

## Chapter Twenty-three

# CAPTURED

**W**hump. Whump. Whump. The high-powered speed-boat met each wave head-on as they raced across the ocean. Max and Lola were lying on the floor of the boat, drenched by rain and saltwater spray, their hands and feet bound with rope, their mouths tightly gagged.

It had all been going so well. Max had been so relieved to get out of the Black Pyramid and get back to the safety of the camp. He was proud of himself for standing up to Ah Pukuh and his demons. And even though their impersonations had been grotesque, their attempts had reassured him that his real parents weren't far away.

Against all odds, victory had been within their grasp. Now Hermanjilio, Lord 6-Dog, and Lady Coco would have to fight the forces of evil alone. When Venus rose in the morning, Lola would be tied to the sacrificial altar and . . . what? What fate did Landa have in store for Max? Would he be sacrificed, too?

He strained to turn his head until he could see Lola. Her hair was plastered to her face. She looked as seasick as he felt.

He thought he might puke at any moment. How would that work with the gag? It was too disgusting to contemplate.

Just when he thought he could hold it in no longer, the boat stopped.

A white yacht towered over them.

*La Espada, Cadiz.*

Someone yanked him up roughly and hustled him and Lola into a cargo net. Before he knew what was happening, they were scooped off their feet and winched into the air. Next minute they were hanging a few feet above the surface of the ocean. Max thought he could see a shark fin cutting through the water toward them.

Would he rather be eaten first or watch Lola being eaten?

There was no time to decide, for the cargo net suddenly lurched, swung around, and dumped them heavily onto the deck, like two fat codfish.

Lola was carried away in one direction, while Max was dragged off in the other. Two guards manhandled him roughly along gangways and up stairways until they reached a carpeted corridor on an upper deck. Here the guards untied him and removed his gag.

"Where are you taking me?" asked Max.

One of the guards answered in a torrent of Spanish. Max was none the wiser.

"Is it to Landa?" guessed Max. "I have nothing to say to that pig."

The guards seemed to find this hilarious. They nodded and leered as they pushed him toward a set of varnished wooden doors at the end of the corridor.

So this was it. The long-awaited confrontation with Count Antonio de Landa.

Max wondered if the count had an onboard torture chamber. Well, at least if he was busy torturing Max, it meant he wasn't engaged in sacrificing Lola. Wow! Max got a lump in his throat as he realized that was probably the most selfless thought he'd ever had in his life. But what was the point of being a reformed character if a sadistic Spaniard was about to pull out your fingernails one by one?

Max's thoughts were spiralling into hysteria when the guards pushed him headlong through the doors.

He went sprawling onto the carpet. When he staggered to his feet, he found himself in a plush, wood-panelled stateroom. There was a long table in the centre of the room and red velvet banquettes around the edge. At the far end, a man was standing with his back to the room, gazing out to sea. He was wearing a white linen suit.

"Uncle Ted!"

Uncle Ted turned around. His face looked even more furrowed. He had dark shadows under his eyes. He looked like he hadn't slept for at least a week.

"Uncle Ted, what are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question, young man."

"This is Landa's yacht! Are you in league with him? I might have known it!"

"I think we should start this discussion with an apology."

"It better be good," said Max.

He waited.

"An apology from you," clarified Uncle Ted.

"Me? For what?"

"Let me think," said Uncle Ted. "For betraying my trust, perhaps? For stealing the Red Jaguar? For doing your utmost to destroy my business?"

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“Your business?” Max stared at him in disbelief. “Don’t you understand that the world is about to end and you won’t even have a business if we don’t stop your friend Landa from waking the Undead Army?”

Uncle Ted looked alarmed. “What have they done to you? I heard you’ve been keeping bad company, Max. Have they brainwashed you?”

“Me, brainwashed? That’s a good one. So how long have you been involved in this plot, Uncle Ted?”

“Plot?” Uncle Ted sounded genuinely puzzled.

“The plot for Landa-slash-Tzelek to take over the world.”

“That’s enough, Max!” said Uncle Ted. “Can you imagine how worried I’ve been? First your parents disappear. Then you run off into the jungle with a band of thieves. If this is what it’s like to have children, then—” He stopped himself abruptly and continued in a colder, more businesslike tone. “All I’m trying to do is recover a valuable artefact for my client. If you’d just tell me what you’ve done with the Red Jaguar, perhaps we can sort it out without recourse to the law.”

Max narrowed his eyes and looked hard at Uncle Ted. Either he was an Oscar-worthy actor or he really didn’t know Landa’s plans.

“Your client has been possessed by the spirit of an evil Maya priest. He’s using the Black Jaguar to release the demon warriors of the underworld.”

“Oh, grow up, Max! I don’t think you understand how serious this is. Larceny, assault, sabotage, property damage . . . you and your girlfriend are in a lot of trouble.”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” muttered Max. “If you could just get us off this boat, I’ll tell you everything. . . .”

Uncle Ted ran his hands through his hair.

"I'm afraid that's not possible. The matter is out of my hands. Thanks to your delinquent behaviour, Count de Landa is calling the shots." Uncle Ted lowered his voice. "You know I'm no fan of his, Max, but you've forced me to take his side. He's my client and I made a deal with him. Now he wants his merchandise and he won't give up until he gets it. He's ruthless, Max. So stop all this nonsense right now."

"It's not nonsense. It was you who told me that if Landa's journal was not a fake, it could destroy the world."

"I should have kept my mouth shut."

"But Uncle Ted—"

Max saw a movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned, once again expecting to see Landa. But it was Lucky Jim. He was sitting there, arms folded, staring straight ahead.

"Lucky, you're a Maya—you know I'm telling the truth. Or is it you who's in league with Landa? I don't know who to trust anymore."

Lucky Jim ignored him.

Uncle Ted stepped forward and stared into Max's eyes. "Paranoia, stealing, delusions . . . Have you been taking drugs?"

"Of course not! I'm telling you the truth, Uncle Ted! You said yourself that anything can happen, that things are never what they seem around here. If you don't help me stop him, Landa is going to sacrifice Lola to Ah Pukuh."

Uncle Ted sat down heavily on a banquette. He looked like he was trying hard to keep his temper. "Let me spell it out. All the count wants is the return of the Red Jaguar."

"No, Uncle Ted, you're wrong! Landa wants to rule the world! Why do you think he's collecting Jaguar Stones?"

"It's not my business, Max."

"It is your business! It's all our business! Someone has to

stop him! I know you deal with some shady characters, Uncle Ted, but surely even you can recognize pure evil when you see it?"

"That's enough, Max!" Uncle Ted put his head in his hands. Max turned back to Lucky Jim.

"Lucky, you know what I'm talking about!" he said. "You understand the power of the Jaguar Stones!"

Lucky Jim shrugged. He looked uncomfortable. "You were right," Max continued, "the ancient Maya are still trying to run things in this jungle. Last night, in the Black Pyramid, I met Ah Pukuh—"

"You tourists should stay out of our temples," said Lucky Jim.

"No!" yelled Max. "We've gone way past that. It's not about who's a tourist and who's a Maya. We're all in this together. You can't ignore history anymore, Lucky Jim, because it's playing out right in front of us. Your children will ask you why you didn't try to save them from the living hell that will be their lives when Ah Pukuh takes over. Are you going to blame that on the tourists? Or are you going to do something about it, while there's still time?" Max's face, red with fury, was right in Lucky's face. Their noses almost touched. "At least you could tell Uncle Ted that I'm not crazy."

Silence.

Max took a softer tone. "We need you, Lucky! There's going to be a huge battle tonight between good and evil. The immortal Lord 6-Dog is out there right now. We used the Green Jaguar of Itzamna to bring him back. He's inside the body of a howler monkey, and Tzelek is inside Landa. . . ."

Max's voice trailed off as even he realized how ridiculous it all sounded.

Lucky Jim got up and left the room.

"Now you've gone too far," said Uncle Ted, "making fun of Lucky's heritage. I'm disgusted with you, Max. Here I am, trying to protect you. . . ."

"Don't give me that," said Max. He was past caring what he said. "You hate me just like you hate my father."

Uncle Ted looked genuinely appalled. "That's not true," he said quietly. "It took me a day or two, but I grew fond of you, Max. You reminded me of myself at your age. Sure, you were a little spoiled, but I thought a few weeks in San Xavier would change that."

"I have changed, Uncle Ted."

"But, sadly, not for the better. Listen to yourself. Evil spirits, human sacrifices, demon warriors . . . I'm too frustrated to talk to you anymore. You should have stayed in your room that night, Max. You gave me your word and you broke it."

"But my word wasn't good enough for you, was it? I was going to stay in my room until I realized you'd locked the door. Why couldn't you have trusted me? You locked me away like a prisoner."

Uncle Ted sounded close to tears. "No, I locked you away like something precious. I just wanted to keep you safe, Max." The pain in Uncle Ted's eyes hardened into resolve. "But now I can see the error of my ways. I'll give you a little time to think about things, and then I'm handing you over to Landa."

With that, Uncle Ted swept out of the stateroom.

The two guards, who'd evidently been waiting outside the door, barged in and grabbed Max again. They looked disappointed to find him in one piece and did their best to injure him themselves as they pushed and pulled him through hatches and down ladders to the bottom of the ship.

At the end of a long metal gangway, a door was unlocked

and Max was pushed in. He found himself in a small cabin with no porthole and no furniture except for a sink and a metal bunk bolted to the wall.

Now what? Max checked every inch of the cabin for a way out. He pressed his ear against the door, but he could hear nothing. He tried kicking the door for a while, but no one came. He paced up and down. He lay on the bunk. As the hours went by, he grew more and more wretched. This waiting and not knowing was as bad as any torture the creepy count could have devised.

What was happening? Where was Lola? How would Hermanjilio and two talking monkeys be able to outwit Landa and all his men? The more he thought about it, the more his heart sank. Whichever way you looked at it, they were in big trouble. And there was nothing he could do to help.

As he lay on the bunk in that airless cabin, he gradually dozed off. He awoke with a start to the blaring of an alarm. There were men shouting and the sounds of running feet all over the boat. Someone ran past his door and up the stairs. He heard motorboats starting up, revving their engines, and roaring off.

Then all was quiet again.

What was going on? Had something happened onshore?

Had Hermanjilio made his move?

Max banged on the door. He kicked the walls. He shouted. After a while, he thought he heard a noise in the corridor. He held his breath and listened as closely as he could.

Yes, there it was again. There was something or someone out there.

"Let me out! Let me out!" he shouted.

He heard the lock slowly turning.

Suddenly, the door flew open and a familiar figure half stepped and half fell into the cabin.

"Uncle Ted! What's happening?"

"Some kind of emergency . . . all gone ashore . . . good time to escape . . ."

Max took in his uncle's slurred speech, his unsteady gait, and the whiskey fumes that wafted from his pores. "Are you all right, Uncle Ted?"

"Had a drink or two with the captain . . . to get him out of the way. . . . He's sleeping it off . . . on the bridge. . . . You must go now."

Before Max could ask any more questions, Uncle Ted lurched back down the gangway toward the stairs. When Max caught up with him on the deck, he was leaning perilously over the guardrail and pointing at something off to stern.

"That'll get you to shore. . . . Think you can handle it?"

Max peered over the side. A little boat with an outboard motor bobbed below, straining at its rope.

"I don't understand," said Max.

"Zodiac inflatable . . . jus' pull the cord and slam it into gear. . . ."

"No, I mean, why are you helping me escape?"

Uncle Ted looked like he might cry. "Turns out I do owe you an apology, Max. . . . The way they dragged that poor girl off . . . I think you were right about Landa. . . . I should have listened—"

"Lola?" interrupted Max. "Where did they take her?"

"To shore . . ."

"I have to go; I have to save her."

"Save your own skin, Max. . . . Get as far away from here as possible."

"I'm going to find Lola. Are you coming?" said Max coldly. His uncle shook his head. "What we should do"—he staggered slightly—"what we should do is call the police."

"There's no time! Don't you understand? Landa's going to sacrifice Lola. We need to stop him!"

Max was pulling his uncle toward the ladder down to the Zodiac, but Uncle Ted clumsily disengaged himself.

"Uncle Ted, come on. Lola needs us!"

"Sorry, Max . . . I'm not the hero type. . . ."

"Are you scared of Landa?" sneered Max.

"Yes," said Uncle Ted.

"So you'd let Lola die rather than face up to him?"

"We Murphys look after number one."

"Well, this Murphy has learned that you can't live your life that way."

"I tried to be a hero once. . . . It went wrong. . . . She died. . . . I should have just called the police—"

Max impatiently interrupted, gripping his uncle's arms to call him back from his drunken ramblings. "Where's Lucky Jim? He could help me."

"Lucky? I think you've upset him, Max. He's locked himself in his cabin and he won't come out. I can hear him chanting, and it smells like he's burning incense. If I didn't know him better, I'd think he was doing some sort of Maya ritual. I don't know what's come over him." Uncle Ted hiccuped loudly.

"With Lucky on our side, we might have stood a chance." "Do you want me to try and talk to him?"

"There's no time," said Max, climbing over the side of the yacht. "Wish me luck."

"Max . . . wait!"

"Are you coming with me?"

"No, I just want to give you this."

Uncle Ted passed down a diver's knife on a belt.

"Good luck, Max."

When Max was safely aboard, Uncle Ted untied the rope and shouted down instructions. Max pulled the cord with all his might, and the engine roared to life. After a few false starts when he butted the yacht like an angry ram, he got the hang of steering and the Zodiac sped away.

Soon Max could make out the shore and the sinister outline of the Black Pyramid. He headed straight for it, with the motor flat-out. His heart surged, happy to be free again. His stomach, which apparently knew something his heart did not, shrank into a tight ball of fear.

What grisly sight would be waiting for him at the temple?

After a while, he heard the motor of the yacht behind him. The captain must have woken up and discovered him missing.

He willed his little boat on across the waves. But, as fast as his inflatable was, the yacht quickly gained on him. The bow got closer and closer until he could feel it looming over him. The captain was clearly trying to run him down.

Max turned sharply. The yacht turned as sharply as it could, but it was no match for the agility of a Zodiac. He was confident that he could outmanoeuvre it. His only worry was that the captain might radio ahead and tell Landa's men to meet him in their high-speed motor launches.

In fact, Max should have been worrying about something else entirely.

Like the fact that, at that very moment, the captain was out on the flying bridge, aiming a rifle at him.

As the yacht closed the gap and loomed over him again, Max started to make his next turn when—*crack!* A bullet tore

into the outboard motor. The engine sputtered. Max turned sharply and started zigzagging to make himself a more difficult target. He was losing speed.

*Crack! Crack! Crack!*

Spouts of water shot up around his boat where the bullets had missed. Max silently thanked Uncle Ted for plying the captain with whiskey. He was horribly aware that it would take only one good shot to deflate the Zodiac and scupper his escape.

But the damage was done. The outboard motor coughed and shuddered to a halt. He was dead in the water. As he pulled on the cord, praying for the engine to start, he saw the captain taking aim. Even drunk, he couldn't miss now. Max steeled himself.

Suddenly, the captain pitched over the railing and into the ocean. In his place was Uncle Ted, with a big grin on his face. He threw a life ring to the flailing captain and took the wheel of the ship.

"Pull out the choke," Uncle Ted called down through cupped hands.

With the choke fully out and a few more tugs on the cord, the outboard motor roared shakily back to life.

As the yacht veered sharply away, it gave a loud blast of its horn.

Max turned and waved, then once again headed for the shore.