

The Joshua Files: Invisible City

All I am sure of is this: I've found another possible motive for Dad's murder. Not a jealous husband but a search for a historical treasure. A search that led my father on a one-way trip – deep into the Mayan heart of darkness.

I get right on to the search the very next day. There are clues in Dad's emails. I'm no expert on Mayan history, but Dad's study in our house is chock-full of books. So I swot up on the ancient Mayan civilization.

When I was a little kid, we'd spend long summers in Mexico, usually around the site of one of Dad's excavations. The names have all faded into a blur now. Truth is, I didn't pay much attention to where we were. It was all pretty much the same; ruined temples, jungles, tents and trying to find enough flat land for a game of football with the local village kids.

I didn't pay attention to the archaeology. Which now, I kind of regret.

I've never heard of any of the Mayan cities mentioned in Dad's emails – Cancuen, Calakmul, Ek Naab, Chechan Naab. So, I look them up in Dad's books. Cancuen is in Guatemala – a Central American country next to Mexico. Calakmul is in southern Mexico – Campeche state.

Close to where Dad's plane crashed.

Cancuen and Calakmul were important cities of the Mayan kingdom. Calakmul had this powerful ruler once, a guy called Yuknoom Ch'een. He was on the throne for ages.

But I find nothing about Ek Naab, nor Chechan Naab.

I find an online Mayan dictionary. It's cool – even has a little button you can press to hear the Mayan words spoken. Ek Naab translates as *dark water*. Chechan Naab translates as *knotted snake water*.

I'm playing around on that website when the doorbell goes. It's been quiet lately – for obvious reasons I haven't felt very sociable. Outside the door is Tyler Marks, a guy I recognize from capoeira – my Brazilian martial arts class.

"We thought you was dead," he says with a big grin.

"Not me," I say, deadpan. "My dad."

That rips away his smile. "God, Josh, I'm really sorry. I didn't know. You didn't show up. We wondered if you'd lost interest."

"Sort of, yeah. I've got other stuff to do."

"Like what?"

"Just ... stuff."

"You and me both," Tyler says. "But you should still practice."

"Hmmm."

We share an uncomfortable silence.

"What did your dad die of?"

"Of murder."

"You're kidding!"

"No."

"Wow."

“Yeah.”

We stare at each other, saying nothing. But he doesn't leave.

“Thing is, Josh, there's a talent scout coming in from London. Picking guys for a British team to go to Brazil. Mestre Ricardo says they're looking to pick one person from Oxford.”

“Fine,” I reply. “It can be you.”

Tyler looks disappointed. “They have to see me in action. Against someone of similar standard.”

I get it – he wants me to make him look good. “What do you want?”

Tyler's brown face cracks into a gleaming white smile. “Just come to class a couple of times over the next few weeks. Then when this scout comes in September, I can put on a show.”

I scratch my head. “I'm out of shape.”

“Come on. Do you good.”

“You'll owe me.”

“Hey mate, name your price.”

I sigh. “OK, you win.” I grab my skateboard. “But sooner or later, it's payback time.”

So, down at the gym, we spar. Capoeira has all these pretty special rituals, so I wear the white *abada* clothes, I join in with the songs, but inside I'm strangely detached. We sing in Portuguese, the old songs of slaves striving to keep body and soul together. We flex our muscles against each other, aiming for graceful mock combat.

Thousands of miles away, a deteriorating corpse awaits a burial. Nearby, an innocent man languishes in prison for a murder he didn't commit. These thoughts don't leave me for a minute, even as I retaliate against Tyler's cartwheel attacks. I'm drawn to those steamy jungle towns with their mysterious-sounding names. Chechan Naab and Ek Naab.

Why are there no references to them in any books? Or on the Web?

Are they lost cities, like the ones in the movies where Indiana Jones found the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy Grail? Was my dad looking for some incredible, ancient relic with the power to change the world?

Well, now even I begin to think I'm cooking up some daft fantasy. But I can't help it. Dad was involved in something heavy. I'm sure enough of that.

After the capoeira, we hang out together at Tyler's playing Xbox. Tyler talks non-stop about girls he reckons fancy him. I don't say much, just listen. I don't have those kinds of stories to tell; worse luck.

It's still warm and sunny as I'm walking home. I'm through the gate when I notice something odd.

The curtains are drawn – every last one.

I know I didn't draw them. I guess that it must have been Jackie. I'm about to go over and ask why she's been in our house, when I hear the sound of an upstairs door closing.

The noise comes from inside my house.

I take my key and open the front door. I'm still only slightly puzzled. I step inside and call out, "Hey Jackie, I'm back."

There's no answer. I stand absolutely still, listening.

And that's the first time it strikes me that something is really wrong.

There's someone upstairs and it isn't Jackie.

I'm looking around for a weapon when a guy in a balaclava comes hurtling down the stairs like a hurricane. He vaults over the banister and lands right next to me, swings out with a punch. My reflexes are better than I'd guessed because without even thinking, I duck. He narrowly misses my head. With all that momentum, he overbalances and stumbles. I'm in a *ginga* stance right away and aim a *pontiera* – a high front kick at his chest. It lands squarely – he's knocked back. I follow it up with a *chapa baixa*, landing a hard kick to his knee. He staggers into the back room. He tries to slam the door closed but I jam my foot in the door. Big mistake. He crushes the door hard against my trapped foot until I scream and pull the foot free. Again he slams the door – this time it snaps shut. I try to shoulder-charge it but it's no use – he's got something up against the handle.

He's only got one way out now – the French windows.

I can feel the adrenaline pumping through me as I rush out of the front door. I'm round the back just in time to see him dashing across the back lawn, loaded with a black rucksack. I throw myself at him in a flying rugby tackle and get him to the ground.

It's the wrong move. I should have stuck to the capoeira. This time he's prepared for me. On the ground, I'm useless. He lands two punches to my face; I taste blood in my mouth and see stars. While I'm still reeling in a daze, he pushes me off him, starts to get to his feet. I lunge out, grab hold of his balaclava and yank. It pulls off just as he's moving away. In that second I catch a glimpse of him. He's tall, eyes clear green and almond-shaped, high cheekbones, square jaw. There's a faintly astringent smell – aftershave or hair gel.

I could swear, before he heads off, he actually grins at me.

I'm still dabbing at my bloody nose and cheek with Kleenex when Jackie and the police turn up.

They all look at me with an expression that's kind of embarrassed for me. One bad thing happening to you, that's bad luck. More than once and it's almost like it's your own fault.

Inside the house, everywhere I look, objects are strewn; every drawer, every shelf, cupboard has been emptied and the contents tossed around. Jackie takes one look at me and goes straight to the freezer, takes out a bag of frozen peas and makes me press them to my face.

"Horrible bruising you'll get from that, see if you don't," she says in disapproval.

One policeman asks me to go to my room, see what is missing. I trudge upstairs in a daze. My room is every bit as bad as the rest of the house. The guy's taken my laptop computer. I'm trying to process what's happened as I slope back downstairs and tell the police.

Mum's laptop is gone too, and the box for Dad's computer, and a fancy digital camera. "They go for stuff they can get rid of quickly at the pub," the policeman tells me. "It'll be kids looking for money to buy drugs."

"It wasn't 'kids'," I say, annoyed. "I gave you his description. He was in his late twenties at least. He knew what he was doing."

The copper gives me a disapproving look. “You shouldn’t tackle burglars, son. Not ever. I don’t care if you’re a black belt. You should consider pressing charges when we catch the perpetrator.”

If they catch him, is what goes through my mind.

Then he leans in close, says, “Your neighbour seems to think this will be too upsetting for your mother to hear about. In her current condition.”

He leaves out “in the psychiatric hospital”.

I ask, “You think there’s a connection?”

“With what?”

“Between my dad’s murder and this burglary?”

He looks at me blankly. “I don’t see how ... but if you’re worried, I’ll ask DI Barratt to take a look at the case.”

I nod. “Please.”

“It’s not a good idea for you to sleep here alone,” says the copper. “Not after this. Sometimes they come back for what they might have missed. Or for what they think you’ll replace. Best stay away. Just for a bit.”

He makes it sound sensible, but there’s no hiding the fact that within one month I seem to have lost my dad, my mum and my home. I feel pretty rubbish. When it came down to it, I wasn’t up to defending what was mine.

“It’s just temporary, Josh,” says Jackie, laying a friendly hand on my shoulder. I just nod wordlessly. My eyes sting from tears I badly need to hold back.

I don’t believe for a second that it’s “kids”. I think back to Montoyo’s warning to Dad about the Ix Codex. *Those who have sought it have so far disappeared without a trace.*

Yet my dad was murdered, with evidence and everything. Whoever these people are, they’re getting sloppy. They’re beginning to make mistakes.

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Probably because I’m dazed from the punches and my ice-cold bruise, it isn’t until much later, as I’m about to leave for Jackie’s, that I think to check Dad’s study. Is there anything is missing other than the computers? I notice a couple of books on the floor, swept off the shelves. By accident? I kneel down to take a look.

The books are some standard textbooks of Mayan archaeology. I pick them up, replace them on the shelf. There’s a gap. I scan the titles of the remaining books.

One is missing.

Even before I really think about it, I know which one it will be. Because only one book really matters.

One of the John Lloyd Stephens books – Volume II of the two-book set: *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan.*

There’s a whole story behind those books, one I’ve never heard all the way through. But the story is magical to us – the books that brought Mum and Dad together, the books that Dad read as a young boy who was fascinated with travel, discovery and adventure. The books that first gave him the archaeology bug; the dream of discovering a lost city of the Maya, just like his hero the American traveller John Lloyd Stephens, the

first “white man” to see some of the Mayan ruins as they lay undisturbed for centuries, gobbled up by the jungle.

Well, Volume II *is* gone. I take a thorough look just in case, but I know, with a sinking feeling in my guts, that the burglar has nicked it. Why? It feels like spite, but I know it can't really be that. Maybe Dad left a note in there? I slump down into his chair, trying to think.

I can't face telling Mum that her book is gone – not on top of everything else. It isn't just a valuable first edition of *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* – it was her first present from my dad, inscribed with the very first romantic note he'd ever written her.

All I can think of is how I can find some way to replace it. Somehow it has to be possible.

Jackie isn't all that surprised when the first thing I do round at hers is to get straight on to the Internet. I get on to some second-hand book websites and hunt around for any bookshop that has a copy of that book. There are four or five in Oxfordshire, as it turns out. And one even has a first edition.

I almost laugh when I see the address. It's right here in Oxford – a shop in Jericho.

The next day, after school, I take the bus straight there. Tyler calls me on my mobile phone as I'm riding over Magdalen Bridge.

“I got your text about last night. Mate ... what are you like?”

“Didn't arrange the burglary myself, you know,”

Why does everyone act like it's somehow my fault?

“Yeah, mate, I'm only messing. It's just ... what's going on with your life, hey?”

“Well ... there's some stuff I haven't told you about,” I tell him.

“Like?”

“Stuff about why my dad was murdered. Stuff to do with his work.”

“He's a university lecturer, innit? Who'd kill a teacher?”

“He's an archaeologist,” I say, sighing. “And it's ... oh ... complicated.”

“What you doing now?”

“I'm going to Jericho, actually. Looking for a book. Not far from where you live.”

“Can I come with?”

I meet up with Tyler outside the Phoenix Cinema. The bookshop is close by. I go straight to the owner, tell him I'm the one who sent the message through his website. He's put the book aside and fetches it from behind the counter.

It's in good condition, but not mint – not as good as Mum's copy. There's a chance that Mum wouldn't notice if the book was just spine-out on the shelf. I take it to the corner of the shop and inspect it. Tyler peers over my shoulder.

“Any good?”

I tuck a finger into the flyleaf, check the inside. That’s when I see this inscription:

My dearest Arcadio,

Meeting you has been an inspiration. I trust you’ll recognize yourself in this book. Many thanks for fascinating times at Chechan Naab and Tikal. JLS, 1843.

JLS?

It couldn’t be ... John Lloyd Stephens himself? And mentioning Chechan Naab – a place that I can’t find any mention of in books about Mayan cities? The date sounds right to be Stephens, but I can’t tell anything apart from that.

I show the bookshop owner. Did he know about the inscription?

Smugly he replies, “Yes, it’s a hoax, obviously.”

“Why?”

“Well, John Lloyd Stephens didn’t know about Tikal. In fact, he describes its location without knowing that he does. He describes it in this book as a legendary city of the Maya where the Maya are still living – ‘a living city’.”

“A place where the Maya were still living? In the nineteenth century?” I ask, puzzled.

“So rumour had it. Course, Tikal was discovered a few years later. Abandoned, like every other Mayan city. Stephens was propagating a local myth, nothing more.”

“So...?”

“Well,” the owner says, a bit condescendingly, “he’d hardly write an inscription about a city he didn’t even know existed, now would he?”

“And what about Chechan Naab?”

“Now that’s the other problem,” he says. “There’s no such place.”

The bookshop owner is convinced. Turns out that he’s looked into the whole thing. My guess is that he’d secretly hoped it was signed by Stephens. It would have made the book worth a big chunk of money. But he’s happy to sell it for “only” £200.

“£200?” I say, shocked. “You didn’t put that on the website!”

“I’ll take your best offer in the vicinity,” he says.

My “vicinity” isn’t even close. I give Tyler a nod and we step outside on to the pavement.

“I can’t get £200,” I tell him in a low voice. “Not unless ... unless I nick my mum’s cashcard.”

“Do you know the PIN?”

“I sort of ... do.”

Tyler shrugs. “It’s for your mum, isn’t it?” he says. “Hardly *Grand Theft Auto*.”

As we're standing there, a studenty guy in a hoody pushes past us on his way into the shop. I'm about to say something but Tyler distracts me. He's right – it's only a loan. Mum would want the book.

I'm looking over Tyler's shoulder when I notice the hoody guy getting all chatty with the owner. Soon enough they're standing at the cash desk, then a book and money are changing hands.

The owner keeps looking over at me. With a funny look in his eyes, sort of embarrassed.

The hoody guy didn't have much time to find a book. A horrible thought strikes me. I take a harder look at the student, realize that there's something familiar about him. I didn't see his eyes, only his mouth and jaw.

It's when he comes out of the shop, walks towards us, that I catch a proper look. He's trying to avoid my gaze. I look at the paper bag in his hand.

And that's when I remember where I've seen him before. Those green eyes – unmistakable.

“Get him!” I shout to Tyler, as the guy breaks into a sprint behind us.

“Wha...?”

I'm already turning and pelting after the bloke. “He's the burglar,” I yell. “And he's just bought the book!”

I get a flying start but Tyler catches up to me in a few seconds.

The burglar is fast. He's up the street and past the cinema by the time we're even really moving. Before the corner shop he turns left. We're there two seconds later and make the same turn, heading through a gateway and under a brick archway into St Sepulchre's Cemetery. The burglar dashes past the yew trees, vaults a couple of broken gravestones and we do the same.

The whole cemetery is surrounded by a massive building site. There are plasterboard facings all the way around. He runs the whole length, trying to find a way through.

We're almost on him when he finds a gap and dives through.

Tyler squeezes through first, then me. On the other side, we're just in time to see the burglar scooting up the road into the backstreets of Jericho.

We chase him, chests all puffed out, follow him into a little square where there's a bridge over the canal. He's on the bridge, giving us one final look at he crosses.

We're on the bridge less than two seconds later. But he's already nowhere to be seen.

On the opposite bank is another stream of the canal. It's parked with houseboats, bumper to bumper. There are a couple of guys fishing. They ignore us.

I stop, bend down, trying to grab my breath. Between gasps, I manage to ask, “Did you see a bloke in a hoody? Carrying a paper bag?”

The fishermen look at me in silence. One of them shakes his head.

“Nah.”

“You must have!”

“Din’t see nuthin’.”

Tyler and I exchange a grimace. Our gazes fall on the long row of brightly painted houseboats. The guy who robbed my house and swiped that first edition of John Lloyd Stephens, he’s in one of them. I know it. But which?

I grab a handful of long grass in my fist, tear it off and scatter the shreds in frustration. Tyler watches in sympathy. The one thing I tried to do to help, and I couldn’t even pull that off.

How can there be any doubt now? That burglar was looking for clues about the Ix Codex.

Whoever these codex hunters are, they have long arms. I might be thousands of miles away from Mexico, but suddenly I don’t feel safe.