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opening extract from

# The Comet of Doom

written by

## Karen Wallace

published by

**A & C Black Publishers Ltd**

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*To Ivor, with love*

First published 2009 by
A & C Black Publishers Ltd
36 Soho Square, London, W1D 3QY

www.acblack.com

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ISBN 978-1-4081-1498-8

A CIP catalogue for this book is available from the British Library.

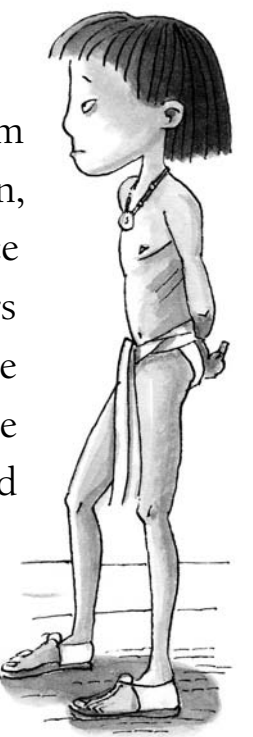
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Printed and bound in Great Britain
by CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading RG1 8EX.

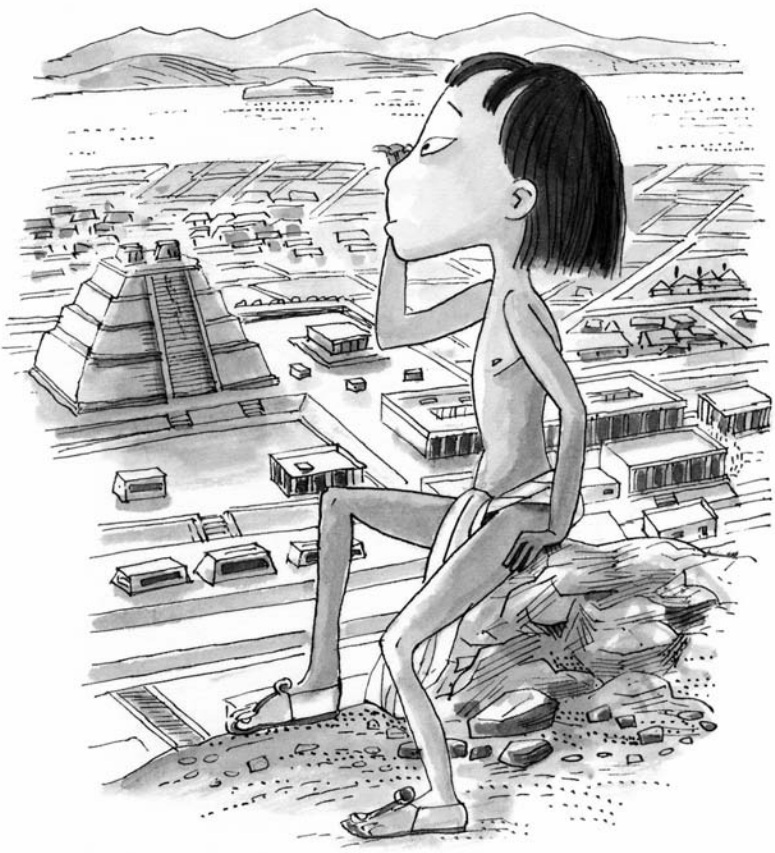
# Prologue

**On the mountainside above Tenochtitlan, 1511**



My name is Chantico and I am an Aztec. My city, Tenochtitlan, is the most beautiful place under the sky. My ancestors built it on an island in the middle of a lake. Now there are temples and palaces and thousands of painted houses. Each one has a garden full of sweet-smelling flowers and shady green trees.

When I look down from my secret place on the mountainside, I can see canals crisscrossing the city like blue ribbons and the tiny shapes of people paddling in their canoes.



I come here to write about Tenochtitlan in the word pictures of my language. My uncle, Ahcambal, who is soothsayer to our great king Moctezuma, gave me this special paper, which folds up like a map. He said it would last for ever, just like our wonderful city.

How was I to know my uncle would be wrong?

# Chapter One

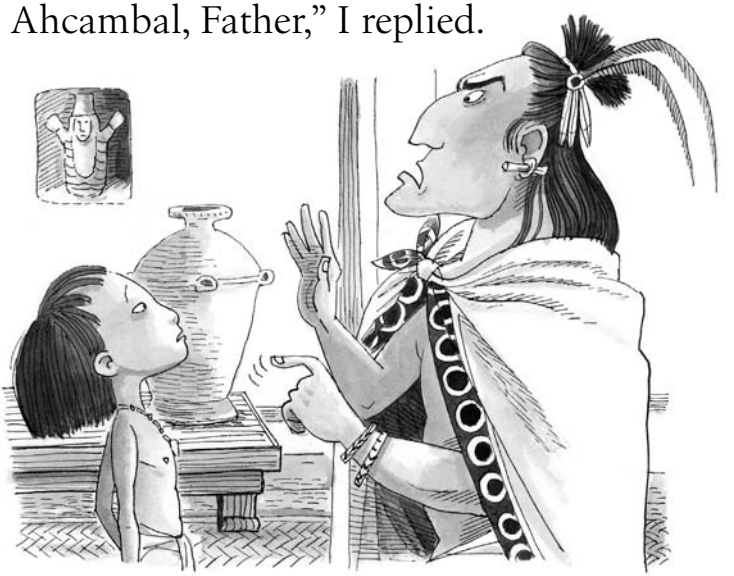
In some ways I live the same kind of life as any other Aztec boy of my class. My father, Tenoch, is a great warrior. He can throw his spear faster and further than anyone I know. But *I've* never wanted to be a warrior. I hated the wooden sword and shield my mother gave me to play with. I almost preferred the toy loom and apron that belonged to my sister, Tayanna. Well, *almost*. Being a girl isn't much fun unless you happen to like cooking, cleaning and embroidery.

As far as my father was concerned, there was nothing more glorious than

being a warrior and dedicating your life to the service of our king. He was very proud that he had captured hundreds of prisoners, who had all been sacrificed to the god of war so the king would be successful in battle.

"How will *you* serve our Lord Moctezuma, Chantico?" he asked me, when I was still very young.

"I will be a soothsayer like Uncle Ahcambal, Father," I replied.



"What do *you* know about being a soothsayer?" my father demanded.

"I know what is going to happen before it happens," I said. "My uncle says I have the gift of second sight."

"What nonsense," my father snorted.

But it was true. It's something I've had ever since I was little. I would tell my mother that we were going to eat seaweed biscuits before she had even decided to cook them. Or to plant her corn seedlings because I knew it was going to rain. Sometimes I would see something in a dream before it actually happened. It was like looking into the future.

"Really, little know-all," my mother would say. "You must learn to keep your lucky guesses to yourself."

"He's nothing but a loud mouth," my father would add in a sour voice.

But something must have made them change their minds, because one day I was sent to study with my uncle. With him, I learnt how to paint word pictures, which is how we write down the ways of our people.



"You must draw lots of footprints – to show how far our ancestors walked to find the right place to build Tenochtitlan," my uncle would tell me, taking the brush from my hand. "And this shape, like a tiny puff of wind, shows when a man is speaking."

My older sister Tayanna never talked about my gift. She was too smart for that. She knew I wasn't lying and she never called me names.

In fact, Tayanna was the smartest girl I'd ever met. Not only could she remember all the legends Uncle Ahcambal taught me, she was brilliant at embroidery. She could make a word picture with a needle and thread almost as fast as I could paint one.



Now, here we were, sitting in our house by the canal, having one of our normal family conversations. As usual, my father was in a sulky mood because I wasn't a warrior like him, and my mother was making the pancakes we call *tortillas* and trying to keep the peace.

"If I was a warrior, I'd want to be like you, Father," said Tayanna sweetly, pretending not to notice the scowl on his face. "You are the best spear thrower in the city."

"You are very clever, for a girl," said my father in a self-mportant voice. He always liked being flattered. "Perhaps you should help your brother with his lessons."

My mother held out a plateful of *tortillas*. "How many would you like, Tayanna?"

The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. "Three," I shouted. "She wants three!"

Then I burst out laughing because I could tell from the look on my sister's face that I was right.

"Chantico!" bellowed my father. "Where are your manners?"

I knew he was going to cuff me around the ears, so I ran into the street as fast as I could.

"Where are you going in such a hurry?"

It was my friend, Pochotl.

"I'm running away from my father's bad temper." I replied, looking over my shoulder.

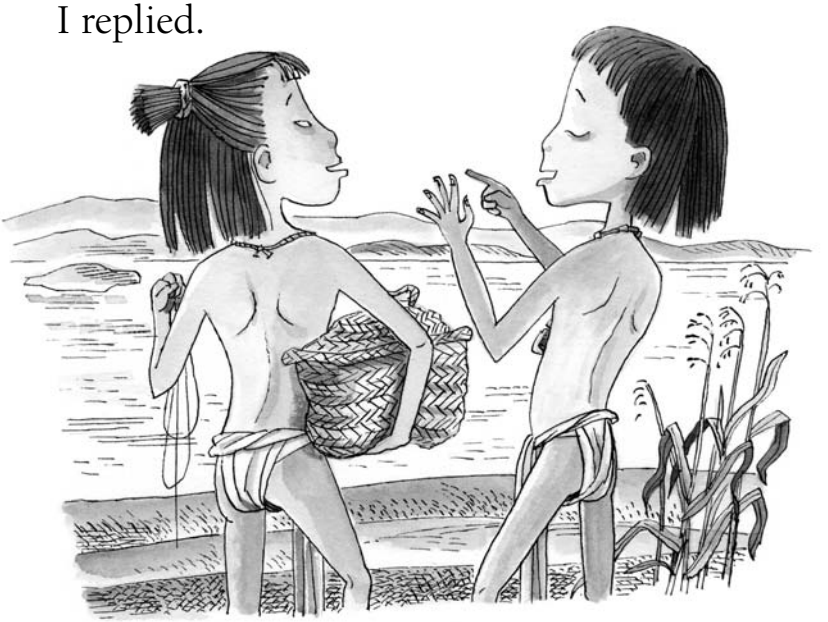
"Do you want to come fishing?" asked Pochotl.

It was perfect timing.

"Yes! I'd *love* to come fishing!"

Pochotl grinned and held up his basket. “How many fish will we catch, little know-all?”

I closed my eyes and saw seven silver fish. “Four for me and three for you,” I replied.



Pochotl smiled. Last week I had dreamed that King Moctezuma wanted to eat a dish of rabbit stewed in chilli and chocolate on his birthday. Pochotl had

told his father, Maxtl, who was head of the royal kitchen, about my dream. And, sure enough, the king had been so delighted with his stew that he gave Maxtl a tiny rabbit carved out of gold.

*Now* Pochotl believes me when I say I have the gift of second sight.

"Three fish sounds good," said Pochotl. "By the way, my father says he owes you a favour."

I laughed. When would *I* ever need a favour from the head of the royal kitchen?

We ran along the edge of a canal, past men in canoes carrying melons and cooking pots and cages of chickens. I loved the way everyone called out greetings to each other as they paddled across the city.

Pochotl's canoe had two painted eyes to watch out for the water goddess.

We climbed in and he untied the twine that tied it to the wooden posts. I picked up the long pole that lay on the bottom and pushed us gently into the water.



Pochotl didn't go to the same school as me. He was training to be a carpenter. It was a friendship that suited us both. Pochotl showed me how to build wooden boxes to keep my word pictures dry. And I told him the stories my uncle Ahcambal taught me.

As we floated silently in the reeds by the lake shore, we found ourselves staring at the towering stone walls of the temples in the middle of the city. Even though they were miles away, they were so huge we could see the yellow stone sparkling in the sun.



Once, Uncle Ahcambal had taken me to the courtyard of the temples to see prisoners being sacrificed on the high altar. Hundreds of men stood silently on the steps with their heads bowed. My own father had probably captured some of them.

Everyone believed it was an honour for a captive to be sacrificed, but the thought of a sharp knife slicing into my chest had made me flinch, and I worried that Uncle Ahcambal might think I was a coward.

"Tell me a story," said Pochotl, as he let out his fishing line.

I looked across at the temple that was dedicated to the Feathered Serpent, the god that created our world. It was one of the tallest temples in the courtyard.

"One day, legend says that the Feathered Serpent will come down from

the sky and destroy everything," I began. Then I stopped because Pochotl was shouting with laughter.



"I asked for a *story*," he cried. "Not a *joke*!"

But as he laughed, the air turned cold around us and I found myself shivering. Somehow, it felt like Pochotl was laughing at the Feathered Serpent himself, which was a dangerous thing to do. No matter how small the insult, gods always take revenge.