

## Chapter 1: Akbal

A long time ago, I had a boyfriend who described everyone he knew as a car. The worst thing he could think to say about someone was that they were an economy van.

I was, he told me, a '56 Thunderbird convertible. Not being much into cars, vintage or otherwise, I wasn't sure what that meant. One day, a couple of years after we parted company, I saw one, silver, on a revolving platform at a classic car show. Maybe he had liked me more than I had realized.

Anyway, while I can barely remember what this guy looked like, he has left me with this peculiar way of categorizing people.

Isa, for example, is the kind of car she drives. Elegant and snappy, a Mercedes 580SL convertible.

Jonathan? A British racing green Rover, leather upholstery. Refined, expensive in an understated way, and maybe just a little pretentious.

Lucas? -- I wasn't sure about him just yet. But whatever the model, the color would have to be black.

Waiting at the reception desk as I went downstairs the next morning to scrounge a cup of coffee, was the person I had already come to think of as a Mack truck. The kind that roars up on your bumper so only the silver grille, like rows of sharks teeth, shows in your rearview mirror. Convinced that any moment you will be squashed like some insignificant bug on its radiator grille, your relief is palpable when eventually it roars past, causing your car to bump and lurch in its wake.

It was the investigating officer, one Major Ignacio Martinez, I had learned the previous night. Clearly this was a man who shot first and asked questions later, who made up his mind about the guilty party very early in the investigation, then went to great lengths to prove it, regardless of evidence to the contrary.

And the person he had decided was guilty of stealing the statue of Itzamna, I was soon to learn, was Dr Hernan Castillo.

I had awakened late. The day was gloomy, fitting for Akbal, a day of evil and darkness. I had not arrived at any resolution of my dilemma of the night before, but when I saw Martinez standing at the reception desk, I thought my problem had been solved, though in the worst possible way.

But Martinez was not looking for Alejandro, he was looking for me. And it was Don Hernan he wanted to talk about.

We went into a small sitting room off the lobby.

"What brought you to Mexico, Senora?" he began.

"I'm on a break from my studies, a holiday."

"What made you choose Merida as your destination?"

"I'm studying Maya history and languages," I replied.

There was a pause.

"I think you are not being entirely, shall we say, comprehensive, in your answers to my questions. Now why would that be?"

"Perhaps you are not asking the right questions," I snapped. "What exactly is it you want to know?"

"I want to know the whereabouts of Dr Hernan Castillo, and I believe you have the answer," he said.

Whereabouts? This man watches too many movies! I thought.

"What in heaven's name does Dr Castillo have to do with this? Surely you cannot think he has anything to do with the robbery. He's a well respected scholar."

"I believe I am the one authorized to ask the questions, Senora, not you. Do I think he walked into the bar and took the statue personally? No, I do not. But yes, I do think he is involved. He and Senor Gomez Arias had an argument over the stolen sculpture, in fact only a few weeks ago."

"I don't know where he is," I replied. "I do know that he would not have anything to do with something as shabby as this."

He ignored that last comment. "But you did come to Merida to meet him, did you not?" Obviously either Jonathan or Lucas had been more 'comprehensive' in their testimony than I had been. "Yes, but he cancelled our first meeting, dinner the evening before last. I have not heard from him since."

And the reason for his bad manners?"

"Bad manners?"

"Cancelling dinner with a lovely foreign visitor whom you have invited to visit would not normally be considered good manners, would it, even in Canada?"

I ignored the jibe.

"What were you meeting him for? Perhaps to carry some stolen merchandise out of the country for him? I understand you have a fair knowledge of the import/export business."

"I really do not know what he wanted to talk to me about. It really was just an excuse to get away from my studies and the Canadian winter," I replied. My reply, though true, sounded questionable even to me. And no doubt I looked a little long in the tooth to be a student.

Another long pause. Perhaps this is a technique I thought: wait long enough and the person will blurt something.

"May I see your passport please?"

A new approach. I handed it to him, then watched in dismay as he slipped it into his jacket pocket and rose from his chair.

"You can't take that!" I sputtered.

"Ah yes, but I can. Do not, as they say in your American movies, leave town, Senora."

Then he was gone, leaving me with the satisfaction, albeit minimal, of being right about the movies.

My first reaction was to try to reach my father to see what he and his diplomatic connections could do for me here. It is amazing how no matter how old we get, we still turn to our parents in a pinch. However, now that my father was retired, my parents, their wanderlust still unsated, were always traipsing off somewhere, usually somewhere obscure. Currently, if I remembered correctly, they were on the slow train for Ulan-Bator.

Instead, I went looking for Don Santiago. After expressing his outrage in decidedly undiplomatic language, he propelled himself over to a telephone, and began phoning some old acquaintances in the diplomatic corps to see what could be done.

As I left the sitting room, I passed Alejandro at the front desk.

"You and I need to talk, Alejandro," I hissed on the way by.

He looked nonplussed for a brief moment, but then merely smiled and nodded. This was one composed young man.

"Meet me at the Cafe Escobar, in an hour," I said, naming a small restaurant just a couple of blocks from the hotel.

Reasonably calmed by my brief conversation with Santiago Ortiz, and his promise to try and fix the mess with the passport, I went into the kitchen to get some coffee. Isa and her mother were sitting at the big oak table having a companionable cup of coffee together. Don Santiago joined us there shortly afterwards. I told them about my day so far, then enquired about Don Hernan.

"Still not back, and we haven't heard from him either. We're getting worried," Francesca said.

"This would hardly be the first time he has disappeared on us," Santiago observed.

"Yes, but he usually calls," Francesca demurred.

"I went to his office yesterday. It was locked up tight. I'd hoped he'd be there, or if not, I was hoping to get in to take a look around to see if there might be clues as to where he might be."

The Ortiz' exchanged a glance, and Francesca rose from her seat.

Santiago said "We have a key -- Don Hernan was always misplacing his, so he left a spare with us. Francesca will get it for you. I'm sure Don Hernan would not mind."

As I was about to leave them a few minutes later, key in hand, a bell began to ring in the kitchen. The Casa de las Baganvillas still has the features of a gracious home of a bygone era, including a kind of upstairs/downstairs bell system where the aristocrat upstairs pulls a cord in the room and a bell rings down in the kitchen. This summons staff to receive commands, go back downstairs to act upon them, and then return upstairs with the task completed.

Most hotel guests, of course, simply telephoned the front desk when they wished something.

"I thought that system had been disconnected years ago," I said.

"It has," Isa sighed, "except for the Empress."

Francesca rose from her chair to answer the bell in person.

"The Empress?" I asked.

"Senora Josefina Ramirez de Leon Tinoco," Isa replied. "She treats my family as if they were her personal servants!"

I don't pretend to understand the Mexican naming system, but I get the general idea that the longer your name, the higher your station in life. This name should put Dona Josefina pretty close to royalty, maybe just this side of god. Clearly she had never felt the need to learn to use the telephone.

"Does she wear a mantilla?" I asked.

"Always," Isa smiled.

And with that I left them.

Shortly thereafter I made my way to the Cafe Escobar. I had no idea whether Alejandro would show up or not.

The Cafe was far from fancy, lots of formica and what my neighbor Alex likes to call "little junks" -- dangling Day of the Dead skulls and the like. But the food was good and plentiful and one wall had a Diego Rivera-esque mural that appealed very much to students and aging dissidents. I thought it would be a place Alejandro would feel comfortable in.

As I waited for him, I tried to calm myself. I had had nothing to eat yet that day and it was already well past noon, which didn't help any. I'd consumed several cups of very strong black coffee, and with this and the events of the day, I was almost dizzy with caffeine, adrenalin and anxiety.

I ordered chicken chilaquiles, a casserole of tortillas, shredded chicken, tomatilloes, chiles, cream and cheese. To wash it down a Dos XX beer. If he didn't show up, at least I'd have had lunch.

I sat in a small banquette against the wall, watching the door, mentally plotting my approach to the subject.

Show up he did. Bold as brass.

He slid into the booth opposite me and quickly ordered a beer for himself. He was obviously well known here: he didn't have to tell them which brand.

"You wanted to talk to me about something?" he smiled.

This was a very self-possessed young man. I had to remind myself that he was only about half my age.

"Yes I do, Alejandro. About a robbery. In a bar. A robbery at which as it turns out, I was present."

His expression did not change.

"Not only present," I continued, "but in which I am implicated."

"Implicated?" He looked surprised.

"Yes. In more ways than one. The police believe I have information that would lead them to the perpetrator."

Now I thought I was getting beginning to get through to him, judging by the way he kept nervously twirling the coaster on the table.

"I could, in fact, should I choose to, lead them to one of the perpetrators. Ironically, however, it is not the person they are looking for."

"I'm not sure I follow you," he said, but he looked a little uneasy now.

"Would it interest you to know that the police suspect Dr. Castillo of masterminding the whole event? And that he is now the object of search of that rather ruthless Major Martinez?"

A slight flicker of emotion, apprehension perhaps, crossed his face.

"I cannot imagine why they would do that," was all he said. But I had struck a nerve.

"Tell me, just who are these Children of the Talking Cross?" I asked.

"I have no idea," he said.

"Oh I think you do, Alejandro. Why would these people, whoever they are, steal a statue of Itzamna and not the others?"

"Perhaps some political reasons you wouldn't understand," he said, slowly.

"Or perhaps they are just a bunch of young hoodlums defying their parents, and making a nuisance of themselves, drawing innocent people in as they go!"

He gave me a look that I could not interpret, tossed a few coins on the table to pay for his beer, and hurried from the restaurant.

"Well that was brilliant!" I told myself. "He knows all you know, and you know nothing more than you did before. Furthermore he'll never tell you what he knows because now he is convinced you're a nasty old cow!"

I paid for my meal and grabbed a taxi for the Museo. I made the driver stop about a block away, and walked the rest of the way.

I paid my admission, made a pretense for a few minutes of looking at the exhibits, then as I had the day before, ducked through the door on the top floor marked Prohibido entrar and very quietly let myself into Don Hernan's office, carefully locking the door behind me. I did not want to be surprised by anyone, least of all Major Martinez.

Despite the fact that he was well past retirement age, the museum board of governors had let Don Hernan keep his little office in recognition of the contribution he had made to Maya studies in general, and in particular his generosity to the museum. Many of the exhibits on the floors below would not have been possible without his donations.

It wasn't much of an office really, just a dark little cubby hole at the end of a long hallway on the top floor of the building. The little room still reeked of the cigars he indulged in, and I very quietly unlocked the window and opened it a few inches to allow in some air.

There was not much light in the room, in part because of the gloominess of the day, but I was afraid to turn on the reading lamp. It would have been quite obvious, I thought, if anyone came into that dark hallway.

I could feel my face flush in mortification at the mere thought of being caught searching the office. Whatever would I say, I wondered. That Dr. Castillo had sent me to get something for him? And what would that something be? Indeed, when it came right down to it, what on earth was I doing here and what exactly had I hoped to accomplish? To find a road map pointing to his precise location? I felt a rush of annoyance at myself. Don Hernan had said he was going out of town and would call on his return. He did this all the time, at least he used to. He was probably just fine, and I was being silly.

But there I was, burdened by this niggling anxiety about the old man. I'd already committed a felony, minor though it might be, letting myself into this office without permission, so perhaps I'd just carry on, I reasoned.

I looked around. The room was much as I remembered it: stacks of books and papers everywhere, the odd pottery sherd scattered on the desk. It was going to be difficult to find anything in this clutter, but I was able to locate his desk diary, a logical starting point, very quickly.

There was a comfortable ledge by the window, which led, as is typical in many old buildings to a fire escape landing. After momentarily pondering the idiocy of having a fire escape off a locked room, I began to look at the entries in the diary made in Don Hernan's spidery scrawl.

I was just settling in nicely when I heard footsteps out in the hall.

I stood motionless, hardly daring to breathe. The footsteps stopped right outside the door. I heard the rattle of keys as first one, then a second was tried in the door. I had no doubt that one would fit, and I looked frantically around the room for a place to hide.

At that moment there was a loud rumble as the rather antiquated freight elevator just down the hall groaned into use. Whoever was outside the door stopped fiddling with the lock and stood still. This person or persons apparently wished to be caught in this office as little as I did.

As the freight elevator clanged and rumbled, I carefully slid the window open and crawled onto the fire escape, sliding the window down behind me. As I did so, I heard the lock click and sensed rather than saw the door begin to open cautiously. I pressed my back to the wall to one side of the window.

It was a few minutes before I was able to regain a shred of composure, and standing as still as possible, to take stock of my surroundings. This was no easy task because I am not good with heights, and standing on an open fire escape even on a building as low as four storeys made me very uncomfortable at the best of times, which clearly these weren't.

Looking to the right and down I could see that this was the kind of fire escape where, presumably to discourage burglars, the stairs do not go right down to the ground, but lead instead to another window two floors below.

I did not relish the thought of climbing into someone's office. It was an academic point anyway, because to get to the stairs I would have to cross in front of the window. Since the window was still open slightly I knew that the unwanted visitor was still there, systematically searching the office. It did cross my mind that it could be Dr. Castillo, but I decided that he would not have had to try so many keys to get in, neither would he be searching his own office quite this methodically.

Looking straight down I could see that I was on the back of the museum, on an alleyway of sorts, which opened on to a larger street. Across the alley was another building, windowless on this side. My imagination, overactive at the best of times, began to see accomplices in the shadows of the alleyway.

The longer I stood there, the worse it got. The spurt of adrenalin that had got me out the window so quickly, was now contributing to what I can only describe as a full-fledged panic attack. My heart was pounding so loudly I was sure it could be heard in the office, and I couldn't seem to get enough air no matter how often or how deeply I breathed. I tried concentrating on remaining motionless and breathing normally, but I felt overwhelmed by the need to get away from my precarious and exposed position on the fire escape, no matter what the risk of doing so.

A small rational part of my brain was still functional and assessing my situation, I guess, because I became aware that I was leaning against something uncomfortable, which I eventually realized was an iron ladder. By craning my neck I could see it led to what appeared to be a flat roof. As slowly and quietly as I could, I turned, put one foot on the first rung, then moved in slow motion to the second.

I was very close to the top of the ladder when I hit a loose step which clanged, metal against metal, in what seemed to me to be the loudest noise in the world.

I heard someone start to raise the window, and with my last ounce of strength I hauled myself up and over the top to lie face down on the gravel surface of the flat roof. I remained there absolutely still, imagining

someone coming out on the firescape and up the ladder. But no one did, and after what seemed an eternity, I heard the window close, and a loud click as it was locked shut.

After several more minutes of motionless existence, I rolled over on to my back and sat up. Over my shoulder I could see a large metal tank next to a brick wall, which I took to be the top of the elevator shaft.

I began to edge my way backwards towards the tank, thinking it might afford me some protection. I felt even more exposed up there on the roof than I had on the fire escape, and I wanted to huddle in a corner until the danger had passed. I thought if I could get to that tank, I could rest in its shadow, and figure out where to go next.

My hands were bleeding from pushing myself along on the stones, but eventually I felt my back touch the tank. I tried to wedge myself in tight against it. But as I reached out, my hand touched another, cold as death.