

CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE

THE

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

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— TEN DAYS AGO —

JEBEL AL-LAWZ, TABUK PROVINCE, SAUDI ARABIA

Vindication tasted like sweat. Backbreaking, limb-aching sweat. Tzivia Khalon pushed onto her knees and used the back of her gloved hand to wipe away the perspiration plastering her hair to her face and neck. She needed a break. In the logbook, she recorded her progress, sketched what the B23 grid site resembled, then stood and started for the sorting tent.

Noel Garelli, her assistant, looked up from B20. “Giving up?”

Tzivia snorted. “In your dreams.” Though they’d all thought about it. Two weeks onsite, and they’d uncovered nothing of significance, nothing directly connected to the Bronze Age or the Israelites. But there was no way she’d walk away so soon. Dig sites could go from mundane to extraordinary in the space of an inch.

Just an inch. *I just need an inch.* Just 25.4 millimeters to clear her résumé of the Kafr al-Ayn disaster three years ago, when a toxin from an artifact stolen from her mentor, Dr. Joseph Cathey, nearly wiped out a village. The president of the United States had been killed in the aftermath. Despite being cleared of negligence and wrongdoing, Tzivia bore the dent in her reputation from that incident. It had endangered grants. Stalled donations.

Jebel al-Lawz was her chance to expunge that humiliating experience from her life. One amazing find, and she would be sought after. Respected. She wouldn’t let anything or anyone

ruin this chance. Not even her nosy brother in the States. Or his brooding, handsome friend, Tox Russell.

Tzivia huffed. Tox had died three years ago. It still stung. Not to mention the way he'd shut her out when they arrested him. Told her to move on. "*It's for your own good.*"

She *had* moved on—she was now *Doctor* Tzivia Khalon. Had it not been for the weight Dr. Cathey's name carried, Kafr al-Ayn could've destroyed her career and life. But being an authority on Ancient Near Eastern studies, he pulled a few strings and had them cleared of misconduct. When she compared her résumé against his, she might as well be in kindergarten. Her focus had strictly been Ancient Near East, but Dr. Cathey had degrees in Hebrew Bible and semitic epigraphy as well as Ancient Near Eastern Studies. With two doctorates, he now served as an adjunct professor with Oxford's Oriel College.

She scanned the archaeological dig site. Her site. With the help of Dr. Cathey, they'd won the grant to search for answers about Jebel al-Lawz, the land purportedly where the Israelites had encamped. Gaining the permission of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage to work this site hadn't been easy, but the promise of cooperation and sharing all artifacts got her team onsite. Having Dr. Cathey backing the dig gave her clearance to even be here, gave the dig credibility, and provided her with an authority who could review any recovered artifacts.

Years ago, the Saudis had erected a fence with a guard hut around this area to keep out looters and vandals. They believed something significant happened here, and she shared that belief, though she wouldn't fall prey again to Dr. Cathey's religious ideals—that was his one detraction. Or should she call it "distraction"? He believed the Bible to be more than a piece of literature. He believed Moses had been here. That the blackened mountain in the distance was where the Hebrew patriarch received the Ten Commandments.

Many scholars refuted the site. Some had outright called her desperate for coming here. Supernaturally carved tablets or

not, she and her team would attempt to answer whether this site truly was the biblical Mount Sinai.

“Just one inch,” Tzivia whispered as she pivoted.

Earth gave way beneath her feet. Rocks scraped and clawed her legs, yanking her downward. With a scream, she shielded her face. Terror grabbed her by the throat. Dirt and rocks smothered her face.

Then didn't. She felt the world fall away. Coldness wrapped her tight in the split second before she thudded to a stop.

Pain slammed into her back. She landed, staring up at the hole. It seemed impossibly small for her to have fallen through. Dirt dribbled into her eyes. She jerked away, peeling off the ground. Her hand suctioned against mud. Mud? This arid region wasn't exactly fertile terrain. She squinted around. To the left, a short, two-foot-high stone circle. Worn, broken boards straddled the stones.

Plop! Plunk!

Water rippled. Water! The stones encircled the lip of a well.

Wiping muddy hands on her tactical pants, she climbed to her feet. Before her—she froze. Mud bricks laid out in a consistent pattern. A wall? She bent, her fingers tracing the mortar that had formed through the years between the bricks. No, not years—*centuries!*

“Tzivia!”

“Here,” she called, waving a hand behind her but unable to take her eyes off the wall. Something protruded from the ground at the base. Gloves back on, she gently brushed aside the silt. “Noel, c'mere!”

“Sending a rope down.”

Tzivia followed the lower edge of the wall with her gloved finger. How far back did it go? Bricks crumbled at her touch. Her heart climbed into her throat as years of history were reduced to rubble and dust. “No no no.” She drew back her hand, afraid to create any more damage before it could be logged. Afraid she'd undo the miracle just discovered.

The wall stood about six feet tall. What was this place? A

dwelling? It didn't look right for Bronze Age. Her hope dimmed. She shifted and checked right and left. It stretched the entire length of the underground cave.

But there was a well here. So . . . Tzivia stepped back a few paces. Took in the wall. *What's behind you?* She went to her knees. Shoulder to the wet ground, she peered into the new hole. Darkness. She yanked the torch from her hip holster and flashed it into the darkness.

Light stabbed the ebony blanket beyond. Dust particles danced in the beam. A room!

Whoosh!

As another section of wall gave way, Tzivia shoved back and turned away. Coughing, she blinked quickly to clear her eyes.

"Tzi!"

"I'm okay," she said around another cough. "We need to stabilize this. It's all damp and collapsing. My cave-in must've weakened the supports or something." A sweet, pungent odor filled the tunnel, nauseating her. "Ugh."

"Look out below," Noel called.

With a hefty thump, a rope ladder dangled behind Tzivia. Noel's frame filled the hole topside. Once down, he screwed up his face. "What is that smell? It reeks!" He steadied the ladder as Basil, one of the interns, clambered down, too.

Flashlight in hand, Tzivia wiped her face. Something caught her eye in the darkened room. She froze. Something had moved. A dark shape. Shadow? Tilting her head, she bent over the partially destroyed wall and sucked in a breath at what she saw. Dust caught in her throat and made her cough. Basil started coughing, too.

"Should we go back up?" Noel asked, his lanky frame towering over her.

"The air's stale, but we'll be okay for a few more minutes." Tzivia pointed. "Look." Shoved up against the far side of the earthen room sat a chest, maybe two feet by two feet. Frayed rope handles didn't look like they'd hold its weight. "Come on." They climbed over the crumbled wall, causing more of it to

collapse. She cringed at the damage but allowed the lure of discovery to lead her on.

“I’m not feeling so great,” Basil muttered as they squatted.

“There’s something stamped in the lid.” She wasn’t ready to admit it looked like a Templar cross. “Let’s get it to the sorting tent.”

Noel nodded, grabbing the sides of the chest. He lifted it.

Crack! Pop!

“No!” Tzivia cried as the bottom fell away.

Three objects hit the ground.

Sucking in a disbelieving breath, she lifted one of the items in her gloved hand. “Noel!” Exhilaration spiraled through her veins as Basil aimed his flashlight at it. “I think . . . this is a Hebrew *miktereth*.” Though most censers were made of pottery, these were bronze and roughly six inches in length, with a handle supporting a small cup-like space for the burning incense. She traced the markings. A giddy laugh surged as she looked at the other two censers on the ground. “I can’t be sure of the date down here—it’s too dark and we need to test scrapings—but they look Bronze Age.”

“But . . . bronze?” Noel asked, pointing to the metal censer.

“True.” Most miktereths of this age were made of pottery. “Except. . . .”

“Did we find it?” Noel’s voice was but a whisper. “Please, tell me we found it—this is where the Israelites camped, isn’t it?”

She laughed, looking up at him with history in her hand. “I believe we did.”

* * * *

— TWO DAYS AGO —

OKOMU FOREST RESERVE, EDO STATE, NIGERIA

“If you do this thing, do not think I will come save you.”

Slinking through the humid jungle, Cole “Tox” Russell almost grinned at the words of his “conscience” vibrating in his comms

piece. “If you’re right,” he subvocalized, leaning against a tree and scanning the dense vegetation through his thermal binoculars, “there won’t be anything to save.”

“It is a bad idea.” His own personal Jiminy Cricket came in the form of a six-foot-five Nigerian named Chijioke Okorie.

“It’d be boring if it wasn’t. Remember, three minutes.” Their self-imposed assurance that no tangos came out of there alive.

Ambush. They’d agreed the probability was high. As in more likely than not. Enough to tell anyone with half a brain not to engage. But Tox was missing that half. This half had him stalking through the jungle because of a twelve-year-old girl. No way could he sit back on the savannah, watching cheetahs outrun gazelle, knowing his niece, Evie Russell, was in the hands of sadistic guerillas.

Not after the promise he’d made in a pool of blood.

So here he was, shirt soaked to his chest and boots rubbing blisters into his ankles and toes, working his way north to the camp. Wiping away the sweat, he scanned the forest, alert. Nerves thrumming.

“It is not safe, *Ndidi*,” Chiji huffed.

Tox nodded to no one but himself. His friend had it right—this wasn’t safe. In fact, it could end his life. But securing the objective would fulfill that promise.

He glanced up at the canopy, where fading sunlight poked through defiantly. Sweat slipped down his temple, traced his jaw, and raced along his neck. This had to be done. And even with the calloused warning of no help from his friend, Tox knew Chiji would come. Tox had made the mistake once of thinking Chiji only warred with Bible verses. He could still feel the *thwack* of the stick across his back, unprepared for the skilled kali strike that face-planted him in the West African desert.

Skulking, Tox made his way around the tree trunks. The guerillas had made it too easy and too obvious. Yep, a trap. Within a few hours of the hovel he called home—where he’d managed to stay hidden for the last three years—and Evie just happens to end up held hostage by some rogue outfit with

connections to DC?

Right.

Despite the infinitesimal possibility that Evie was actually here, Tox couldn't ignore it. Could not risk the potential threat against her life.

"Two targets, twenty yards north of your position," Chiji said from his nest in one of the tree houses overlooking this narrow swath of forest. Tox bet the national park hadn't imagined their perches for bird watching and appreciating the unique environment would come in handy as the vantage point for a mission.

Tox moved east to flank the targets. This was stupid. Really stupid. Anyone setting him up would also know it was stupid to try. He wanted to believe nobody was asinine enough to play chicken with the life of a child. Especially not with him involved. He'd more than earned his "Toxic" moniker.

Snap!

The sound of breaking branches sent Tox into the buttresses of a nearby kapok, its gnarled roots looking like the foot of a monstrous dog, nails digging into the soil. Shoulder pressed to the trunk, he peered around, keeping his movements slow and fluid as the palmate branches swaying above. Nothing sudden to draw attention. Using his legs, he pushed up.