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Opening extract from

The Joshua Files: Invisible City

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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 a 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 at my sudden violence in Mum's eyes.

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 Guatamela. 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 automtically 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 11 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 June 19. 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 15, 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.



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 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 shaked 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 the 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 Cancuen for four days before his death. On June 12, he'd flown out of Cancuen, 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 June 16, 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.



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

Geez ... 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?



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 June 12. And the plane crash on June 16 – 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 June 12–20? 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. June 12–20. So he left Cancuen 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, June 12–20. 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?



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 practice."

"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