

THE SECRET SCROLL

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A NOVEL BY

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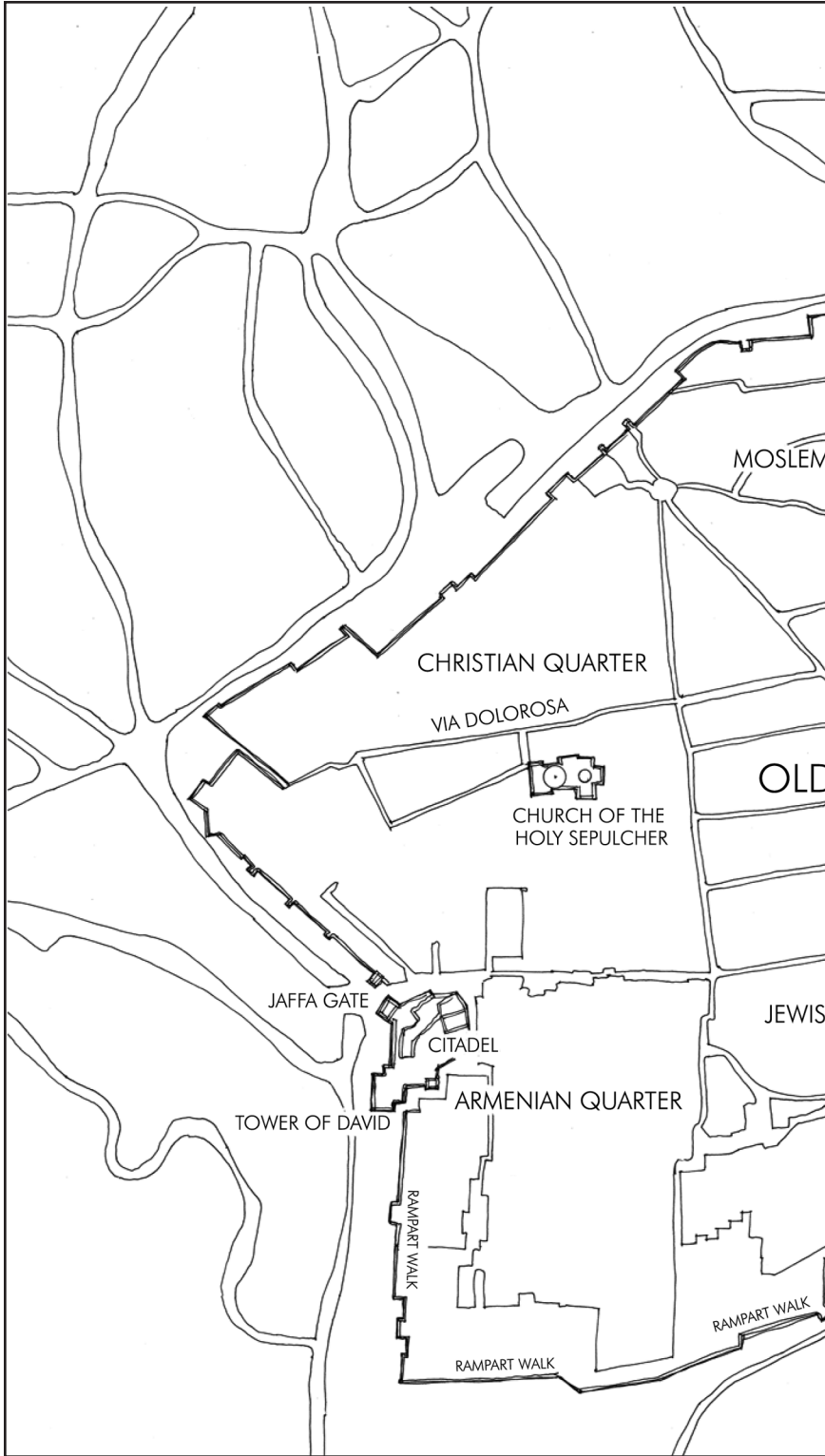
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First Edition

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DEDICATION

To my family and friends
To my ancestors
To all the people I loved who are no longer with me
and
To you, my readers



MOSLEM

CHRISTIAN QUARTER

VIA DOLOROSA

CHURCH OF THE
HOLY SEPULCHER

OLD

JAFFA GATE

CITADEL

JEWIS

TOWER OF DAVID

ARMENIAN QUARTER

RAMPART WALK

RAMPART WALK

RAMPART WALK



ROCKEFELLER MUSEUM

QUARTER

VIA DOLOROSA

LION'S GATE

TEMPLE MOUNT

MOUNT OF OLIVES

CITY

DOME OF THE ROCK

TEMPLE MOUNT

WESTERN WALL

H QUARTER

RAMPART WALK

DUNG GATE

JERUSALEM

THE SECRET SCROLL

Chapter 1

JOSH COHAN WAS FEELING SPIRITUALLY HEIGHTENED. He had visited countless sites in more than thirty countries, but Masada was like no other. It sat like an island in the sky, a fortress atop a desert mountain plateau keeping eternal watch over the Dead Sea some thirteen hundred feet below. Josh moved away from the crowds to an ancient stone ledge and, from there, stared at the deep, blue, cloudless sky above. He cast his eyes downward to the Dead Sea and realized that he was taking in the same view that the Jewish fighters had nearly two thousand years before, when they faced the might of Rome. The landscape hadn't changed.

He closed his eyes and listened to the rustling of the wind. He allowed himself to sink into the moment, but instead of lulling him, the sound grew louder and louder, first becoming the ominous hiss of a serpent and then swelling to a crescendo of voices. Like a Greek chorus, the thousand voices chanted...

From the beginning to the end: freedom, compassion, tolerance, sacrifice....

In his mind's eye, Josh saw a lamb being washed away in a river of blood. Flames rose from the earth, suffusing the clouds with a deep, bright red.

The disembodied voices reverberated in Josh's ears. When he opened his eyes, he saw the shadows of countless people on the ground.

One...one...one...one...they chanted.

But when he looked upward to see who cast the shadows, there was nothing but sky and the fluttering sound of invisible wings.

Josh had visited Masada three times before, and three times the voices had whispered to him. But he had never experienced anything like this before. He was a man of science, and although he loved the stories this desert held, he was trained to find the truth in artifacts and bones. The historical power of the place had simply caused his imagination to play tricks on him. The voices, of course, weren't real.

But what if they were? Even if they were purely the product of his imagination, might they carry some meaning beyond the safe perimeter of the ancient past?

Josh drove north toward Jerusalem on Route 90, an Israeli-protected road. To his right was the deep blue of the Dead Sea, and beyond, illuminated by the late afternoon sunlight, the Jordanian mountains. To his left, the Judean desert stretched outward in an expanse of hills and caves so vast that it had concealed the Dead Sea Scrolls for nearly two thousand years. Josh wondered what secrets were still buried there today.

But he was taking a leave from active duty as an archeologist. This sabbatical was precisely what he needed: a restorative break from the departmental politics back at the university museum. Israel beckoned to him not only as a scholar, but also as a man—a cultural Jew if not a practicing one—and it was time to heed the call. He had felt transformed the moment he landed at the airport in Tel Aviv. Gazing at the azure sky, smelling the air, Josh sensed that he had touched sacred ground. He belonged in this place. Something bonded him to the land itself.

His thoughts returned to the solemn majesty of Masada

and he felt himself walking amongst its ancient citizens. The energy of the place was undeniable, even all these miles away.

In his reverie, the image of the cave ahead barely registered. It was enough, though, to unleash a torrent of remembered dreams—years' worth of visions Josh had no ability to explain.

He is reeling through the desert, the menacing hiss growing louder as the flying serpent spits and lunges closer and closer behind. And then the sand around him ignites into an otherworldly fire, the flames stretching out ahead of him on either side as if in protection, lighting his way through the dazzling whiteness of midday. He follows this path toward the hills, but the Earth seems to have been upended, with the sky below and the solid rock somehow hovering above. And directly in front of him, suspended from the ropes of flame, is the opening of a cool, dark cave, its lip curving dramatically downward to the heavens.

His head spinning and the blood thumping in his eardrums, Josh jammed on the brakes and the Land Rover fishtailed off the side of the road. Fortunately, there were no other cars nearby and he came to a skidding stop with nothing more than the sound of gravel crunching beneath his tires. Josh took a deep breath and tried to steady his hands against the steering wheel. But still dizzy after another minute, he opened the door and stumbled out to find some grounding.

The hot sun felt heavy, as if it were weighing down against his skull, and he bent over at the waist, head hanging and elbows braced against his knees. Josh was afraid he was going to throw up, but instead the spinning sensation passed as suddenly as it had begun. Breathing more easily now, he opened his eyes and stared between his knees at the expanse of desert beyond.

It was exactly as he had seen it all of those nights—the sky below, the hills above...and the unusual shape of the

opening itself. He had seen nothing else like it in Israel, nothing like it anywhere in the world.

Slowly, with mounting trepidation, Josh got his backpack from the car and began to climb toward the cave. Within minutes the dirt and sweat had mingled in muddy streaks down the back of his neck. He'd been this close before in his dreams. He'd been to the edge of the cave—but never inside. As he approached the curving mouth, he wondered if it was actually possible to enter. He'd always awakened before he could take that step. What would happen now?

Josh's nerve endings bristled as he stepped across the threshold. Something was waiting here for him; he knew this with certainty, just as he'd known it in every interrupted dream. He turned on his flashlight and aimed it ahead of him, moving deeper into the unknown. As he walked, his nervousness dissipated, replaced by a sense of tranquility he'd rarely experienced before. Even as his curiosity remained on high alert, his body felt incredibly relaxed.

Moving deeper, he saw rock projections jutting out from every side, ready to trip unwary trespassers. Josh wouldn't stumble here, though. He beamed his light onto the wall across from him, revealing a series of faint drawings. He moved closer and observed letters that he recognized as Aramaic and, under them, a broken line. He held his flashlight two to three inches from the inscription, but realized that it would be impossible to translate. Parts of letters were totally missing, while other characters had faded away through age and decay. Josh looked instead to the broken line. It appeared to point downward.

It's telling me to dig.

It wasn't a thought; it was a conviction.

Josh dropped to his knees and felt the ground at the bottom of the wall directly under the markings. It was near-

ly as solid as the rock—much too hard to dig—but he knew he had to try. He retrieved a small spade from his backpack and began to probe the resistant topsoil. After long minutes, he'd made it ten inches below the surface. There, he noticed the top of a buried object. Josh reached down and touched what felt like clay. When he examined it more closely, he immediately recognized it as an artifact from a distant age.

In every version of the dream he had known that there was something waiting for him in the cave, though he never got to enter. Josh was certain now that he was supposed to find this object.

He worked feverishly, losing all concept of time. As he dug, he couldn't help but remember the last dig he'd been on—the one that drove him toward this sabbatical. It hadn't been his project; in fact, it wasn't even his area of expertise, but when a senior colleague makes a special request for your assistance, you can't politely decline. Josh knew that much about departmental politics, even before he left for Mexico.

For more than a month he had labored under the merciless Yucatan sun, filtering the dirt, searching for some relic or artifact. This was a standard part of any archaeologist's work—many hours and few discoveries. The excitement and the mystery of the exploration made the search rewarding even if it netted nothing.

Josh had the reputation of being meticulous in his execution of even the smallest tasks, so it was often the smallest tasks that he was assigned. But one day, unexpectedly, he unearthed the tip of a stone unlike the others. Digging with even greater care, he uncovered a statue of an unknown Mayan god. His heart thrilled as it emerged from the earth; this was what he lived for. Josh delicately wrapped the six-inch artifact and went to Coughlin, the gruff yet tenured head of the dig.

“Cough,” he said, unable to conceal his excitement, “I’ve just discovered something you should look at.”

His supervisor studied the artifact. “It appears authentic,” Coughlin said as he stroked his beard thoughtfully. “But I wouldn’t get too excited until we get back to the university and do extensive testing.”

Six weeks later, in a meeting at the University of Pennsylvania’s world-renowned museum, Coughlin announced the discovery to a packed room of faculty, reporters, and students.

“Gentlemen and women,” he said, stoking the drama of the moment, “I’ve made a major archaeological discovery—the statue of an unknown Mayan god. The artifact is in excellent condition and may give us clues to the Mayans’ demise, as it dates from the time period just before their civilization’s disappearance.”

Josh was stunned. Coughlin had failed to acknowledge that Josh had been the one to make the discovery. At that moment, he realized that his department was as much—if not more—about positioning and power than it was about pure science. The notion made him sick.

The next day Josh went to Coughlin’s office.

“I tried to talk to you yesterday after you announced our discovery,” he said, “but you left so quickly.”

Coughlin picked at his right ear. “What’s up? You look upset.”

“Yesterday you never acknowledged that I discovered the artifact.”

“Josh,” he said condescendingly, “you’re part of a team, that’s all. I’m the team’s leader.”

Josh felt his blood run cold. “A discovery of this scale doesn’t come along very often. This was a huge thing for me.”

“Welcome to the real world, Cohan. When you get to my level maybe you’ll understand.”

“I’m not just going to sit back and take this,” Josh said, seething. “I’ll go to the media. I’ll...”

Coughlin put a hand up to stop him. “I don’t think you get the point. I have decades of experience. With that experience comes plenty of influence. If you do anything to undermine me, I can arrange it so you’ll never go on another meaningful dig for the rest of your career.”

Josh was so furious he couldn’t speak. His intuition told him not to proceed, but he did anyway, challenging Coughlin’s false claims. It did him no good. Cough was too well protected by his cronies. Josh knew that he had upset the status quo and that at least a few people saw Coughlin for what he really was; but after all was said and done, that didn’t improve Josh’s situation.

At least he managed to escape the career-ending consequences that Cough had threatened. The only action taken was that Josh was prohibited from working with Coughlin again, and he considered that more of a reward than anything. He assumed that, while they wouldn’t validate his charges against the more senior archaeologist, the university didn’t want to punish him in the face of his obvious accomplishments, either.

Still, the whole experience had left Josh more than a little disillusioned. Maybe he should have listened to his intuition and simply walked away from the entire mess. His instincts had rarely failed him, and he should have known better than to let his ego do the talking. As it was, conditions at the university were too difficult to bear. He applied for a sabbatical in a place where he felt an emotional connection and left for Israel.

It was interesting, Josh thought, that the very mess he had thought might ruin him had helped to bring him here. If it hadn’t been for Coughlin, he may never have been driving down that particular road or made the connection to his dream.

At last, his work paid off. Josh put on a pair of surgical gloves and carefully raised the cylindrical jar from the ground. Although considerably smaller, it was similar to the storage jars that had contained the Dead Sea scrolls, found not more than ten miles north of this cave.

Josh took off his T-shirt, delicately wrapped the jar, and placed it carefully in his backpack. He would be able to do a much better inspection of the artifact back at his hotel than here in the dimly lit cave.

It was almost dark as Josh moved carefully down the hill back toward the highway. As he neared the road, he saw a beige military jeep parked next to his Land Rover. Beside it were two Israeli soldiers, tall, well-built, and serious. And both with their guns pointed directly at him.

“Take the backpack off and put it on the ground,” they ordered, “then put your hands on your head.”

Josh complied. “I’m an American archaeologist vacationing in Israel,” he told them, his voice shaky.

The fairer of the two soldiers walked toward him, lowering his gun. “What’s your name?”

“Josh Cohan. I’m a professor at the University of Pennsylvania.”

“Where is your identification?” the man demanded, heavily armed and now only a foot away.

Josh’s heart pounded and his mind began to race. If they opened his backpack and found the jar, it would be confiscated on the spot. He couldn’t lose another find, especially not to a couple of overzealous kids who’d probably destroy the artifact just trying to figure out what it was. He would have to talk his way out of this, but how?

The other soldier’s rifle still aimed at his heart, Josh weighed his options and decided to go with the friendly foreigner approach.

“So how about that desert?” he joked, trying to lighten the tension in the air.

But neither soldier answered. Instead, the blond one swung his own weapon around onto his back and took one more step forward. Josh could feel the man’s hot breath on the side of his neck.

“Documentation,” he demanded again, sweat glistening in the furrows of his stern set brow.

“I’m afraid it’s inside the car,” Josh said, hoping the lie wasn’t evident on his face.

He heard the safety disengage from the other soldier’s rifle as he was pushed toward the front of the Land Rover, legs spread and arms out against the hood. Not wanting to draw attention to his backpack, Josh waited until the soldier was kneeling down, frisking his calves and ankles, to steal a glance in the direction where it lay, all but forgotten for now.

Suddenly there was a hand in his back pocket, and then without explanation the soldier walked away. Josh heard the crinkling of paper and then the static of a walkie-talkie as the soldier radioed in to his command center. He had found Josh’s driver’s license and the photocopy of his passport he always carried when he was on the road. Josh was stunned. He was certain that they had been in the backpack. He was nothing if not methodical....

After a long, uncomfortable silence, the walkie-talkie crackled again and someone on the other end reported back, “He’s okay.”

The Sephardic-looking soldier lowered his weapon at last.

“Can I pick up my backpack?” Josh asked, as casually as he could manage.

“What’s inside?”

“Only personal items and a few souvenirs. Would you like to inspect it?”

It was a gamble, but one Josh was hoping would pay off. He'd already been cleared by the higher-ups, and he was betting that the two kids were as eager as he was to get out of the heat and back on the road.

The blond soldier looked at the backpack for several seconds, then finally raised his eyes back to Josh. "That won't be necessary."

Josh grabbed the pack and flung it over his shoulders.

Another military jeep pulled up, carrying two more armed Israeli soldiers. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," said the soldier with the dark hair. He nodded to Josh. "You can go."

Josh hoped that his relief wasn't obvious as he returned to his car. What would have happened if they'd discovered the jar in his backpack? He never could have convinced them to let him hold on to it. That business with Coughlin would have been nothing compared to losing this artifact. Josh wasn't too big on messages from the beyond, but something in that jar had been calling to him for many years.

The full moon shone brightly on the desert as Josh drove toward Jerusalem. In less than an hour, he'd be back at the Jerusalem Pearl Hotel. There, at last, he could inspect his discovery.

As he drove past the oasis of Ein Gedi, the import of the last few hours settled on Josh. His recurring dream was no longer just a dream. It had led him to the jar...where would it lead him next?