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Guatemala

Despite what Uncle Bob had said, it took Peter a while to find the big old house. The people he asked as he climbed the hill just told him to go all the way to the top, but when he got there, all he could see were the Strange Hotel to the left and a big driveway with a sign reading, **Strictly Private – Keep Out!** straight ahead.

So where was the big old house?

Amanda lived at the Strange Hotel and she would certainly know where this big old house was. But Peter didn't want to give her another chance to show off how much she knew and make him feel stupid. All he could think of to do was to set off along the nameless driveway, creeping cautiously past the **Strictly Private** sign in case it attacked him. If you ignored such signs at his previous home on Evil Island, the chances were you'd end up in a

crocodile.

His nerves on edge at the thought of crocodiles, the sudden shout which came from behind made Peter jump.

"Are you looking for the big old house?"

Peter turned to see a girl of about his own age coming up the hill behind him. She had long curly hair and freckles. He didn't think he had seen her before.

"I can take you there," she said.

"Do you know the way?" asked Peter.

"I'd hardly offer to take you there if I didn't," the girl said reasonably. "What do you think I am, a practical joker or something?"

Peter grunted. "Well, I do know someone like that." He was thinking of Amanda, of course, though admittedly she seemed better behaved since that awful business with Algernon.

"Well don't worry, I know the way, all right," said the freckled girl. "I moved in a few days ago. I live there."

"Wow," said Peter, very impressed. "You own the big old house?"

"No, of course not," the girl replied. "I'm too young to own a house. My father owns it. He and I live there and so

does my awful Uncle Percival. Oh, and what seem to be two hundred Australians, but that's another story. My mother and my brother will be living there too, but they're away on an adventure at the moment."

Peter was even more impressed. "What kind of adventure?"

"Oh, just an ordinary run of the mill adventure," the girl explained. "They run in the family, as you'll discover. Anyway, let me show you the house." She smiled broadly and led the way up the driveway.

"Are you sure it's safe?" asked Peter. "That sign—"

"What? The one saying **Private – Keep out?**"

"Yes."

"Don't worry about that. I live here so the sign doesn't apply to me, and I hereby appoint you as my friend, so it doesn't apply to you either. Does that set your mind at rest?"

"I suppose so," said Peter.

"My Uncle Percival put it up. He's suddenly got a secrecy thing, but we don't want to encourage him. Now then, I hope you don't mind me asking but why are you carrying a coat stand?"

Peter looked at the angulator he was carrying as though noticing it for the very first time.

"It isn't really a coat stand," he said, "it's an angulator. I'm bringing it for my Uncle Bob to help with your swimming pool."

The girl gave a gasp. "Oh, you must be Peter. I'm sorry, I should have known it was you. I heard them say you were coming on later. My name is Mala. Short for Guatemala."

"That's an interesting name," said Peter.

"Yes, isn't it?" Mala replied, "My father's an explorer so he named us after his favourite countries. My brother is Pat, short for Patagonia, which isn't really a country, but we won't go into that now. I'm pleased to meet you, Peter. I'm sorry I didn't recognise who you were. You must come with me to the house for tea and cake."

Peter was usually in favour of any arrangement involving cake, but he wasn't sure that Uncle Bob would approve.

"I'm supposed to be helping my uncle," he said. "I'd like to come for a cup of tea but I'll get into trouble."

"No, you won't," the girl insisted. "I'll say it was my

fault. After all, it usually is. And anyway, your uncle is having an important discussion with my Uncle Percival. They'll be at it for ages."

"But—"

"Oh look," the girl exclaimed, "you can see the house from here."

The driveway they were following swung sharply to the right, so the big old house now emerged from beyond a copse of trees ahead. It looked enormous. It was made of crumbling old stone and was draped all over with climbing plants on trellises.

Peter gave a whistle. This was even bigger than the Strange Hotel next door.

"It's quite hidden away, isn't it?" said Mala. "It'll be even harder to find when they landscape the garden." She pointed out a long stretch of lawn to the right. "They're going to build lots of hills to hide it away."

Peter was puzzled. "But why? Isn't it hard enough to find already?"

"You'd have thought so, wouldn't you? But like I say, my Uncle Percival seems to have developed an obsession with privacy. He says it's to keep my father's fans away. My

father's famous, you see. Or used to be."

"Famous for what?"

"Famous for being an explorer. He used to write books about his travels. You've probably seen them. They're called *Mr. Flipper's Travels*."

"Hmm," said Peter, "so if your father is Mr. Flipper and you're Guatemala—"

"I'm Guatemala Flipper," said Mala. "It rolls off the tongue, doesn't it? Which reminds me, what do you call an undercover apple?"

Peter said he didn't know.

"A banana," said Mala. "There you are. I'm good at telling jokes, aren't I? I write them myself. Oh look, you can see the excavation now."

As they drew closer to the house, they could see a line of boards extending from the left-hand corner of the building. A truck was emerging from a gap in the line. It was laden down with soil.

"Is that where they're digging the hole for the swimming pool?" asked Peter.

"That's right," said Mala. "Uncle Percival wanted it built, which is strange because I've never known him to

swim before.”

“That truck looks tiny,” said Peter, rubbing his eyes. Even allowing for the effect of the distance, the truck looked remarkably small.

“Yes,” said Mala. “It’s an Australian truck. The Australians are very small, you see, so they build their wagons the same way.”

“Hmm,” said Peter. “I didn’t realise Australians were so tiny.”

“Neither did I,” said Mala, “but these ones are.”

Peter was not convinced. He had always got the impression that Australians were big and brawny. He wondered if there was more than one place called Australia.

Mala began to explain about the house’s construction and how many bedrooms it had, while Peter found himself wondering if it had screeching watch-geese on the lookout for bogeys, the same as they did at the Strange Hotel. There was plenty of noise, which increased the closer they came to the house, but it didn’t come from watch-geese. It came from the work that was going on in the excavation. Peter wondered if Uncle Bob was in there, waiting

anxiously for the angulator. He realised he ought to deliver that first, before any tea and cake.

Then suddenly Mala broke off from what she was saying and grabbed hold of Peter’s arm.

“Oh dear,” she said. “It looks like Uncle Percival is waiting for us.”

A man stood by the door to the house, watching them approach. He was smartly dressed in a suit and tie and had greasy, slicked back hair. His eyes were dark grey, drained of colour.

“Be careful,” Mala whispered to Peter. “I don’t trust my uncle any more than I can throw him. And believe me, I’m total rubbish at throwing.”

As they reached the door, Uncle Percival smiled at Peter. It was an icy, toothy smile. It might have belonged to one of the weirder varieties of deep-sea fish.

“Ah, you must be Mr. Arkenthrob’s nephew,” the uncle declared. “I am pleased to meet you, Peter. My name is Percival Crow.”

“Er, pleased to meet you, Mr. Crow,” stuttered Peter. There was something about this man’s gaze that made speech difficult. Peter thought he might make an excellent

Searcher, as he seemed to be looking deep under Peter's skin.

"I see you have already met my niece Guatemala," said Mr. Crow. "And I am delighted to also observe that you have located your uncle's angulator. I am very pleased about that. He and I have been anxious about it, very anxious indeed. I wonder if I may look at the instrument please?" And to Peter's surprise and dismay, he reached out and wrenched the angulator out of the boy's hand before he had a chance to reply. His eyes were so full of hunger that for a moment Peter was scared he was going to eat it.

"Ah yes," said Mr. Crow, setting the instrument down on its feet and examining it carefully. "This really is very interesting. Here is the on-board abacus. That will be very useful for calculating the angles." He paused to nudge some coloured balls along a wire, grinning in satisfaction as he watched them slide. "This socket here must be where you insert the optional marker flares. And this if I'm not mistaken is the alert and retaliation circuit." He pressed a button and a light started glowing faintly pink. An alarm sounded and a short, barbed arrow emerged from the

central body of the device. A sign lit up, reading: **Launch Rocket? Yes/No/Snooze.**

Mr. Crow gave a nod of appreciation. "All this and lightweight too," he said. "Your uncle is very clever."

Peter was also impressed, but this made him all the more anxious to get the instrument back. He didn't trust this Crow any more than Mala did.

"Yes, my uncle is very proud of it," said Peter. "And he'll be anxious for me to bring it to him, I think," he added pointedly.

"Oh, there is no need for you to trouble yourself any further," replied Crow. "I shall take it to him myself. Your uncle and I will not be much longer. In the meantime, why don't you take some tea? You can keep Guatemala company. It will save her getting under the heels of everyone else."

He gave a rather unpleasant smile at them both and then slinked away, taking the precious instrument with him, his shoes squeaking as he went. Peter was rendered speechless. He tried to call out in protest but could only produce a wheeze. Mala made a face. It was the kind of face you might make if you ate something nasty.

“There you are,” she whispered, “I told you you wouldn’t like him.”

“Who does he think he is,” he managed to splutter to Mala, “snatching the thing off me like that and then walking away with it? The angulator belongs to my uncle.”

Mala smiled rather sadly.

“I’m afraid Uncle Percival is my father’s business manager,” she said. “He organises everything round here – including me if he gets the chance. He thinks I’m lazy but it’s not my fault if I’ve nothing to do, is it?”

Peter shook his head. “That must be very annoying.”

“It is,” Mala continued. “Fortunately, my father always sticks up for me if I tell him I’m having a problem, but I don’t like to bother him very often. He’s got enough on his plate with his expedition. Don’t worry about that instrument though. If there’s any problem about it, I’ll have a word with my father later. Let’s go for some tea, shall we? After all, you have my uncle’s official permission to take it now. The parlour’s this way.” She turned and led the way along a grand oak panelled hall.

“By the way,” she said, “in case you were wondering about that joke I told you, an undercover policeman is a

policeman disguised as a criminal, so an undercover apple would be an apple disguised as a banana. But jokes are never as funny when you have to explain them, don’t you find?”

Peter glanced back to where Uncle Percival had disappeared with the angulator and wondered if it was not too late to go and grab it back. But that seemed likely to get him into more trouble than ever, so he followed Mala and tried to turn his attention to cake instead.

“What was that about a banana?” he asked.

6

The Explorer

Peter and Mala found comfy chairs in the parlour. Tea was served in china cups by a very short man with a beard and a striped shirt. He bowed a lot and spoke in a foreign language. Peter was pleased to see that he also brought some chocolate cake.

“Politblob,” said the man when Peter thanked him.

“That was one of the Australians,” Mala said when the little man was gone.

“But I thought Australians spoke English,” said Peter, taking a piece of cake.

“Our Australians don’t,” said Mala. “The only thing they seem to say is politblob. Perhaps they come from a different part of Australia.”

Peter agreed that was possible.

“They come from a part where there aren’t any hills,”

said Mala. “They don’t like hills, you see. They mainly live underground at home so they’re very happy in holes. That’s why Uncle Percival’s got them excavating the swimming pool.”

Peter tried to remember what he had heard about Australians. He couldn’t remember anything about them being happy in holes.

“Uncle Percival’s trying to get them to landscape the garden as well,” said Mala, “but they’re not going to be happy with all the hills.”

“But the garden isn’t all that hilly,” said Peter.

“It will be when it’s finished,” said Mala. “I’ve seen the plans. It’s part of the privacy thing. There’ll be so many hills, you won’t be able to see the house till you get right up to it.”

Peter still didn’t understand why it needed to be so private. Was Mala’s father really in danger of being overrun with admirers?

“You say your father used to be famous? Was he *very* famous?” he asked.

“Yes, he was,” said Mala. “I’ll show you.”

She went across to a bookcase and returned with a

pile of lavishly bound volumes. They looked old-fashioned and had a musty smell to them. The edges of their pages were coloured in golden pigment. She passed the books to Peter one by one.

“He wrote about his travels all over the world,” said Mala. “His books were very popular. People used to give them as presents – if their relatives had sufficient socks and underwear.”

Peter looked at the titles: *Mr. Flipper in India*, *Mr. Flipper in Italy*, *Mr. Flipper Swims the English Channel*.

“He was a great sportsman as well,” said Mala. “He used to ski and climb mountains and so on, once. He was particularly good at the egg and spoon race.”

“You must be proud to have such a famous father,” said Peter, looking through the books. The front covers bore pictures of a tall, muscular man in all sorts of exotic places, usually smoking a pipe and reading a map. Peter thought there was something strangely familiar about him.

“Yes, I am proud,” said Mala, “but he was at his most famous before I was born. He was too busy exploring to get married while he was younger. By the time he met my mother, he was middle aged and already running out of

places to visit. There’s only limited space on the planet, I’m afraid. He wanted to go to the moon, but he failed the medical.”

“That was a pity.”

“It meant he had more time to spend with me, which he liked, but he missed being able to travel. He tried to write books about closer to home but they didn’t sell as well. *Across London by Bus* was a failure and *Down the Road to the Corner Shop* sold even worse. He couldn’t find a publisher after that.”

Peter could see the problem.

“So that’s why Uncle Percival suggested he come to the Vale of Strange, since he’d been everywhere else. I know you get lots of tourists here, but my uncle says there are other bits that are still unexplored, so that’s where my father will go. I hope they’re not too dangerous though. My father’s not as young as he was, and I worry about him.”

Peter was starting to have a very bad feeling about this.

“You live round here so you might know,” said Mala. “The Vale of Strange isn’t too dangerous, is it?”

“Well,” Peter began, but he was interrupted when the

door opened and a familiar figure appeared. It was the man he and Amanda had met in the library, this time wearing only a towel he had wrapped around his waist. He stood there peering around him in confusion.

“Ah,” he said. “This isn’t the bathroom then?”

“Here’s my father now,” said Mala, “as you might have guessed.”

7

Headlong Pursuit

The man in the doorway still bore a faint resemblance to the young man on the covers of the books, but his hair was going grey and he no longer looked so intrepid.

“Father, this is Peter,” said Mala. “He’s helping to build the swimming pool.”

“Ah good, yes,” said Mr. Flipper, peering across at Peter. “Er, haven’t I seen you somewhere before?”

“Yes, at the library earlier on,” said Peter. “Did you manage to find a good book on the Vale of Strange?”

“No,” said Mr. Flipper, “but I found an excellent volume on geometry. It has greatly improved my understanding of triangles.”

“Will that be of use in the Vale of Strange?” asked Mala.

“Oh, I expect so,” said Mr. Flipper. “Those triangles

get everywhere.”

Peter decided the time had come to speak up.

“Do make sure you find out more about the Vale of Strange as well,” he said. “It will help to know what you’re dealing with before you go.” He wanted to blurt out everything about how dangerous it was in the vale and how someone like Mr. Flipper shouldn’t be going there. But he was scared he would get into terrible trouble if he said all that. He needed time to think what best to do and perhaps to consult Amanda, who could be very annoying but knew much more about the vale than he did. “Perhaps we can have a chat about it when I have more time,” he said. “I have to go to my uncle now but perhaps we can talk tomorrow.”

“Oh, yes, that will be splendid,” said Mr. Flipper. “I look forward to finding out more about the vale. I am hoping to start my expedition in a few days’ time, as soon as the Australians have finished their work for Percival. They’re stout little fellows, you know, small but very muscular. Percival did well to find them. I’ve heard that food is hard to come by in the Vale of Strange so I’m hoping they can carry a trunk full of tuna and cucumber

sandwiches.”

“My father has a very good appetite,” Mala said.

“And trifle too,” said Mr. Flipper. “We must have trifle, though I am unable to choose between chocolate or pear and banana.”

Peter was impressed by Mr. Flipper’s taste in food, but he wondered whether he had in mind an expedition or a birthday party.

“Anyway,” said Mr. Flipper, “I can’t stand chatting here all day. If you will be so kind as to point me in the direction of the bathroom please, Guatemala, I shall be on my way.”

“It’s up on the next floor, Father,” said Mala. “Shall I take you up there?”

“Don’t worry, my dear,” said Mr. Flipper. “You stay there and talk to your friend. I’m sure there will be a passing Australian I can ask if I need further guidance. Goodbye for now.” Then he gave a wave, turned round and bumped into the door he had closed behind him. “Ah,” he said, “silly me.”

When he had finally managed to find his way out, Mala turned to Peter and shook her head.

“He’s always had an awful sense of direction,” she said, “but when he was younger it didn’t matter. It used to make his adventures all the more interesting for the readers. *Mr. Flipper in China* was set entirely in Japan, but nobody minded. His books always had that element of surprise. The trouble is now he’s not in the best of health any longer. I’m not sure he’ll be able to cope with this Vale of Strange.”

Peter wasn’t sure what to say. He had the same doubts himself.

“Do you think the Vale will be too much for him?” asked Mala. “Do tell me what you know about it, Peter. Ever since we moved here, I’ve been asking everyone I’ve met about the Vale of Strange, but no one will tell me anything. All they say is to make sure I wear my sturdy boots and get some glop. So I bought some glop but now I don’t know what to do with it. It’s very frustrating.”

Peter shuffled uneasily. He was on the verge of blurting it all out now. How Mr. Flipper seemed too inept to cope with bogeys and heeble-greebs and all the rest of the very dangerous strangeness in the Vale. How he should pack up and go back home and stick to writing books

about buses and corner shops. But just as he was about to speak, there came a dreadful commotion from outside the house. There was lots of shouting and what sounded like gunshots.

Peter and Mala both scrambled to the window to see what was happening.

“Uncle Bob!” cried Peter in alarm, for his uncle was running past the window with a wild look on his face. He was being chased by a throng of Australians, some wielding guns.

“What are they doing?” cried Peter. “Why are those Australians chasing my uncle?”

“He should stop running,” said Mala, looking on in horror. “He could be killed if he doesn’t.”

“It looks like he could be killed if he does,” said Peter. “I need to go and help him.” He hurried to the door and out into the hallway, almost skidding across the polished wooden floor as he ran. He could hear Mala behind him, calling him to come back, but he had to try to help his uncle.

As he sprinted along the hallway, an Australian appeared from a door beside him and Peter tensed in

alarm. The Australian seemed as shocked by events as Peter, however. He turned and disappeared through the door from which he had come, yelling a fevered 'politblob' as he went.

Eventually reaching the front door, Peter emerged just in time to see the band of Australians disappear round the copse of trees he had passed on his walk with Mala. They seemed to be heading for the gateway at the top of Peculiar Hill. He could only presume they were still pursuing his uncle.

Peter gave chase across the lawn, vaguely aware of urgent cries behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of Mala and her uncle with several Australians standing by the door to the house. He was pleased to see they were showing no signs of joining the pursuit.

Looking ahead as he rounded the trees, Peter saw the mob of Australians come back into view, still giving chase to Uncle Bob who was doing well to maintain his lead. His uncle was not especially fit, but he had the advantage of longer legs than his small pursuers. Peter hoped he would make it as far as Aunt Maggie's shop and lock himself

inside. The trouble would come if he tired before he reached it.

Aware that his uncle might need his help, Peter tried to quicken his pace but lost his footing and fell to the ground in a heap. When he picked himself up, he could no longer see any trace of either his uncle or the Australians.

Feeling both frustrated and sore but renewing the chase as best he could, he passed the top of Peculiar Hill and the sign saying **Danger – Keep out!** but still he could see no sign of those he pursued. He scurried on down the hill, assuming that Uncle Bob would have made for Aunt Maggie's shop, where his faithful blosh would be on hand for protection.

Later, Peter wished he had taken more time to decide which way to go – and had taken more note of the distant screeching of watch-geese.

