

THE
CITY OF LOST
SECRETS

KATIE MCVAY

The City of Lost Secrets

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PROLOGUE

Jerusalem, Israel

June 2009

The cave was dark, cramped and surprisingly damp, with less headroom than I had anticipated. I would have to crouch to move around, or crawl on hands and knees.

Once inside the square inner chamber I moved to the east wall and sat on the dusty floor, allowing the dark to envelop me.

He came in after me, flashlight in hand, ready to show me what I had traveled thousands of miles to see.

The flashlight's beam illuminated the loculi that extended out from the main chamber like spokes on a wheel. There were six of these deep niches, two on the east wall behind me, and two each on the north and west walls. The precious contents of the niches had since been removed. Now, every last one of the loculi was empty.

Dr. Uri Nevon removed his hat and slid closer to me. "Was this worth the wait?" he asked.

"Absolutely," I said, peering through the dark of the chamber. "So, where was it? Which loculi?"

He held the flashlight out to me. "Right behind you."

I took the flashlight and hastened to turn around to face the east wall of the chamber, thousand-year-old

rock and rubble crunching beneath my feet. Now looking in the right direction, I trained the light into the deep niche Uri had been referring to, the one on the far right-hand side of the wall that at one time had held two small limestone boxes, or ossuaries.

I closed my eyes and pictured one of the ossuaries in particular. In my mind's eye I saw the stray marks that were carved onto the two-foot by one-foot rectangular stone box in various places. There were enough markings to make the ossuary seem significant, but they were oddly and haphazardly placed as if to suggest that someone hurriedly etched them there. To the untrained eye, these marks would look more like primitive graffiti than an ancient inscription. I thought the markings represented letters of some archaic language, perhaps Hebrew.

English is everywhere in Jerusalem but, in the time I spent in Jerusalem, I would grow used to hearing and seeing Hebrew, as well. I heard vendors and passersby yelling it to each other across crowded, chaotic roads; saw signs and street markers and billboards scrawled in its curly-cued alphabet; and, most memorably, listened intently—in a moment of impassioned excitement—as Uri whispered it in my ear.

Ossuaries were nicknamed “bone boxes” because they contained the remains of the dead. This cave, therefore, was a tomb.

I was concerned with one bone box in particular.

“Jesus son of Joseph,” I said, reciting the English translation of the inscription on the ossuary that had been my obsession of late, my whole purpose for being here, in Jerusalem, in this tomb.

I looked at Uri, my new Israeli companion. His

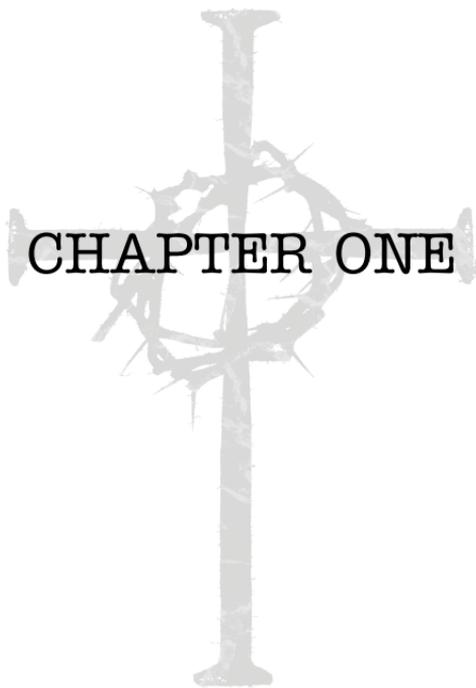
handsome face was freckled with dirt and his brown eyes were bright with excitement.

“Jesus son of Joseph, Yeshua bar Yosef,” he repeated in English and then in Hebrew, the language inscribed on the bone box in question.

We were both silent for a moment, allowing the significance of our surroundings to make its impression on us.

Uri spoke first.

“Welcome to the tomb—the final resting place—of Jesus.”



CHAPTER ONE

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

May 2009

It was a decent crowd for a rainy Monday night.

Philadelphia, my hometown, was the last stop of my fifth book tour, and I had been hoping for an excellent turnout.

I was sitting just inside the front doors of a chain bookstore in Center City, behind a table stacked with copies of my newest book, *Heaven Can Wait*, a chick-lit novel about a depressed yet successful bookstore owner named Casey who is visited by an angel. The angel is there to solicit Casey's business savvy. However, Casey thinks the angel is there to take her mother, who is battling breast cancer. Turns out, God's love of all things Gucci has dried up the celestial coffers, and Casey's help

is needed to get heaven back in the black.

Ultimately, it's a novel about family and forgiveness and financial responsibility.

Whatever.

It doesn't really matter. All you really need to know is that over the years I've carved out a name for myself as a chick-lit novelist who writes about young, professional, attractive women who experience minor hiccups attempting to find success in life and love.

My novels haven't changed the world, or won any awards, or landed on any best-seller lists, for that matter. I'm not that type of writer. Damn, I wish I was, and I've certainly aspired to be, but I don't think I have it in me. My talent lies in giving my audience an easy read, a temporary escape, and characters they can identify with.

But I can't complain. My wonderfully talented and shrewd agent, Jenny, took a chance on me, an unpublished author with a passion for writing but with very few writing credits to her name. She recognized that my writing style was chick-lit in nature and, after years of hard work, I was publishing book number five.

And now here I was promoting it. This part of the gig wasn't bad. I liked connecting with fans and hearing what they had to say, be it positive or negative. And I'm very fond of traveling.

A red-headed woman in her mid-twenties approached the table, my book in hand.

"Miss Beltane," she said, "Casey is such a great character."

"Please, call me Mara," I said. "And thank you, I'm glad you think so."

She handed her book to me to sign. "She has red hair, like me." Then she paused. "And...and, well, I found

that I was really able to identify with her.”

As I opened the book to make an inscription, I was struck by how trifling her comment seemed. *She connected with the character because she had red hair?* Was the character that shallow?

I signed my name, handed the book back to her, and thanked her again for coming.

The young woman clutched the book to her and suddenly looked wistful.

“I lost my mom to breast cancer last year,” she said, her eyes suddenly glassy with tears. “I’m glad Casey was spared the type of pain I endured. I’m glad you allowed her mom to live.”

I was surprised by the confession of this woman and equally filled with admiration for her strength to tell it. She was a literal stranger, and yet I felt the sudden urge to reach across the table and hug her.

And then, of course, I felt something else: guilt for having underestimated her, a young woman who had lost her mother way too early.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” I said.

The red-headed woman smiled wanly. “Thank you.”

“Were you close to your mother?”

“Yes and no. We had our moments. But I loved her very much and will miss her the rest of my life.”

At that moment I thought about my own mother. We’d had our moments, too. Been through a lot together. What mother and daughter haven’t? Images of my trials with my own mother flooded by brain.

When I was a junior in high school my mom read my diary and learned I was no longer a virgin. On college graduation day I yelled at my mom and called her weak for seeing a shrink. There was the time she confessed she

thought I was making a mistake by marrying Thomas. There was the time she thought I was making a mistake by not having children with Thomas. There was my knowledge of my father's infidelity. There was my father's funeral.

Things worked out more or less okay with my mother, but to this day our relationship is marked by guardedness on both our parts. We bite our tongues instead of speaking to tame our shared conceitedly dogmatic tendencies, and generally agree with each other on everything.

The red-headed woman thanked me for my time and as she walked away I told her that I appreciated her sharing her story. And then I made a note to myself to call two people ASAP: My mother, to tell her I loved her; and Jenny, to suggest that we donate a percentage of the book sales to a breast cancer charity.

Deciding to donate to charity was just the first idea that came to me in a flash in the space of a few days. The next one—a rash, dangerous plan—came the very next day.

At the time, while signing books for fans, I had no idea that in less than seventy-two hours the charity and my conversation with the red-headed fan would be relocated to the back of my mind. That's because I'd be far from the city I called home, half-way around the world, in fact, chasing a story and a dream. And in the days and weeks following my return, I'd wonder what would have happened had I stayed in Philadelphia. How different my life might have been if I decided not to get on that plane. If I'd played by the rules.