. The air is thick with our anxiety.

"There was a woman out there. In this Chetumal place. The professor had been seen visiting with her, you see. This past year. Many times. Plenty of witnesses. Incidents of affection, you understand. In a small town like that, there's always gossip. But where there's smoke. . . Rumours spread, the wrong people get to hear."

Mum's face drains. Her voice cracks. "I see. Was she . . . a married woman?"

"I'm afraid so. Her husband, you see. . ."

And in a tiny voice, Mum says, "I understand."

"I'm sorry, Mrs Garcia."

I blurt, "Well, I *don't* understand. Can someone explain?"

Barratt turns sympathetic, watery eyes on me.

"The woman's husband. The jealous type. And a qualified pilot. No alibi. Motive. Opportunity. Far as they're concerned in Mexico, they've got their man."

"So we're supposed to just believe this – village gossip?"

“I’m sorry, lad. These things happen.”

And I shout, “Not to my dad!”

Mum pulls me close. Her cheeks are already wet with hot, silent tears. I bite my lip. It’s not easy to stay calm.

BLOG ENTRY: FOUR MISSING DAYS AND A MURDER

So, it's official. My dad is dead. Not only dead, but murdered.

I thought it was bad before. But after today I'm just sort of tired. There's a weird kind of numbness. Like I've reached a limit.

Comment (1) from TopShopPrincess

Josh . . . omigod, I can hardly believe you aren't making this up.

Reply

TopShopPrincess - I couldn't. I'm living it and I can hardly believe it's happening.

Chapter 3

It's a bad night, one of the worst. I can hear Mum crying next door. She'll get up every so often to be sick. She's melting away, losing herself in tiny pieces.

I phone the doctor, but they only put me through to the health information service.

"Call your GP in the morning. If there's no difference tomorrow, she can prescribe something to calm your mother down. This will have been a terrible shock."

Mum doesn't get up until late afternoon. We sit together at the kitchen table. I trace patterns in a pool of spilled cranberry juice. I've lost all sense of the future. What do people do after a thing like this? I have no idea where to start.

Mum begins to shake. She asks for a small glass of brandy. A little later she stops shaking and begins, very softly, to cry. I don't feel like crying any more – just the opposite. I have an urge to run – anywhere. To get far away from this house of bad news.

She gulps down one of the tablets I picked up for her, wipes her face with a tissue and blows her nose. I've never seen her look so bad. Not even the very first day.

Finally I speak up. "Why do you believe it?"

"Because it's my worst fear."

"That Dad dies?"

"That he'd find another woman. Your dad is – was – a very attractive man, Josh. I've always known it. And these excavations, they go on for ever."

I'm quiet for ages. I had no idea. And I can't think what to say. "You never said."

"Of course not."

"Did he know?"

"Of course not, he hated jealousy."

I think about how my parents were together. OK, no one likes to see their parents kiss and stuff. Obviously, it's gross. But I sort of liked that Dad was always really affectionate with Mum. She is shy, reserved. Very British and all that. Not him, though. Always pleased to see her, big hugs and kisses when he came home. My whole life, they'd held hands, watched TV in each other's arms. All that, had it been a lie?

"But how?"

She sighs. "Men . . . are that way, I suppose. DI Barratt said the woman is in her late twenties. Late twenties! You probably think that sounds old. But to a man your father's age. . ."

She leaves that one unfinished, goes back to her brooding. I can sense waves of anger building inside her.

I chip in, "Not Dad, though."

Mum snaps, "Why not? He's just another man, isn't he? I should have been more suspicious. What a fool I've been! *La casa grande y la casa chica!* Not as though I haven't seen plenty of Mexican men behave this way. It's finally happened to me."

"*La casa grande. . .?*"

"The big house and the little house. A nice little euphemism for a married man's family and his mistress's. Haven't you wondered where some of your uncles disappear to when they're in their forties? To their younger women, that's where. But the first wife, if she's in the know, then she's supposed to be quiet, dignified. She's supposed to cover for him! 'Where's your husband?' 'Oh, away on business!'"

I stare at Mum. I can't believe how easily she believes it. She's judging my dad without evidence, as if he were just any macho Latin husband. If she thinks that about him, is she going to start treating me like just another one of "them"?

"No. It's not fair to accept this without hearing Dad's side. I don't believe he'd do it."

She's quiet for a long time. "I wish . . . I'd like to believe that."

"Well, why not?"

She looks at me with a faint glimmer of hope.

"Do you think we could? Just, not believe it?"

I take a deep breath. "*I* don't believe it."

But she can't meet my gaze. She looks down, begins to tremble. "I must be a terrible person," she says, her voice quavering. "Because I think it must be true . . . why else would they arrest someone?"

Why else?

I wonder about that all afternoon.

BLOG ENTRY: THIS IS A LOW

Mum spent today in bed again. It's been over a week. Well, I feel like I'm grinding through it, going to school every day, which takes my mind off stuff for a few hours. But each day I come home to find that Mum hasn't moved. When I came home today, I found her listening to "Waters of March." She and Dad didn't have one tune, but I'd guess that one was probably in their top five. She'd put it on a continuous loop and was lying flat on their bed, staring up at the ceiling.

Since Dad's death, jazz has been banned from our house. Miles Davis, Oscar Peterson, Stan Getz, Tom Jobim and all those guys – that's my dad's music. Me, I'm not a fan, but you get used to it. Mum and me – we have this unwritten rule now. Hearing jazz is just too miserable – for us both.

And yet there she was, wallowing in it.

Well, I said nothing. Just closed the door quietly so that I didn't have to listen.

I'm trying to keep things going here. I even cook sick-person food for Mum. Tomato soup with soft white bread. Chicken broth and buttered crackers.

But still she won't eat. Finding out what really happened to my dad seems to have finished her off.

What the heck am I supposed to do?

Comment (1) from TopShopPrincess

Jeez . . . Josh. You need to get some help, man. I'm out of my depth here. Call the doctor!

Reply

So . . . I did it. Called the GP. Told her that Mum was hardly responding. Just staring. And that was it.

They sent some paramedics round. Said Mum needed some time with specialists. I don't know if Mum even understood what happened. I prepared a bag for her; make-up, toiletries, spare clothes. As she walked through the front door, she got this look in her eye.

It made me crumble. I feel like a traitor.

Comment (2) from TopShopPrincess

Josh – you've done the right thing. You're only thirteen. How can you look after your mum when she's like this? She'll be all right in a bit. You wait and see.

Reply

I know you're just being nice. But I'm the one who feels guilty here. I have to come up with something quickly, something that will get Mum's hopes up again. If only I can get some bit of proof that this affair is a lie. Or come up with another reason why someone might have killed Dad.

Comment (3) from TopShopPrincess

Well – yeah. You could try. But how?

Chapter 4

How am I going to prove that Dad wasn't having an affair with that woman? It's pretty tough to prove a negative.

I think about those four missing days. The way I see things, the police have accounted for just two of them: Dad's plane landing late at night in the town of Chetumal, Mexico on 12 June. And the plane crash on 16 June – the night of the murder.

What about all the days in between? Did the mystery woman hide Dad away somewhere? Where had his plane been? But the police aren't asking those questions. They don't believe a word the woman says. They reckon she'll say anything to keep her husband out of jail. Meanwhile the husband pleads his innocence. "But he would say that," insist the police. They have their man, and that's that.

I figure that something like this doesn't come from nowhere. People meet, they communicate. Emails, phone calls. Maybe even old-fashioned letters.

Until I make some headway, school is off the agenda. At my school they don't chase truants right away. I figure I have at least one day to get something done.

I've been eating supper next door at Jackie's while Mum's in the hospital. Afterwards, I go through Dad's emails on the home computer. There are no suspicious emails from any Mexican-sounding ladies. So either he's innocent or else he's smart enough to set up a secret email account.

I check the history of his Web browser. No record of any other email accounts. So either he's innocent or else he's smart enough to delete his history files.

I go back to the emails and read through the last few he's sent or received. That's when I find something interesting about Dad's plans for those missing days in June.

And it has nothing to do with an affair.

The day before he left Oxford, Dad emailed a Dr Marius Martineau of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in the US. It was the last email he sent.

Dear Dr Martineau,

A manuscript that has come into my possession leads me to believe that there may be some truth in rumours of the existence of a fifth codex of the Maya. The manuscript appears to be a part of a letter from a Mayan citizen of Cancuen to the Ruler of Calakmul. This "Calakmul letter" is dated 653 AD. It speaks quite clearly of a book named the Ix Codex, a book it describes as a kind of Mayan Book of Revelations – about the end of the world in 2012.

I gather you have a rather formidable collection of rare inscriptions taken from stelae in the Rio Bec region. Have you come across any inscriptions from the city of Calakmul that might shed light on such a story?

Perhaps we could meet between 12–20 June? I plan to be in Mexico for several days following a trip to the ruins at Cancuen.

*Regards,
Andres Garcia*

The reply from Martineau came in the same day.

Dear Professor Garcia,

A "fifth" codex, prophecies about the "end of the world" on 22 December 2012. . .? If I listened to every crackpot idea

I heard in this field, I'd be too busy joining a cult to get any work done.

You say the document is dated 653 AD? That sounds suspicious. All surviving codices date from the fifteenth century.

I think you've got a fake on your hands. They can be quite convincing – I've seen the Prague Codex and it might well have fooled me.

I'm pretty busy at the minute. I'm sorry, but I don't really have the time for something that looks this controversial. Maybe someone else can help out with authenticating it?

*Sincerely,
Marius Martineau*

My pulse races as I read the dates in Dad's email: 12–20 June. So he left Cancun exactly as planned. Did he fly somewhere to meet with Martineau after all? Martineau's email seems pretty indifferent – which suggests that they didn't meet. I move on and read the second-to-last email Dad sent – two days before he left Oxford.

Dear Dr Montoyo,

I wonder if you remember meeting me at Palenque Round Table last year? I have recently come across a fragment of a Mayan manuscript. It appears to be part of a letter written to the ruler of Calakmul. This "Calakmul letter" speaks of a Mayan book named the Ix Codex. The letter also mentions two Mayan cities – Chechan Naab and Ek Naab. I've never heard of these cities, nor been able to find any references to them in the literature. That in itself is pretty strange, don't you agree?

I remember that you told me you'd recently been leading a project to translate new inscriptions from

Calakmul. Have you come across cities named Chechan Naab or Ek Naab? Or ever heard of the Ix Codex? If you can offer any help, I'd be more than happy to work together on this project. I'll be in Mexico later this month, 12-20 June. Perhaps we can meet?

*Regards,
Andres Garcia*

When I look through the reply, my heart begins to pound. This is it. There is more to this Ix Codex than meets the eye.

Dr Garcia,

Indeed, I do remember our meeting. I feel I must warn you that you are headed on a dangerous path. The existence of the I Code* is a rumour that has persisted in some disreputable circles for many years. I speak of various dubious practioners of the occult. I never thought to hear about the codex from a renowned archaeologist such as you. Those who have sought it have so far disappeared without a trace.*

Please take note that I do not even include the name in this email. If you value your safety, you will not search for that term on the Web or include it in an email again. Web searches and emails are routinely monitored by organizations whose interest in the I Code* might surprise you.*

I cannot say more except in person. I will find you during your visit to Mexico. It is best if we don't make a firm appointment.

*Regards,
Carlos Montoyo*

Without even thinking, I hit the reply button and type a quick message to Montoyo:

Dear Dr Montoyo,

I am the son of Andres Garcia. Maybe you heard the news that my father died in an airplane crash in June. I read your email to him. Did you and my father actually meet? I have some questions about his research. It would be great if you could help.

*Yours,
Josh Garcia*

My eyes flick back to the top of Montoyo's email; when had it been sent? The reply came through the very morning Dad left. And it *had* been read. Dad went on his trip knowing that this wasn't just an exciting hunt for a valuable piece of Mayan history. He'd stumbled across something else, something that could attract the wrong kind of attention.

But was it the kind of attention that could get you killed? And would the killers take the trouble to frame someone else for the murder?

All I am sure of is this: I've found another possible motive for Dad's murder. Not a jealous husband but a search for a historical treasure. A search that led my father on a one-way trip – deep into the Mayan heart of darkness.

BLOG ENTRY: RAIDERS OF THE LOST CODEX!

I am NOT even joking. Seriously, my dad was involved in some major stuff. I just found evidence (not going to give details) that he found some Mayan inscription that might lead to one of the rarest finds in Mayan archaeology. A long-lost book, or codex, with a Mayan prophecy about the end of the world – in 2012!

Looks like I might have to learn how to decipher Mayan writing.

Comment (1) from TopShopPrincess

OK, now you've got me thinking you're making this up. Are you a big fat liar, Josh?

Reply

What's it going to take to convince you? Want to come down the library with me to do some research?

Comment (2) from TopShopPrincess

Very funny, LOL. I'm sixteen. A bit old for you, Josh, if that's what you're thinking.

Reply

Huhhh? Who said anything about that?

Chapter 5

I get right on to it the very next day. There are clues in Dad's emails. I'm no expert on Mayan history, but Dad's study in our house is chock-full of books. So I swot up on the ancient Mayan civilization.

When I was a little kid, we'd spend long summers in Mexico, usually around the site of one of Dad's excavations. The names have all faded into a blur now. Truth is, I didn't pay much attention to where we were. It was all pretty much the same; ruined temples, jungles, tents and trying to find enough flat land for a game of football with the local village kids.

I didn't pay attention to the archaeology. Which now, I kind of regret.

I've never heard of any of the Mayan cities mentioned in Dad's emails – Cancuen, Calakmul, Ek Naab, Chechan Naab. So, I look them up in Dad's books. Cancuen is in Guatemala – a Central American country next to Mexico. Calakmul is in southern Mexico – Campeche state.

Close to where Dad's plane crashed.

Cancuen and Calakmul were important cities of the Mayan kingdom. Calakmul had this powerful ruler once, a guy called Yuknoom Ch'een. He was on the throne for ages.

But I find nothing about Ek Naab, nor Chechan Naab.

I find an online Mayan dictionary. It's cool – even has a little button you can press to hear the Mayan words spoken. Ek Naab translates as *dark water*. Chechan Naab translates as *knotted snake water*.

I'm playing around on that website when the doorbell goes. It's been quiet lately – for obvious reasons I haven't felt very sociable. Outside the door is

Tyler Marks, a guy I recognize from capoeira – my Brazilian martial arts class.

“We thought you was dead,” he says with a big grin.

“Not me,” I say, deadpan. “My dad.”

That rips away his smile. “God, Josh, I’m really sorry. I didn’t know. You didn’t show up. We wondered if you’d lost interest.”

“Sort of, yeah. I’ve got other stuff to do.”

“Like what?”

“Just . . . stuff.”

“You and me both,” Tyler says. “But you should still practise.”

“Hmmm.”

We share an uncomfortable silence.

“What did your dad die of?”

“Of murder.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.”

We stare at each other, saying nothing. But he doesn’t leave.

“Thing is, Josh, there’s a talent scout coming in from London. Picking guys for a British team to go to Brazil. Mestre Ricardo says they’re looking to pick one person from Oxford.”

“Fine,” I reply. “It can be you.”

Tyler looks disappointed. “They have to see me in action. Against someone of similar standard.”

I get it – he wants me to make him look good. “What do you want?”

Tyler’s brown face cracks into a gleaming white smile. “Just come to class a couple of times over the next few weeks. Then when this scout comes in September, I can put on a show.”

I scratch my head. “I’m out of shape.”

“Come on. Do you good.”

“You’ll owe me.”

“Hey, mate, name your price.”

I sigh. “OK, you win.” I grab my skateboard. “But sooner or later, it’s payback time.”

So, down at the gym, we spar. Capoeira has all these pretty special rituals, so I wear the white *abada* clothes, I join in with the songs, but inside I’m strangely detached. We sing in Portuguese, the old songs of slaves striving to keep body and soul together. We flex our muscles against each other, aiming for graceful mock combat.

Thousands of miles away, a deteriorating corpse awaits a burial. Nearby, an innocent man languishes in prison for a murder he didn’t commit. These thoughts don’t leave me for a minute, even as I retaliate against Tyler’s cartwheel attacks. I’m drawn to those steamy jungle towns with their mysterious-sounding names. Chechan Naab and Ek Naab.

Why are there no references to them in any books? Or on the Web?

Are they lost cities, like the ones in the movies where Indiana Jones found the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy Grail? Was my dad looking for some incredible, ancient relic with the power to change the world?

Well, now even I begin to think I’m cooking up some daft fantasy. But I can’t help it. Dad was involved in something heavy. I’m sure enough of that.

After the capoeira, we hang out together at Tyler’s playing Xbox. Tyler talks non-stop about girls he reckons fancy him. I don’t say much, just listen. I don’t have those kinds of stories to tell; worse luck.

It’s still warm and sunny as I’m walking home. I’m through the gate when I notice something odd.

The curtains are drawn – every last one.

I know I didn’t draw them. I guess that it must have been Jackie. I’m about to go over and ask why she’s been

in our house, when I hear the sound of an upstairs door closing.

The noise comes from inside my house.

I take my key and open the front door. I'm still only slightly puzzled. I step inside and call out, "Hey, Jackie, I'm back."

There's no answer. I stand absolutely still, listening.

And that's the first time it strikes me that something is really wrong.

There's someone upstairs and it isn't Jackie.

I'm looking around for a weapon when a guy in a balaclava comes hurtling down the stairs like a hurricane. He vaults over the banister and lands right next to me, swings out with a punch. My reflexes are better than I'd guessed because without even thinking, I duck. He narrowly misses my head. With all that momentum, he overbalances and stumbles. I'm in a *ginga* stance right away and aim a *pontiera* – a high front kick at his chest. It lands squarely – he's knocked back. I follow it up with a *chapa baixa*, landing a hard kick to his knee. He staggers into the back room. He tries to slam the door closed but I jam my foot in the door. Big mistake. He crushes the door hard against my trapped foot until I scream and pull the foot free. Again he slams the door – this time it snaps shut. I try to shoulder-barge it but it's no use – he's got something up against the handle.

He's only got one way out now – the French windows.

I can feel the adrenaline pumping through me as I rush out of the front door. I'm round the back just in time to see him dashing across the back lawn, loaded with a black rucksack. I throw myself at him in a flying rugby tackle and get him to the ground.

It's the wrong move. I should have stuck to the capoeira. This time he's prepared for me. On the ground, I'm useless. He lands two punches to my face; I

taste blood in my mouth and see stars. While I'm still reeling in a daze, he pushes me off him, starts to get to his feet. I lunge out, grab hold of his balaclava and yank. It pulls off just as he's moving away. In that second I catch a glimpse of him. He's tall, eyes clear green and almond-shaped, high cheekbones, square jaw. There's a faintly astringent smell – aftershave or hair gel.

I could swear, before he heads off, he actually grins at me.

I'm still dabbing at my bloody nose and cheek with Kleenex when Jackie and the police turn up.

They all look at me with an expression that's kind of embarrassed for me. One bad thing happening to you, that's bad luck. More than once and it's almost like it's your own fault.

Inside the house, everywhere I look, objects are strewn; every drawer, every shelf, cupboard has been emptied and the contents tossed around. Jackie takes one look at me. She goes straight to the freezer, takes out a bag of frozen peas and makes me press them to my face.

"Horrible bruising you'll get from that, see if you don't," she says.

One policeman asks me to go to my room, see what is missing. I trudge upstairs in a daze. My room is every bit as bad as the rest of the house. The guy's taken my laptop computer. I'm trying to process what's happened as I slope back downstairs and tell the police.

Mum's laptop is gone too, and the box for Dad's computer, and a fancy digital camera. "They go for stuff they can get rid of quickly at the pub," the policeman tells me. "It'll be kids looking for money to buy drugs."

"It wasn't 'kids'," I say, annoyed. "I gave you his description. He was in his late twenties at least. He knew what he was doing."

The copper gives me a disapproving look. "You shouldn't tackle burglars, son. Not ever. I don't care if

you're a black belt. You should consider pressing charges when we catch the perpetrator."

If they catch him, is what goes through my mind.

Then he leans in close, says, "Your neighbour seems to think this will be too upsetting for your mother to hear about. In her current condition."

He leaves out "in the psychiatric hospital."

I ask, "You think there's a connection?"

"With what?"

"Between my dad's murder and this burglary?"

He looks at me blankly. "I don't see how . . . but if you're worried, I'll ask DI Barratt to take a look at the case."

I nod. "Please."

"It's not a good idea for you to sleep here alone," says the copper. "Not after this. Sometimes they come back for what they might have missed. Or for what they think you'll replace. Best stay away. Just for a bit."

He makes it sound sensible, but there's no hiding the fact that within one month I seem to have lost my dad, my mum and my home. I feel pretty rubbish. When it came down to it, I wasn't up to defending what was mine.

"It's just temporary, Josh," says Jackie, laying a friendly hand on my shoulder. I just nod wordlessly. My eyes sting from tears I badly need to hold back.

I don't believe for a second that it's "kids". I think back to Montoyo's warning to Dad about the Ix Codex. *Those who have sought it have so far disappeared without a trace.*

Yet my dad was murdered, with evidence and everything. Whoever these people are, they're getting sloppy. They're beginning to make mistakes.

Chapter 6

Probably because I'm dazed from the punches and my ice-cold bruise, it isn't until much later, as I'm about to leave for Jackie's, that I think to check Dad's study. Is there anything missing other than the computers? I notice a couple of books on the floor, swept off the shelves. By accident? I kneel down to take a look.

The books are some standard textbooks of Mayan archaeology. I pick them up, replace them on the shelf. There's a gap. I scan the titles of the remaining books.

One is missing.

Even before I really think about it, I know which one it will be. Because only one book really matters.

One of the John Lloyd Stephens books – Volume II of the two-book set: *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*.

There's a whole story behind those books, one I've never heard all the way through. But the story is magical to us – the books that brought Mum and Dad together, the books that Dad read as a young boy fascinated with travel, discovery and adventure. The books that first gave him the archaeology bug; the dream of discovering a lost city of the Maya, just like his hero the American traveller John Lloyd Stephens, the first “white man” to see some of the Mayan ruins as they lay undisturbed for centuries, gobbled up by the jungle.

Well, Volume II is gone. I take a thorough look just in case, but I know, with a sinking feeling in my guts, that the burglar has nicked it. Why? It feels like spite, but I know it can't really be that. Maybe Dad left a note in there? I slump down into his chair, trying to think.

I can't face telling Mum that her book is gone – not on top of everything else. It isn't just a valuable first

edition of *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* – it was her first present from my dad, inscribed with the very first romantic note he'd ever written her.

All I can think of is how I can find some way to replace it. Somehow it has to be possible.

Jackie isn't all that surprised when the first thing I do round at hers is to get straight on to the Internet. I get on to some second-hand book websites and hunt around for any bookshop that has a copy of that book. There are four or five in Oxfordshire, as it turns out. And one even has a first edition.

I almost laugh when I see the address. It's right here in Oxford – a shop in Jericho.

The next day, after school, I take the bus straight there. Tyler calls me on my mobile phone as I'm riding over Magdalen Bridge.

"I got your text about last night. Mate . . . what are you like?"

"Didn't arrange the burglary myself, you know,"

Why does everyone act like it's somehow my fault?

"Yeah, mate, I'm only messing. It's just . . . what's going on with your life, hey?"

"Well . . . there's some stuff I haven't told you about," I tell him.

"Like?"

"Stuff about why my dad was murdered. Stuff to do with his work."

"He's a university lecturer, innit? Who'd kill a teacher?"

"He's an archaeologist," I say, sighing. "And it's . . . oh . . . complicated."

"What you doing now?"

"I'm going to Jericho, actually. Looking for a book. Not far from where you live."

"Can I come with?"

I meet up with Tyler outside the Phoenix Cinema. The bookshop is close by. I go straight to the owner, tell him I'm the one who sent the message through his website. He's put the book aside and fetches it from behind the counter.

It's in good condition, but not mint – not as good as Mum's copy. There's a chance that Mum wouldn't notice if the book was just spine-out on the shelf. I take it to the corner of the shop and inspect it. Tyler peers over my shoulder.

"Any good?"

I tuck a finger into the flyleaf, check the inside. That's when I see this inscription:

*My dearest Arcadio,
Meeting you has been an inspiration. I trust you'll
recognize yourself in this book. Many thanks for
fascinating times at Chechan Naab and Tikal. JLS, 1843.*

JLS?

It couldn't be . . . John Lloyd Stephens himself? And mentioning Chechan Naab – a place that I can't find any mention of in books about Mayan cities? The date sounds right to be Stephens, but I can't tell anything apart from that.

I show the bookshop owner. Did he know about the inscription?

Smugly he replies, "Yes, it's a hoax, obviously."

"Why?"

"Well, John Lloyd Stephens didn't know about Tikal. In fact, he describes its location without realizing what he's written. He describes it in this book as a legendary city of the Maya where the Maya are still living – 'a living city'."

"A place where the Maya were still living? In the nineteenth century?" I ask, puzzled.

"So rumour had it. Course, Tikal was discovered a few years later. Abandoned, like every other Mayan

city. Stephens was propagating a local myth, nothing more.”

“So . . .?”

“Well,” the owner says, a bit condescendingly, “he’d hardly write an inscription about Tikal, a city he didn’t even know existed, now would he?”

“And what about Chechan Naab?”

“Now that’s the other problem,” he says. “There’s no such place.”

The bookshop owner is convinced. Turns out that he’s looked into the whole thing. My guess is that he’d secretly hoped it was signed by Stephens. It would have made the book worth a big chunk of money. But he’s happy to sell it for “only” £200.

“Two hundred pounds?” I say, shocked. “You didn’t put that on the website!”

“I’ll take your best offer in the vicinity,” he says.

My “vicinity” isn’t even close. I give Tyler a nod and we step outside on to the pavement.

“I can’t get two hundred pounds,” I tell him in a low voice. “Not unless . . . unless I nick my mum’s cashcard.”

“Do you know the PIN?”

“I sort of . . . do.”

Tyler shrugs. “It’s for your mum, isn’t it?” he says. “Hardly Grand Theft Auto.”

As we’re standing there, a studenty guy in a hoody pushes past us on his way into the shop. I’m about to say something but Tyler distracts me. He’s right – it’s only a loan. Mum would want the book.

I’m looking over Tyler’s shoulder when I notice the hoody guy getting all chatty with the owner. Soon enough they’re standing at the cash desk, then a book and money are changing hands.

The owner keeps looking over at me. With a funny look in his eyes, sort of embarrassed.

The hoody guy didn’t have much time to find a book. A horrible thought strikes me. I take a harder

look at the student, realize that there's something familiar about him. I didn't see his eyes, only his mouth and jaw.

It's when he comes out of the shop, walks towards us, that I catch a proper look. He's trying to avoid my gaze. I look at the paper bag in his hand.

And that's when I remember where I've seen him before. Those green eyes – unmistakable.

"Get him!" I shout to Tyler, as the guy breaks into a sprint behind us.

"Wha. . .?"

I'm already turning and pelting after the bloke. "He's the burglar," I yell. "And he's just bought the book!"

I get a flying start but Tyler catches up with me in a few seconds.

The burglar is fast. He's up the street and past the cinema by the time we're even really moving. Before the corner shop he turns left. We're there two seconds later and make the same turn, heading through a gateway and under a brick archway into St Sepulchre's Cemetery. The burglar dashes past the yew trees, vaults a couple of broken gravestones and we do the same.

The whole cemetery is surrounded by a massive building site. There are plasterboard facings all the way around. He runs the whole length, trying to find a way through.

We're almost on him when he finds a gap and dives through.

Tyler squeezes through first, then me. On the other side, we're just in time to see the burglar scooting up the road into the backstreets of Jericho.

We chase him, chests all puffed out, follow him into a little square where there's a bridge over the canal. He's on the bridge, giving us one final look at he crosses.

We're on the bridge less than two seconds later. But he's already nowhere to be seen.

On the opposite bank is another stream of the canal. It's parked with houseboats, bumper to bumper. There are a couple of guys fishing. They ignore us.

I stop, bend down, trying to grab my breath. Between gasps, I manage to ask, "Did you see a bloke in a hoody? Carrying a paper bag?"

The fishermen look at me in silence. One of them shakes his head.

"Nah."

"You must have!"

"Din't see nuthin'."

Tyler and I exchange a grimace. Our stares fall on the long row of brightly painted houseboats. The guy who robbed my house and swiped that first edition of John Lloyd Stephens, he's in one of them. I know it. But which?

I grab a handful of long grass in my fist, tear it off and scatter the shreds in frustration. Tyler watches in sympathy. The one thing I tried to do to help, and I couldn't even pull that off.

How can there be any doubt now? That burglar was looking for clues about the Ix Codex.

Whoever these codex hunters are, they have long arms. I might be thousands of miles away from Mexico, but suddenly I don't feel safe.

BLOG ENTRY: LEAF STORM

Well, the police are no help. I told them all about the burglar being in one of the Jericho houseboats. They just told me they'll "add it to their list of potential locations." I don't get it. OK, burglary isn't a big deal when they've taken nothing massively valuable – but burglary after a murder? But no. No connection, that's what they believe.

Jackie's a nice lady. She takes good care of me. But she hasn't got broadband Internet access. It was one thing to find a second-hand book, but for the full-on Mayan investigation, I really need that. So I've ended up at the library after all. Ha ha, TopShopPrincess. You can come by if you fancy. Or not. Whatever.

Mum asked me to come and spend the night in her hospital room, which has a little extra bed. I was a bit nervous but it seems pretty cool. The doctors don't wear white coats. You can't tell who's sick and who isn't.

I didn't tell her about the burglary, of course. I didn't tell her that I tried – and failed – to replace one of the few possessions she might really care about.

There was a full moon. Its light filled the room with a soft glow. I woke up to find Mum awake, standing by the window.

I said, "Please, Mum, please get better. What am I supposed to do if you fall apart?"

She only shook her head. “You don’t know how this feels, Josh. I hope you never do. It’s all gone for me – vanished, like mist.”

“They’re wrong about Dad,” I told her. I wanted to tell her about the emails I’ve found, but I couldn’t – not until there’s a bit more to go on. “I’m going to prove it. You wait and see.”

I didn’t know what else to say, so I turned on to my stomach and slept. I’ve noticed that my dreams are more vivid when I sleep on my front. But last night’s dream was really weird – one of those where you could actually believe you’re there.

In the dream, I’m dizzy, floundering, caught in the middle of a leaf storm. The leaves surround and enclose me. I close my eyes. In the heart of that storm, I’m suddenly calm. When I open my eyes again, the leaves are gone. I’m standing in a small room with a thatched roof. There are candles everywhere, and the smell of autumn smoke mixed with something acrid, like linseed oil. My eyes sting a little and I blink hard. The room is filled with smoke. There’s a man lying on the straw-covered floor. I don’t recognize him – in fact, I have no clue who he could be. He’s oldish – late forties, maybe, grey hair. And he’s coughing, choking, shaking. His eyes almost pop out of his head. He turns purple. This guy is in bad shape, no doubt about it. I don’t move, though; I don’t help. I just look on and I feel nothing, not a shred of pity. It feels like the incense is making me dizzy. Looks like the guy on the floor is breathing his last. In fact – I’m sure of it. I don’t take a closer look, but I light a candle I’m holding. I hear myself mumble a string of

strange words. I could swear he's done for. But then, without warning, his eyes snap open. And he looks me dead in the eye and says something that sounds like "Summon the Bakabix."

The rest of the dream was just flashes; a small statue of a Buddha-like figure, water lapping around a decrepit old boat, a pier with two matching straw huts, a mist hanging low over water.

Ideas, anyone?

Comment (1) from TopShopPrincess

Well, I could try out some of my A-level psychology.

Maybe the dying man symbolizes a father figure. He's choking – didn't you say your dad was strangled? Could you be imagining your dad's death? What about the "Eastern" references – incense, a Buddha-like statue, the straw huts on water?

Reply

I hadn't thought that those symbols could be "Eastern." I've never been to the Far East, though. As for the rest of it, I don't know. Guess you could be right.

Comment (2) from TopShopPrincess

If a person who's actually died appears in one of your dreams, it can be a way of telling you to move on with your life. I think your mum really needs you now, Josh. Concentrate on supporting her. Time to stop thinking about your dad. Hasn't he already hurt you both enough?

Chapter 7

When I see TopShopPrincess's comment the next day, I'm so mad that I type a quick, angry reply. I call her all the names under the sun. Who is she to judge my dad? If I don't know what to believe, then how dare she assume?

But in the end, what's the point? She's just some stranger. What do I know about her, really? She's taking a psychology A level, she lives in Oxford and as far as UFOs go, she's a believer. She could be a wacko, for all I know. Far as I'm concerned, you give friends a second chance, but someone who'd write a thoughtless comment like that?

It's up to me how I deal with the death of my dad, and the problems with my mum. I don't like TopShopPrincess's tone. Typical, patronizing older girl. What's she doing reading my blog anyway?

But there's another, much scarier idea that's occurred to me – a reason why I need to close down that blog.

Since the burglary, I've been worried about the fact that whoever took the computers may have read the emails between my dad and Montoyo and that other guy, whose name I can't remember, from the Peabody Museum.

Of course, that's not all they could have read. If they tracked back in my browser history, they might see the Web address of my blog. And then they'll know . . . way too much!

So I move the blog to another server, put a password on it. Now it will be for My Eyes Only. And I delete the old blog.

Adios, TopShopPrincess. You can keep your comments to yourself.

But at least she was someone to talk to about this. I don't want to carry it all alone, and no way am I telling anyone at school.

So I decide to tell Mum about the emails.

It won't be easy to get through to Mum while she's all vague from those tablets, but I have to try. I take the bus to the hospital. As I pass the trees on Headington Hill, I'm jolted by the ferocious lime-green quality of their colour – practically fluorescent.

Come on, Mum, get better fast. You're missing the best part of summer.

In Mum's room, I take her hand in mine.

"I found something out," I begin.

Mum groans, rubs her forehead. "It's always something with you. Can't you just comfort me? God knows I tried it with you."

"Dad wasn't killed by a jealous husband," I tell her. I watch for her reaction. There's definitely interest. "He was looking for a valuable Mayan codex. Something to do with the Mayan prophecy about the end of the world in 2012. This Carlos Montoyo guy sent him a warning by email. He told Dad not to even mention the name of the codex in an email! But Dad did email at least one other guy. And we don't know who else he talked to. I think he's been killed for that codex. I reckon that 'jealous husband' has been framed."

I'm not sure how much Mum hears after my first sentence. She's quiet for a few seconds, mulling it over.

"I'm sorry, Josh. What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that he was in some kind of danger."

Mum looks confused. "What's this got to do with . . . anything?"

"Well, maybe he wasn't killed by that woman's husband."

"Not killed by the husband?" she echoes.

I sigh. I'm not really getting through.

"Look, Mum – don't you think it's all a bit convenient that this has been wrapped up so quickly?"

"Another one of your conspiracy theories?" she says with a thin smile.

"Dad's been murdered," I continue, "so now they need a suspect. And quick, or else . . . I dunno, maybe the British police are going to come over and look into things as well. So they listen to some rumours, some local gossip, and throw together a case against a local guy. Slam him into jail, charge him. Open and shut, everybody's happy."

"Not happy."

"Well, no."

"Perhaps you're right, Josh," is all she says. It isn't clear that she understands what I'm getting at.

"Thing is, Mum, there's something we can do. We can find out. Who this woman is. We can go and meet her."

"You're talking about going to Mexico?" she says in a dull voice. "I'm not well enough."

I squeeze her hand. "Maybe not now. But you could be. In a week or two? The summer holiday begins next week. We'll talk to this woman in Chetumal. Then we'll see. How about it, Mum?"

Mum hesitates. "Will we ask the doctor?"

I allow myself a little grin. This is progress.

"Yeah, why not? Something to look forward to. We'll see what's going on with this woman. And if we have to, we'll give her what for."

"I suppose . . . I suppose we could. And the funeral," she says hopefully. "We could have a funeral for your father."

So, we begin to plan it. It's just a matter of time before I'll be showing the Mexican police why they have arrested the wrong guy.

I feel a massive surge of excitement. This is it – I've cracked it. We'll get to Mexico, meet this woman, find out that she's just some friend of Dad's, or someone who's helping him with some Mayan archaeology thing. I'll show DI Barratt the printouts of Dad's emails and he'll convince the Mexican police that they've arrested the wrong guy.

It's amazing what you can do with a bit of snooping around on a computer. When all this is over, Mum will get back to slowly getting over Dad's death.

And she'll do it, too. I'll help her. We'll get through this.

But at the back of my mind, I can't stop thinking about the burglary. They've got our computers. They know everything I know, up until now.

Who are "they"? If they killed Dad for whatever he found, why are they still snooping around here?

BLOG ENTRY: A FIFTH CODEX OF THE MAYA

So – the first entry of my Really Secret Blog to track my detective work around finding who really killed my dad and why.

I'm blogging from a computer in the Summertown Library. When I'm finished, I'll delete the blog address from the browser history. And anyway, you need a password to access the blog now.

Why would a lost ancient Mayan book cause such a rumpus? I couldn't really imagine why until I realized how rare they are.

Rare archaeological artefacts are Big Money. According to the stories I found on the Internet, all sorts of dodgy characters are involved in the trade. Rich South American drug lords can't get enough of the stuff. And their favourite flavour in antiquities is Mayan.

But an as-yet-undiscovered Mayan codex? It doesn't get any better.

The Maya made their books – codices – out of folded bark paper, painted hieroglyphics with bright colours. They should have been an incredible record of an ancient civilization.

Problem was, only four books survived.

Once there were hundreds of Mayan books. Most of them were about astronomy and mathematics. In 1652, after the Spanish had conquered Mexico,

a Spanish bishop named Diego de Landa had all Mayan books rounded up and burned in a Mexican town called Mani. De Landa was apparently shocked by their “blasphemous” content. The Mayans who watched it happen were devastated.

Well, the Church called de Landa back to Spain and punished him for what he did. But it was too late for the Mayans.

And yet . . . four codices did survive. They’d been nicked from Mayan cities by Spanish soldiers, the conquistadors. Three codices turned up hundreds of years later, in the houses of these soldiers’ descendants. A fourth was found hidden in a cave somewhere in Mexico.

There are only four, all owned by museums. No private collector owns one. A fifth codex would be the major archaeological find in the Mayan field – and the prestigious treasure for one of these collectors.

Could my dad have had some rich, powerful South American gangster after him for the codex? Did they kill Dad only to find that the secret of its location died along with him?

Chapter 8

I stop writing my new blog and start to think.

In movies, these drug lords always have the local police forces pretty much under their thumb. These are the kind of guys who can kill a man and frame some local guy; probably someone who'd got on the wrong side of them once too often.

But then again, Carlos Montoyo wrote to Dad, *Web searches and emails are routinely monitored by organizations whose interest in the I* Code* might surprise you.*

He didn't even dare write out the phrase "Ix Codex", for fear it would be picked up by snooping programs on the Internet.

Dad couldn't have been too surprised to hear that drug lords were interested in a Mayan relic. It was part of his ordinary life – he'd often told me that he'd been offered bribes to pass Mayan artefacts on to these people.

Also – how the heck are cocaine barons going to have the kind of technology to snoop on emails? That kind of thing has to be done by the government, and the military, surely?

Is that the kind of organization that Carlos Montoyo means?

I rack my brain trying to remember the exact contents of those emails of Dad's. Apart from the Ix Codex, the main thing I remember is that Dad mentioned a Mayan manuscript he had, which he called the "Calakmul letter."

He never mentioned it to us, so far as I know. It must have been a big, big deal to him. He usually talks about this sort of thing to Mum, sometimes even to me.

I'd never heard so much as a whisper about it in our house. Why not?

That night, I can't sleep. I'm still vexed about the burglary. OK, so by now I have to assume they've read my old blog, and all the emails. They searched the house. Unless they were much luckier than I was, they'll be out of ideas round about now. Where would they go next?

I have to find that Mayan manuscript – if it's still in Oxford. And there's only one place left to search.

I drop by Dad's Oxford college. The porters there know me. They let me by with a respectful little nod, just enough for me to know they're still in mourning for Dad. I've been dragged along to enough college events to know that Dad was a popular guy here. As I make my way around the immaculate edges of the central lawn in the main quadrangle, I almost bump into one of Dad's colleagues, Dr Naomi Turnbull – she's always sweet to me. I tell her that I've come to start clearing out Dad's office.

“Oh,” she says, with a sympathetic frown. “So your mum doesn't have to? You're a good lad, Josh.”

Like everyone else, Naomi wants the latest update. Dad's death is making me feel like a news reporter.

“Yeah, he's definitely dead . . . turns out he was murdered . . . nope, they don't know yet who did it, they're working on some leads. . .”

I hate myself for censoring the rest. But not everyone is going to have my faith in Dad. For Mum, this is the worst thing of all. She's gone from the sympathetic widow to the wronged wife. Not an ideal move.

Naomi seems to be in a hurry anyway. “I have to be going, Josh,” she says, “We had some trouble here this morning and I need to talk to the police.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Oh, just some stupid break-in. Or attempted break-in, actually, in the staircase where your father had his office. They tripped the alarm and ran off. Pretty daft place to try and burgle, though, don’t you think?”

I freeze, and try to look casual. “Yeah. Weird.”

Naomi gives me a sympathetic squeeze before she leaves. I hurry to Dad’s office. Inside, a wave of sadness hits me. It’s so strong that I have to sit down for a few minutes. Tears form at the corner of my eyes. I can hardly look around the room without sensing Dad’s presence. His books, his papers on his desk. My photo, taken when I was eight years old, grinning, all gap-toothed. Eventually I get a grip, start hunting for a hiding place. Where would he stash a secret Mayan manuscript?

I gaze around the room, taking in all the objects. And suddenly it’s obvious. My eyes land on a framed illustration of a Mayan ruin by Frederick Catherwood.

My dad loved Catherwood’s illustrations. He used to say that Catherwood’s drawings of some of the Mayan inscriptions were the best work anyone ever did. As good as photographs.

I lift the frame off its hook. There’s nothing behind it on the wall. I run my fingers over the back of the picture. There’s the slightest bulge in the middle.

I use my fingernails to scratch the brown paper that seals the back of the picture. A layer comes away in my hand. And underneath, something’s hidden.

It’s wrapped in several layers of tissue paper, folded, about the size of a piece of letter paper. I unwrap it carefully. A piece of very old-looking bark paper. I’ve seen this kind of paper before – in museums. It’s the kind the Mayans used in their books. Three edges of the bark paper are smooth but the right-hand edge looks rough, as though it has been torn across the middle, vertically. The paper is coated in a white chalky substance and covered with fading Mayan hieroglyphs.

Whatever it is, it's incomplete. The section of writing to the right of the tear is missing.

Is this the Calakmul letter? As I wrap it back into the tissue paper, I notice that the final layer is covered with some writing. In ballpoint pen, just these words.

*Josh, Eleanor, if I don't make it back from Mexico, BURN THIS. I'm serious. Don't make a copy. Destroy it.
Love you both, Andres.*

It's the lamest farewell note I can imagine. What about saying his goodbyes, telling us how much he loved us and all that? If it's so dangerous, why didn't Dad destroy the letter himself? Or was his note just an insurance policy – against a danger he never really believed he would face?

Is that all we were to him – just someone to burn evidence for him and leave it at that?

I decide not to tell Mum about the Calakmul letter – if it really is that. Dad's note doesn't paint the most encouraging picture of a devoted husband. Even I have to admit that.

And there's another reason. Mum might try to talk me into following Dad's instructions, burning the manuscript. But there's no way. There's just too much at stake.

I peel off the rest of the false back of the Catherwood picture. That's when I see that something else is hidden there.

It's so shocking that I simply stare at it for a long time. A small, square black-and-white photograph, printed on Kodak paper with the processing date – August 1964. The image? I recognize him immediately – it's the man from my dream. The man who with his dying breath whispers: "Summon the Bakabix."

Chapter 9

I start boxing up papers, making good on my promise to start clearing Dad's college office. I can't resist taking one of the photos, too; there's a great one of Dad on top of Mont Blanc. I grab the *Dictionary of Mayan Hieroglyphs* and books on how to read the glyphs. I drop by my house with the two boxes of papers, journals and books that I've cleared out. The back windows are boarded up now, until someone comes to replace the glass. I take a few of the books, go back to Summertown Library and start deciphering the inscription on the Mayan manuscript.

I begin by cross-referencing the place-names mentioned in Dad's emails with any glyph I can easily make out on the Mayan inscription. Some place-names I've heard of, probably even been to at some point. The way it works is this: if they know the original Mayan name for a ruin, they use it. Like Uxmal, Chichen Itza, Calakmul. But sometimes the Mayan name has been forgotten. Like with Palenque – a ruin named for the Spanish-built town nearby.

With a list of known place-names in one hand, I recognize glyphs for Calakmul and Cancuen in the inscription. The symbols for *che* (knot), *chan* (snake) and *naab* (water) are easy to find too, clumped together to make one glyph. I've already researched the cities on the Web, but I haven't found anything about Chechan Naab. That is pretty unusual in itself. Most Mayan cities have been written about somewhere.

Could Chechan Naab be a lost city of the Maya? As for the other city mentioned in Dad's emails – Ek Naab – there's no sign of those glyphs on the inscription.

That's the easy part of the decipherment. As I stare at those columns of glyphs, it strikes me that I don't

have the faintest clue how to read them. Left to right? Top to bottom? I don't even know where to begin. So I put the Calakmul letter safely out of view, tucked away in a paperback copy of *The Subtle Knife*. And I settle down to read a book called *How to Read Mayan Hieroglyphs*.

As I work, I can't help noticing out of the corner of my eye that a girl sitting diagonally opposite keeps glancing in my direction. For a while I'm not sure if she intends to look at me at all – there's probably some cute college student directly behind me. I lift my book to shield my face, then sneak a long look at the girl over the pages.

She's gorgeous.

She's wearing a blue and white cotton dress. Butter-blond hair ripples across her shoulders. I swing around, survey the room behind me. There are plenty of students around, but they're all trolls. Certainly no one worthy of the Total Goddess sitting opposite. When I turn back around, she's staring openly at me, with this sort of bemused grin.

I redden, but manage to mouth, "Who, me?" in what I hope is a comic fashion. She nods. I push my chair back, walk over as slowly as possible, trying desperately to think of something cool to say.

In the end I go with, "Hey, stranger."

The girl grins. "Hey yourself . . . Josh."

I blanch.

"The boy with the blog," she continues. "You know who I am?"

It seems too incredible. But could it really be. . . ?

"TopShopPrincess. . . ?"

"Olivia," she says. "Olivia Dotrice. You can call me Ollie – everyone does."

"But you are TopShopPrincess?"

"Of course. How else would I know where to find you?"

"Um. About that . . . I thought we were both having a laugh."

"Well, yeah, until you went and deleted your blog. . . So, you can guess why I'm here?"

I stick my hands deep into my pockets. "Err . . . nope. I really can't."

She frowns. "I wanted to apologize, Josh. When I saw that you'd deleted your blog, I guessed that my comment upset you. I'm really sorry. I didn't mean for that to happen."

I shrug. "It's OK."

"Were you upset?"

"I was annoyed, yeah. You didn't even know my dad."

"I know. It was stupid, thoughtless. I guess I felt for your mum. I just thought that's where your priorities should be. But it was a hasty judgement. Also. . ." She stops, glances around, lowers her voice. "I was getting worried about how much you were giving away on that blog. Didn't you think that the people who burgled your house might know about your blog? You even wrote about where you were. You should be more careful!"

"Actually, yeah. That's why I deleted it. Not cos you upset me or anything."

"Well, that's a relief," she says, smiling.

We're getting major shushing from the librarian, so we step outside into the garden and find a bench near one of the many sculptures dotted around. It's a fabulous summery day, sizzling hot. The garden is practically empty.

"I've been thinking about your mystery," begins Ollie. "Hope you don't mind. I don't mean to be nosy, but you've got me intrigued now, with the whole UFO thing and all. You really think it's a coincidence that your dad was murdered round the same time that a massive UFO sighting happens?"

I haven't dared to go on about it, what with Mum in the state she's in. Ollie's right, though – I never thought it was a coincidence. I just haven't any idea how UFOs tie in with drug barons in search of a lost relic.

Ollie continues. "Seeing that UFO really changed me. Something like that, it makes you question everything you ever read, ever heard."

"Like what?"

"Well, like the links between the Maya and UFOs, for one thing."

If I'm honest, growing up, the part of archaeology that did excite me was the whole connection between UFOs and ancient history. That stuff is amazing. But of course, the subject was practically banned in our house. Dad worked hard to keep me from being interested in the more bizarro theories about the Maya that you find on the Internet.

"What, the whole ancient-Mayans-came-from-the-lost-city-of-Atlantis thing? Ancient astronauts and all that? My dad always laughed at that."

"I'll bet he wasn't laughing when he was abducted."

"If he was abducted."

"You don't think there's a connection?"

I sigh.

Ollie presses her point. "Wouldn't you like to be the one to find proof that UFOs have something to do with the Mayan civilization? It's like – one of the major secrets of history!"

"Well . . . my dad was pretty down on all that new-age stuff. Plus, things have moved on a bit since you last read my blog. I know now why my dad was killed."

"I think I do too."

We stare at each other for a few seconds.

"What did you say?"

"Think about it," she whispers, tugging at my arm.

"What if your dad found some link between the ancient Maya and UFOs? I mean, real evidence? What if the

codex actually proves that the Mayans had contact with extraterrestials? Wouldn't that be worth something?"

I'm confused. "Who to?"

"Well, lots of people. Art collectors. Those new-age religion gurus, they'd love that."

"Yeah . . . but they're hardly going to kill anyone. . ."

"The CIA."

"What now?"

"The CIA," she repeats, "NASA, 'Majestic', or whatever their latest name is. The government agency that does all the UFO cover-ups. The Area 51 people. You know what, Josh, I think you haven't been thinking big enough. This could be really, really huge!"

I thought I was getting paranoid, thinking about government conspiracies. But it's beginning to make sense. There's a long history of UFO sightings in Mexico. Mum, of course, goes along with the old chestnut, "Mexican people are a fanciful bunch." And hadn't Montoyo written to Dad, *Web searches and emails are routinely monitored by organizations whose interest in the I* Code* might surprise you?*

The CIA!

"They could track emails," I say, almost to myself.

"They could."

"Maybe they read my email to Montoyo?"

"Who's Montoyo?"

I look at Ollie for a few seconds, wondering. She's looking at me, her expression eager. Should I tell her? I can feel it all bubbling up inside me. It feels so good to actually talk to someone about this. Now that I've started, I don't want to stop.

So, I fill Ollie in on the emails I've found between my dad, Carlos Montoyo and that Peabody Museum guy, Martineau. I tell her all about the hunt for the Ix Codex and finish off with my discovery of the Calakmul letter in Dad's college room. I carry it with me at all times

now, still wrapped in its tissue paper. When she sees the manuscript fragment, her eyes widen; she's impressed.

"That is so wicked."

"I know."

"But it's torn." Suddenly she looks disappointed.

"Yeah. The right-hand side of the message is missing. But Mayan writing goes up and down, in columns. So I'll be able to decipher the first part of the letter at least."

"Where do you think the rest is?"

I frown. "I don't know . . . I sort of assumed that this is all that Dad found."

"Hmm," she says thoughtfully. "Do you think it is part of the Ix Codex?"

Dad's emails to Montoyo and Martineau don't suggest that. But then, I wouldn't know what a real Mayan codex looked like.

"Not sure," I tell her. "Maybe it's about the codex. Where to find it, perhaps."

She asks, "What's Montoyo's story?"

"He seemed to know all about this Ix Codex," I say. "Told Dad that people had disappeared looking for it. Funny really, because I've read lots of stuff about Mayan archaeology since this thing started. And I've never heard a single mention of the Ix Codex."

"That is weird. So how did Montoyo hear about it?"

I pause, thinking. "No idea. And he asked to meet my dad. I emailed Montoyo to ask if he ever actually did."

"What did he say?"

"Never replied."

"Did it ever occur to you that he might be the one who really killed your father?"

"Of course," I lie. OK, maybe I'd had a background-level suspicion. Ollie's questioning is crystallizing all sorts of ideas I'd put out to dry.

She warms to her theory. "He knew your dad was on to the codex. So he pretends to help him. Then he meets up with your dad, gets rid of him."

"And this guy they've framed for murdering my dad?"

"That is a bit more tricky," she agrees eventually. "The CIA could frame a person for murder. And they could have your house burgled."

"So you really think it's the CIA, then?"

"I don't know, Josh. I'm just trying out some theories here. Isn't that what detectives do?"

I haven't thought of it that way. The main thing, for me, is to prove to Mum that Dad wasn't murdered for messing around with another woman. And to prove it to myself.

The codex thing has me intrigued, definitely. My father was looking for it. Now I seem to be picking up on the trail. There's a connection with his disappearance – I just know it. And something else, something weird I can't quite put my finger on. It feels pretty thrilling to be following in my father's footsteps. Thrilling – and a little dangerous.

"You know what you have to do?" says Ollie.

"Decipher that inscription. Maybe even find the codex. I could help you. You up for that? We'll be like Mulder and Scully."

I grin. "If you're Scully and I'm Mulder, then shouldn't *you* be the sceptical one?"

"What's the difference? In the end they were both believers."

Ollie's theories spark one of my own. Maybe the woman in Chetumal has something to do with Dad's search for the codex? It would explain why Dad had spent so much time with her. She might know something about the codex. Maybe framing her husband was their way of keeping her quiet?

No two ways about it; we have to talk to Chetumal Lady.

I ask, "Are you a university student?"

Ollie laughs. "Not yet! I'm in the lower sixth at St Margaret's."

I know the school. Some of those girls have modelling contracts. It isn't, after all, so surprising that Ollie seems so glamorous. I'm used to a more everyday type of girl.

"So you really think we should try to find this codex, hey? Assuming it's still out there."

Ollie's smile is a thing to behold. "It'd be amazing."

"Seriously, though. It sounds dangerous."

"Aren't you even a bit curious?"

"Me? Sure, but I've been warned off."

"Don't you want to get back at the people who killed your dad?"

"By finding the codex?"

"Yes," she says. "By beating them at their own game."

Ollie's blue eyes shine with excitement.

I don't know how much of what Ollie has said I actually believe, but her offer is tempting. All I know is that if this codex is still out there, other people will want it. And the codex will buy all sorts of things. Including the answer to the question, *Who killed my dad?*

If I had the codex, they'd have to negotiate with me.

"Well, to be honest," I say, "I could use the help."

That's how we team up. All because of Ollie's powers of deduction.

I've never met anyone like her. She. Is. Amazing.

BLOG ENTRY: DECIPHERMENT!

There are a couple of reasons for today's blog entry. It's a secret record that I daren't leave on paper, or on the hard drive of any computer I'm known to access.

But no one knows about the blog. I haven't even told TopShopPrincess/Ollie that I've started the blog again. I'm kind of embarrassed about what I might write about her.

Jeeez. Ollie! What a turnaround. I stopped being angry with her about ten seconds after she apologized. Thing is, I'd always kind of thought of her as a slightly weird, kooky type of girl. She's anything but that. She looks like a goddess, with the brain of an uber-geek.

Ollie and I couldn't work together at Summertown Library – we were getting too many beady looks and warnings to be quiet. Tyler, an old mate from capoeira, owed me a favour. I turned up on his doorstep with Ollie and told him, "Debt collection time. I need you to let me use your computer for the rest of the night."

I needn't have said anything. With Ollie in tow, he'd have given his living room over to us, even if there was a big match on TV. When he offered to help out with the decipherment, we accepted. I figured there was safety in numbers: the more of us who knew, the harder it would be for Them to silence us.

Them. Now I'm really talking like a conspiracy buff.

We cracked open the drinks and the Pringles, put Batman Begins on the DVD as a decoy for Tyler's parents. Then we started on the inscription.

I quickly showed the other two what I knew about reading Mayan hieroglyphs. Mayan inscriptions were written in a grid format. According to the how-to book, the first glyphs give the date of the document. Then the writing proceeded in a two-column grid that could be labelled in reading order: A2, B2, A3, B3, A4, B4, etc. until the end of the page. Then it continued in the next two columns: C2, D2, C3, D3, etc.

We started with the easiest bit – the date. Mayan documents always start with the date. My dad taught me to read Mayan dates years ago, to stop me from whining with boredom. I still remember how, but I can't do it without a dictionary.

In Mayan, the date was 9.11.0.4.8 16 Pax 9 Lamat.

In English, that translates to 8 Jan 653 AD.

This letter was written in the seventh century!

Then we got started on the main part of the letter. We each took one glyph apart at a time. First we'd look up the whole glyph in case we got lucky. Sometimes a whole glyph can mean something – like the name of a place.

When we'd solved as many of those as possible, our eyes were getting blurry from looking at all the different glyphs. We took a little break.

By then we knew the inscription included the words Cancuen, Yuknoom Ch'een, Calakmul,

Bakab, Itzamna, servant, sacred, book, Ix, and “it will occur.”

Then came the really tough part. We crunched through the rest of the glyphs syllable by syllable. When we thought we had a possible solution, we’d search for the word on the Web, find out all we could about it. That’s how we made sense of the translation.

Six hours later we were still at it. We ordered pizza, kept going. It was like each one of us was daring the others to be the ones to wimp out. I kept asking, “Shall we stop now, go to bed?” but they’d go, “No way, we’re almost there!”

And as the dawn light filtered through the blinds, we had the whole thing deciphered.

*K'inich K'ane Ajk of Cancuen writes to Lord
Yuknoom Ch'een of*

Calakmul

I am your servant

*From Chechan Naab he emerged, from the Great
Temple of the Cross*

The Bakab was defeated

This sacred Book of Ix speaks of the end of days

13.0.0.0.0 it is written in the Sacred Books of Itzamna

It will occur

Chapter 10

I stare at the inscription for a few seconds and let out a slow, “Wow.”

Tyler says, “What does it mean – ‘end of days’? Is that like. . .?”

“... the end of the world?” I say. “Yeah. My dad told me about all that years ago. The Mayan calendar ends on the date 13.0.0.0.0 – Thirteen Baktun.”

Tyler stares, expectant. “Um . . . when’s that, then? In our calendar, I mean.”

I try to sound calm. “Well . . . it’s pretty soon, actually.”

“When?”

“The twenty-second of December, 2012.”

Tyler’s mouth opens, as if he’s trying to think of something funny to say. But nothing comes out.

“People have been trying to work out what that date – Thirteen Baktun – means for *ages*. No one knows.”

Tyler stabs a finger at our translation. “This ‘Book of Ix’ seems to know!”

“Book of Ix – that must mean the Ix Codex,” Ollie says thoughtfully.

“I can’t see any mention of Ek Naab here. . .” I mutter.

“Can we talk about this end of the world thing a bit more?” Tyler says, voice rising.

“It’s not *literal*,” I say. “Not *literally* the end of the world. More like the end of an era. That’s what my dad told me.”

“Good thing you’re so sure about that!” Tyler says. “I’ve never heard of it until now, but it seems pretty worrying to me! I mean – I’ve got plans, you know!”

I say, "This is about a rare Mayan book – some book that maybe finally explains just what the Mayans meant by ending their calendar in 2012."

"Yeah," Tyler says, emphatically. "And what if it really is about the end of the world?"

Could it really be? The idea is so far from what I've been brought up to believe about the Maya that I can hardly take it in.

I can't answer Tyler's question, so I look again at the Calakmul letter.

The manuscript consists of two sets of two columns. The final sentence is incomplete.

Not only are we missing part of the letter, we can't make sense of the final sentence. The final glyph is a verb, the beginning of a sentence: *utom* – "it will occur."

Everything to the right of that is ripped away. Without the second half, we can't even make sense of the first. Without it, we've no hope of picking up the trail of the codex. And without that second half, my dad wouldn't either. So if he thought he'd found the codex – he must have hidden the second half of the Calakmul letter somewhere else. But where?

"There's that word again," Ollie says. "Bakab. Wasn't that in your dream? The one you blogged?"

"I dreamt *Bakabix*."

"That's right," says Tyler. "*Bakab, Ix*. They're both in this inscription."

The possibility that my dream might have some connection with the inscription hits me like a kick to the stomach. It's all too weird. For a second, I imagine myself back in the leaf storm of my dream. There's a flash of memory; a curtain of fragrant smoke behind which a stranger chokes to death.

I suddenly need to be alone, to think. I manage to say, "I really need to get back now."

I drag myself back to Jackie's just as the paper-round kids are hitting the street. The dream is still with

me. It isn't so much what I actually witnessed in the dream but the feeling of utter foreignness. Nothing about it felt familiar.

The dream of the misty lakeside straw hut with its cold, unmoving death scene – like nothing I've ever seen. It feels otherworldly. Disturbing.

That date turning up in the Calakmul letter – 22 December, 2012 – and the mention of the “end of days”. Written about in the Book of Ix – the Ix Codex.

And those words together. Bakab. Ix.

Summon the Bakab Ix.

What – or who – is the Bakab Ix?

Could it really be the guy in my dad's photo? I'm feeling more and more like I've stepped out of reality.

Later that morning I'm at school for an ICT class. Well, they say “ICT”, but this close to the end of term, it's pretty freestyle. Most of us just surf the Web. I Google “Bakab.” The Bakab is a figure from Mayan mythology – one of four sons of the Mayan deity Itzamna. Itzamna is one of the top gods as far as Mayan deities go – the bringer of writing and agriculture to the Mayan people. Only the Creator Gods are above Itzamna. In Mayan mythology, Itzamna married a goddess named Ixchel. They had four sons, who were named Ix, Cauac, Muluc and Kan. The Bakab Ix must be one of these guys.

Why would someone want to summon a Mayan god? Is it some weird occulty thing?

After school I take the bus up to the hospital. I'm hoping to hear that Mum's coming home this weekend. The attendant tells me how much better she is; they've changed her medication; it's very light now and she's “more herself again”. He lets me into her room, but she's asleep. Fine – I'm pretty zoned myself. I lie down for a little nap in the second bed. And I'm out in seconds.

Sometime later I'm vaguely aware of someone fumbling through my schoolbag. I'm still half asleep and in that state, all I'm thinking is that it's fine; Mum's always searching for neglected letters from school. Then there's a long silence. Mum remains quite still.

I wake up to find her staring at a photograph in her hand.

It's *that* photo – the one I found in Dad's office.

Mum's tone is bewildered. "Where did you find this?"

"Dad gave it to me."

Sharply she replies, "No, he didn't."

I pause, surprised. "He did." It's a small lie, I decide; a detail.

"He kept that photo on him. He was never without it."

"Why?"

"If he really gave it to you, he'd have told you what it meant to him."

I stay quiet. No doubt about it – she's sounding much better.

"So you lied to me." It isn't a question.

"I found it in his college room. I went there to get some books."

"Why?"

"Just . . . cos I wanted to learn about Mayan hieroglyphs."

"Why?"

I groan, fall back on to the bed.

"Jeez, Mum. Wow, you really are sounding like your old self! Look, it's to do with the Mayan codex Dad was after. OK?"

Mum looks puzzled.

"You do remember me telling you about the codex he was searching for?"

She says yes. But I'm not convinced.

I snap, "Come on, Mum, we've been through this." Then I remember where we are. And I'm filled with regret.

Mum stares at me with a searching expression. "You tell me why you're so interested in that photo and I'll tell you what it meant to your dad."

"OK. Only. . ." I hesitate. "You're not going to like it."

"Why, are you going to lie to me again?"

"No, it's just that . . . well, you're going to think it sounds stupid."

"Try me."

So I tell Mum about the dream. I tell her everything, with every detail I can remember. Relating it, I feel my spine prickle. And when I come to the end of the dream, I say, "Then he looks at me and he says. . ."

"Summon the Bakab Ix," says Mum.

"How?" I whisper. "How could you know?"

"Because I've heard this before," Mum says simply. "Your father had the exact same dream. All his life. Since he was a little boy. And he never, never understood it. It obsessed him. Andres researched the myth of the Bakabs. Wrote lots of papers about them. He wasn't any closer to understanding the dream. Then, about a year ago, his mother wrote to him. The man who raised him, whom he called 'Papa', wasn't his real father. That kind of family secret – it's not unusual, especially in a Catholic country like Mexico. Young women who got pregnant out of wedlock didn't broadcast it then, and they still don't. She married a close family friend and that was that – they forgot about the real father. You certainly didn't go telling your children that they were illegitimate."

"But she's getting old, so she decided to come clean with Andres, to admit the truth. She told him that his real father was a museum curator, a man she met when she was nineteen. At least he said he was a museum curator. He was the man in this photo. He was looking

to buy old manuscripts from local collectors, take them back to his museum. One thing led to another between the two of them. Then one day he just upped and disappeared. Your grandmother – Abuelita – called the museum he said he worked for, but they'd never heard of him. No one had. He arrived as if from nowhere and went back the same way. This photo of him was the only evidence Abuelita ever really had that he'd ever existed. That and your father, of course."

I have no idea what to say.

Mum continues, "Your dad was raised by the man who was kind enough to marry Abuelita. He never knew or suspected. Then when he was about ten or eleven he began to dream about the man in the hut. And 'Summon the Bakab Ix'. It haunted him. When he discovered that the man in his dream was his father . . . well. . ."

She pauses, seems wistful at the memory. "He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. It was as though a missing part of him had been found. But it still didn't make sense of the dream."

Then she turns, stares intently at me for a second, and asks, "Josh, did Dad ever tell you about that dream?"

I shake my head. Seems like Dad had been pretty close-mouthed about the whole matter.

"Then," Mum says quietly, "how can this be happening to you too?"

BLOG ENTRY: CAPOEIRA O LE LE

I was desperate for a bit of normality, so I let Tyler persuade me to join the capoeira players in a demonstration for the Summertown Arts Festival. We pitched up outside the bank on a sunny Saturday morning amidst the curious Summertown residents. A light breeze wafted the last of the loose cherry blossoms from a nearby tree and they drifted over us like snow. Mestre Ricardo took the *berimbau*, the main musical instrument we use in capoeira; I took the pandeiro drum. The whole group stood in a circle as we drummed up a crowd with a song. Pretty soon supermarket shoppers were crossing the road to watch us launch ourselves in combat. In capoeira, the trick is to just skirt the edges – no contact. It's a flirtation with violence, a ballet. The beauty of the game lies in the controlled, acrobatic restraint of the players.

After a few turns I was up against Tyler. We'd rehearsed the cue. As the roda struck up with the song "Capoeira O Le Le", we began. *Ginga*, handstand, *au malandrau*, *cocorinha*, *armada*, *queixada*. I executed my moves perfectly, just as we practised. Then Tyler left the script and pulled out some style moves – a headspin, a handstand whirl. I could see him grinning at me, delighted to have caught me on the hop. From then on we improvised; we dropped into the music's groove.

That Tyler – he's a show-off. But he knows how to please an audience. The crowd loved it.

Then Ollie turned up. And the subject turned to the codex. . .

Chapter 11

I glance around the faces, hoping to see Ollie – and then there she is. Luckily, Tyler's also thrown off balance at the sight of her. With her eyes on us our pace picks up a notch. I can feel my skin warming where her gaze lands.

"That was coolness," she says afterwards, grinning. Tyler has another bout to prepare for, and he strips off to the vest underneath.

"He's in good shape," she remarks to me as Tyler takes up position against Mestre Ricardo.

I sigh. "Yeah. I know. Probably be selected for the British team."

"I should hope so," she says. "He's terrific!"

It's definitely time to change the subject. "So guess what," I say. "I've found out something about the man in my dream."

Ollie swivels around, eyes wide. "Go on."

"He's my *grandfather*," I tell her. "My secret grandfather. Turns out that Dad was illegitimate. His mother only confessed to Dad about a year ago. She sent him a photo of his father. And that's how I know. Dad's father – he's the guy from my dream."

Well, that does it. I have Ollie's undivided, even fascinated, attention.

I glance at Tyler, who completes a series of intricate moves, a breathtaking sequence of handstand whirls, headspins and a clock movement. He's not improvising against Mestre Ricardo, I notice. Each time the players attack, they plant precisely aimed blows within millimetres of each other's bodies. The crowd surrounds us even more densely. They murmur their appreciation.

Ollie stands next to me, lost in thought. “So in your dream,” she says, speaking very slowly, “you’re seeing the death of your own grandfather?”

I nod. That’s it exactly – like a premonition. Only, it’s already happened.

“And *he* is asking for the Bakab Ix?”

“Right on.”

“Wow.” Her voice drops to a breathless whisper. “So this Mayan thing – it’s been going on in your family for, like, years?”

Again I nod. “My grandfather found the Calakmul letter – the one we deciphered. That’s how Dad started on his search for the Ix Codex.”

“But if your grandfather had the Calakmul letter, then maybe he was searching for the Ix Codex too.”

“That’s the whole point. Grandpa was hunting for the codex. Then Dad. Now me.”

Ollie punches me lightly on the shoulder. “Way to keep your family legacy going!”

“Some legacy,” I say. “They’re both dead. And still no codex.”

“Still,” she replies, “I wonder why your grandpa was looking for it.”

It seems pretty obvious to me. He was a museum curator, a seeker of rare Mayan objects.

“What does his museum say?” Ollie asks.

That was the odd thing. They’d denied all knowledge of him, right from the start.

“Abuelita – my grandma – she tried. Years back. She doesn’t even know where he really came from.”

Ollie’s eyes glisten. “Fabulous! And you know what else is interesting – the missing half of the Calakmul letter? Your dad must have had it once.”

“That’s what I think,” I say. “Or else how could he think he’d found the trail of the Ix Codex?”

Ollie goes quiet for a while, her eyes drifting off as she watches the capoeira players.

“So,” I tell her, “I’ve decided. I’ve got to find a way to go . . . to find Dad’s woman in Chetumal.”

“Dad’s woman? I thought you were in denial about that. . .” she says with a sly smile.

“We’ll see. Maybe she’s a contact, something to do with the codex hunt.”

“From where? How many people do you think know about this?”

There’s Carlos Montoyo, we know that. He still hasn’t replied to my email, which has me more than a little spooked. Then there’s Ollie’s own theory – the CIA – or some US agency looking to cover up UFO incidents and evidence of alien-Mayan contact.

“Let me get this straight. You think that your dad went to Mexico, met with Montoyo and then disappeared?”

“Went looking for the codex. *Then* disappeared. The missing days – remember?”

I watch her as her mind computes away.

“Maybe Chetumal Lady knows where your dad went. Maybe she even saw Montoyo.”

I smile with satisfaction. “Bingo. Man, you’re brilliant.”

Then she asks me about Mum. I relate my discussion with the psychiatrist. He was just about OK with the idea of me going to Mexico – I told him I’d be staying with an aunty in Cancun who’d pick us up at the airport. For a minute I was worried that he’d ask for a phone number, but he seemed OK about it. I told him about my plan to confront the woman in Chetumal. (I didn’t mention the codex or any of the complicated stuff.) He saw how it would “resolve some key issues.” But as for Mum coming along – there was no way.

Ollie says, “Your poor mum. She’s had such a rough time. I bet she’d enjoy a trip to Mexico. But she could probably do without the stress of meeting your dad’s ladyfriend.”

Mum's not being able to go just makes me more determined to sort everything out. "You bring me back his ashes," Mum insisted at my last visit, gripping my arm as I turned to leave. "Have them blessed in a church by a priest, then bring him back to me."

When I tell Ollie this part, she frowns. "Creepy," she says. "You'll be, like, carrying your dad around."

"Don't remind me."

And then Ollie hits me with her own bombshell.

"I'm coming with you," she announces, with not a hint of a request. "Sounds to me like you could use the moral support."

"What a mate you are." I'm caught on the hop, but I'm thrilled and I don't try to hide it. "You're serious? I mean – you hardly know me."

"It's true. It doesn't feel like that, though, does it?"

I'm relieved to hear her say that. It's exactly what I think – but I didn't dare believe that Ollie thought so too.

"You'll need to ask your parents, though, won't you?"

Ollie waves a hand. "That's nothing. They're always on at me to travel. They travelled all the time when they were young. We can get them to buy the tickets for us over the Web, in fact."

I'm secretly relieved that I won't have to use my mum's credit card.

"Really? They sound really cool!"

"Yeah, they're OK," Ollie says, and she looks away, almost uninterested. Her eyes come to rest on Tyler. "Mind you, it could be dangerous."

"No way to know what's gonna go down," I agree. "What about bringing Tyler along too? Capoeira moves can be wicked deadly, you know."

Ollie raises an eyebrow. "'Wicked deadly'? Maybe we *should* invite Tyler along."

"Let's do it."

And with Ollie's almost matter-of-fact comments, the summer horizon opens up. The three of us are off to Mexico, to crack open the mystery of my father's murder, the identity of his Chetumal Lady and maybe even to find the Ix Codex. With my two mates with me, I feel like anything is possible now.

BLOG ENTRY: THE DOLPHIN HOTEL

Well, I should have dragged Mum along. It's too great here, definitely beats summer in England. Sunny, bright blue skies and HOT! I almost feel like relaxing, just hitting the pool. But . . . there's work to be done.

Hotel Delfin (Dolphin Hotel) in Chetumal is a tidy white hotel in a small seaside town. The beach here is made from dredged-up sand. It's nothing to write home about, but works fine as a cooling-off point: a drop-in for anyone wants to explore beyond the mega-famous Mayan ruins at Chichen Itza.

We flew into Chetumal after a connecting flight from Mexico City. It's only the second time in my life I've flown without my parents. The first time I was ten, and had to be accompanied by a stewardess the whole time, along with the other little kids. This time, because Ollie is sixteen, they let us travel with her.

I'm still the expert of the team, though. For one thing, I'm the only one of us who speaks Spanish. I quite enjoyed showing Ollie and Tyler around Mexico City Airport, where I've been almost every year since I can remember. I made sure to pick up Cinnabons before we boarded the domestic flight to Chetumal.

Ollie and Tyler admit that the warm, juicy, cream-cheese-frosted Cinnabons are the best cakes they've eaten, ever.

The hotel is on a main road, roughly a hundred metres from the beach. The lobby is small, marble-floored and only just has room for the reception counter and a small set of upholstered rattan furniture where people can wait. A ceiling fan moves the warm air around uselessly.

When we arrived, the place was deserted – we had to ring the bell for attention. A cramped little room off the lobby serves as the “Internet Café” – it’s where I am right now. In an alcove next to the reception area there’s an ice machine and a drinks machine selling Fresca and Delaware Punch. Grape soda – yum!

When I checked in, the receptionist (name badge said “Paco”) lingered over my passport. “Are you related to Professor Andres Garcia, also from Oxford?”

It’s not a big town, few enough places to choose from. Turns out that I’d chosen the same hotel as my father. Paco was tickled pink by the coincidence, but it didn’t strike me as so unusual.

You don’t find many Mexicans at the Hotel Delfin. It’s mostly eco-tourists who want to hug trees in the rainforest, or tourists on the “Maya Route.” There’s something of an effort to provide a slightly “groovy” atmosphere. Hence piped jazz music in the central courtyard around the pool, and scattered gardenia petals floating on its clear blue water.

I can see why my dad chose it.

Chapter 12

The grooviness of Hotel Delfin isn't lost on Ollie. She smiles, amused, as we stand in the courtyard, taking a good look around.

"Stan Getz," she says approvingly. "Nice."

Back in our room, Tyler and I change into our boardies. I sit down to phone Detective Rojas, the Mexican policeman in charge of the murder investigation. Before we left Oxford, I managed to get through to the police station in Chetumal, trying to get hold of a name and address for Chetumal Lady. They weren't willing to give out that information over the phone. "But phone Detective Rojas the minute you arrive in Chetumal. He will come to your hotel and take you to meet her. This is safest for you, for her."

I've got my UK mobile phone, but the local Mexican call will cost me a small fortune if I use it. So I head for the lobby, to call from a payphone, when Tyler stops me.

He scowls. "Leave it out, just for a bit, hey? We need to cool off. Let's have a laugh first."

I hesitate. He has a point. It's late; Rojas has probably gone home. The call can wait until tomorrow.

So we head for the pool, to enjoy the late-afternoon sun. Ollie emerges minutes later from her room. She's changed into a pink sarong with matching bikini. She stands close to Tyler, dropping chunks of ice into tall glasses of fizzy grapefruit Fresca.

I leap into the pool and Tyler follows, landing on top of me. We begin to wrestle, glad to release some of the tension of the past couple of days. Ollie lowers herself gracefully into the water, where she watches us with a lazy gaze.

"Why don't you two practise your capoeira?"

We stop grappling for a minute. Tyler eyes me expectantly. "How about it? I'm up for it if you are."

"Or. . ." I say, "or we could order cheeseburgers with fries, and chocolate fudge sundaes, and eat them by the pool."

Tyler groans with delight. "Mate, you're so right. What are you waiting for? Call a waiter!"

"Cheeseburger, yuck," Ollie says, wrinkling her nose. Then she perks up. "I'll just have a piña colada."

Everyone's happy when I take their orders to the bar. Tyler's standing with his back to me when I stroll back, and I can't resist shoving him into the pool. He topples and lands with a spectacular splash. Ollie's soaked but she's laughing too much to care. For a second I wish we were just here to hang out by the beach and take in the sights. Why didn't I ever think of bringing friends to Mexico before? It would have made things so much more fun.

We're interrupted by a hassled-looking hotel porter who leans out of the lobby. He shouts in Spanish, "Someone's looking for an English boy named Josh Garcia."

I pull myself out of the water. I'm thinking that somehow, it has to be Detective Rojas. But when a young woman strolls into the courtyard, I just sense it: this is Chetumal Lady.

She's dressed in tight white, low-rise Gap jeans with a jewelled belt and a strappy lime-green top that shows off a slender, deeply tanned, toned body. She walks effortlessly on high-heeled gold sandals. Her deep chestnut hair is long and sleek. She reminds me of a movie star.

She stops in front of me, pushes back her wide, tinted sunglasses.

"Joshua Garcia, right?" she says in Spanish. "Man, but I can read you like a book! The same hotel as Andres? C'mon up here and give me a kiss, willya?"

For a minute I just stand motionless, dripping, exchanging incredulous looks with Tyler and Ollie.

I reply in Spanish with the line I've been thinking about for weeks.

"So you're the woman who ruined my parents' lives."

The reaction isn't what I expected.

"Don't tell me you're buying the same garbage the police are putting about," she snorts. "Thought a guy like you would have more sense. Don't you know Dad?"

"Dad. . .?"

"That's right, hotshot. He's my father, too. So what if he hadn't got around to telling you and your mother about it? He was only a teenager. It doesn't make him the world's worst villain."

"He's your dad too?" I echo. "You're my sister?"

She grins. "Now you're getting it. That's right, baby brother. So how about that kiss?"

She takes another step towards me and plants a kiss on my cheek. "Oops," she says. "You got some lipstick there." I'm frozen, too surprised to react as she carefully wipes my cheek with her thumb.

Then she looks at me, and for a few seconds we just stare into each other's faces. That's when I know she's telling the truth. No doubt about it – my dad's eyes are gazing out at me.

I have a sister.

Nothing has prepared me for this. It is something I hadn't suspected, even in the tiniest corner of my mind. I just stare at her in dumb shock.

"You feel it too?" she asks with a rueful smile. "It's like some weird kind of mirror, isn't it? A mirror of feeling, of sensation. That sense of being split in two. The very same thing happened to me when I first met Andres."

I'm on the edge of understanding what she means. In her face, I see tiny aspects of myself, of my father.

When she touches me I catch a scent of something familiar.

"Look at you," she murmurs. "What a cutie!" She stretches her hand across her face, just touching the tip of her nose. "From here down to your chin, you're Andres."

"You've got his eyes," I admit.

"Yep, I did OK there," she says with a grin.

"Mum knew he was pretty handsome," I tell her. "It's why she was so sure the stories about Dad having a girlfriend here were true."

She wrinkles her nose. "She did? Unbelievable. You can see why the people round here went for it – they love a bit of juicy scandal. And since I'd never told anyone who Dad was, of course they gobbled it up. Kind of thought you'd know better."

Of course *I* had. But her words feel like an accusation. I don't like to hear my mum slated.

"What did you expect? If you go around keeping a secret, having mysterious meetings with an older, married guy. . .?"

"Hey, the secrecy was all his idea," she says, with just a flash of anger. "He kept insisting he'd tell you both when the time was right."

I scowl. She notices and touches my arm.

"Come on now. Our father, he was all about the archaeology. Well, that, and you and Eleanor."

"Really?"

"Sure. He talked a blue streak about the two of you. And the plans he made! How he was going to tell you about me, how I'd go to Oxford to meet you all, how you and I would become best buddies. How you'd always wanted a big sister."

I tell her, "I used to want a big brother."

"Well, bad luck, kiddo. Better learn to make do with me."

By now Ollie and Tyler are out of the pool. They look faintly dazed. My sister suddenly seems to become aware of their presence.

"You gonna introduce me to your buddies?" she says, switching into a heavily accented, Americanized English.

"Maybe you should introduce yourself to us first," says Ollie. "After all – Josh doesn't exactly know who you are, does he?"

"They don't speak Spanish," I tell my sister. "I'll tell them later what you just said."

"My name is Camila Pastor," she says to Ollie, "and I'm the daughter of Andres Garcia."

"Which makes her my half-sister," I tell the others.

"And that's your story, is it?" continues Ollie. Now there's no mistaking her hostility. Camila gives a tiny shrug, turns her full attention on Ollie, looking her up and down. Ollie's taller, prettier, but Camila's attitude is out of Ollie's league.

"That's right, sweetie."

Ollie says, "And you believe her, do you, Josh?"

I'm stuck for words. It hasn't even occurred to me to doubt it. I can't explain that kind of chemistry – the sisterly-cousinly-motherly thing you feel when you touch a female family member. Camila reeks of it. I can't believe it isn't obvious.

Camila beams Ollie a kind smile. "Sweetie, it's nice to see you're so keen on protecting my baby brother. I know he believes me. We recognize each other, see? I don't expect you to understand. As it happens, though, I have proof."

Tyler asks, "What proof?"

"The Mayan manuscript – the Calakmul letter. You've got half of it. I'm right, aren't I? You've got the first half. I've got the second."

Ollie stares at Camila, and a smile suddenly appears on her lips. She looks surprised and delighted. Slowly,

Ollie says, “You’ve got the other half of the Calakmul letter?”

Tyler interrupts, “That doesn’t prove she’s his sister. She could have stolen it from his dad.”

“Sure, buddy. But I got the other letter too, the one that says, ‘Destroy this manuscript’. Addressed to me.”

“You’ve got the second half of the Calakmul letter?” I echo. “And we’ve got the first half! That means we can decode the entire inscription. That means we can find the Ix Codex.”

Maybe I sound a little bemused. But that would be a major understatement.

I’m absolutely, entirely floored. We’ve been in Chetumal for less than two hours, and we’ve already solved two of our three mysteries. I feel a rush of triumph. This trip is turning into a huge success. With Camila’s help, we might only be a few steps from finding the Ix Codex – or solving the mystery of who really killed my dad.

BLOG ENTRY: SISTER ACT

Here's what happened when I met Chetumal Lady.

She turned out to be my long-lost half-sister. No messing. Ever since Dad found out that his real father wasn't the guy he'd grown up calling "Papa", his guilty conscience prickled at him. Because in his case the sins of the father had been passed on – and Dad had his own dark secret from a misspent youth.

The girl's name was Araceli; she was the maid's daughter in the house where Dad grew up. They'd known each other since they were kids, and early teenage fumbles in the laundry room eventually led to much more. When they were fifteen, Araceli fell pregnant and the weight of Mexican middle-class society descended on her and my dad. He was sent away to a Franciscan seminary. She was sent away too, back to her village. There was no discussion and no argument. Any feelings they might have were less than irrelevant. And naturally, abortion was out of the question. So Araceli's family raised baby Camila. But when it came to schooling, Dad's family relented. They couldn't take the scandal of their perfect little family having an illegitimate child in its midst – especially given the fact that it seemed that history was repeating itself. Then again, they couldn't condemn one of their own to a life of poverty and no education. So, they sent money. Every month, bang on the dot: school fees and enough to cover clothes and piano lessons.

The money paid for her to go to a posh girls' convent school. Tough for Camila, though, being the only one from a poor family. It wasn't the best of situations, but she didn't let it get her down too much. She beat all the rich girls to a college scholarship in the US, studied tourism and returned to Cancun, where she ended up selling real estate until she met Saul – the guy who is now locked up in Chetumal jail on suspicion of murdering our dad.