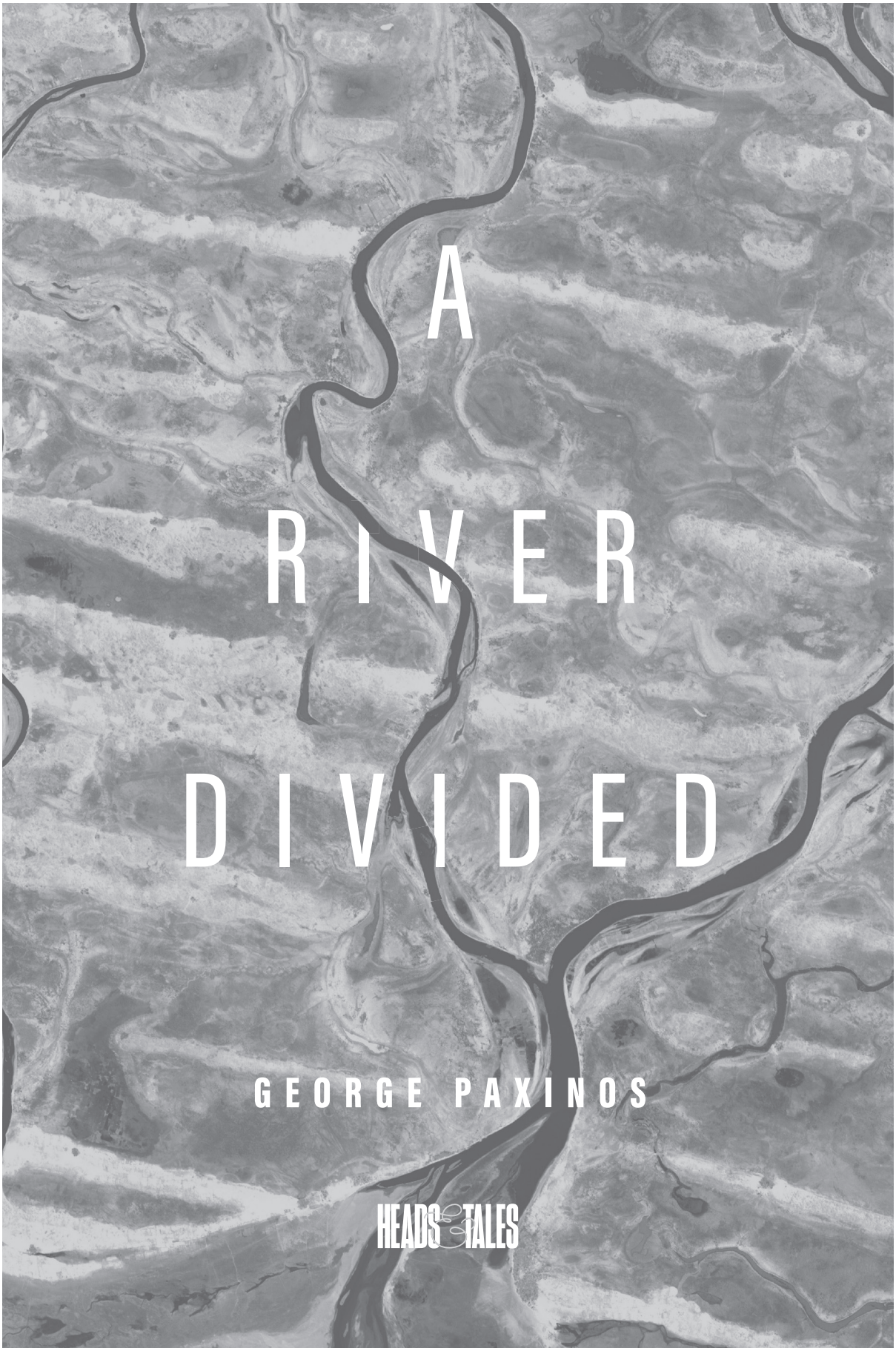
A RIVER DIVIDED

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To Melpo Lekatsa

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I praise the scoring drought, the flying dust,
the drying creek, the furious animal,
that they oppose us still;
that we are ruined by the thing we kill

From “Australia 1970” by Judith Wright

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Prologue

DEAD SEA SHORE, AD 75

"With love eternal," said the woman as she kissed her gold bangle and placed it on the top of the bones. She saw it slide between the human remains to rest at the bottom, where they had earlier placed the cylinder and the sphere.

The three men sealed the ossuary with its stone lid, before lowering it to the depths of the pit they had dug.

All four of them tore their clothes in grief as they sang—

In the splendor of His glory,
He shall give life to the dead,
And rebuild the city of Jerusalem,
And complete His temple there.

Shreds of their clothing fluttered in gusts of wind. In the distance, they could still make out Masada through the sand storm that veiled it.

"The nine hundred and sixty died free," said the woman, tears filling her big brown eyes. "You are now near the bones of our brothers."

One by one they knelt and kissed the lid that sealed the ossuary. They piled earth on top. Each of them placed a rock for remembrance.

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Book One

EVELYN

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Chapter 1

DEAD SEA SHORE, JANUARY 10, 1997

The skull stared back at Evelyn through its empty eye sockets.

She could see that its dome, the calvarium, had been removed. Clearly visible were also a pelvis, a femur and what seemed to be a clavicle. The bones were human.

Feeling like a fugitive, Evelyn stood up to look around. She was on the cusp of a shallow depression, surrounded by lifeless earth, flat and gray. The sky was not graced by a bird, the earth not by a tree. Even the mountains beyond were devoid of vegetation. Marching beside the road were pylons bearing powerlines, oddly juxtaposed against Masada, which resembled a volcano with a flattened top. On the horizon to the south, erosion had sculpted the earth into low-lying profiles, like barges stranded on a dry lake. A few kilometers to the east, Evelyn could make out the shimmering Dead Sea.

Though she was only about a hundred meters from the road, the desert had the silence of a cemetery. Just then she became aware of the fortress-like security station at the Masada foothill. *If I can see them, they can see me*, she thought.

She went down on her knees to look again into the ossuary. It was about a meter deep and there were other things in it besides the

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bones. Pushing herself back, she sat on her heels and put her hand on her chest. Her heart was racing and she paused before reaching for the camera.

This had once been a person who breathed, who played, who loved, she thought.

The camera felt heavy and getting the settings right took time. Activating the flash, she captured images from as far into the ossuary as possible without touching the bones. It was a reburial. Was it recent or ancient? Could there be an engraving?

She started removing the soft earth around the ossuary. The earth was easy to shift, but kept falling back into the area she had cleared. Sweat was running down her face and between her shoulders. The sun was getting to her. It would make sense to return when it was cooler. Repositioning the lid, she concealed the ossuary with earth.

Earlier, on her way back to Jerusalem after visiting Masada, she had left the road to get a good photograph of the mountain. Visiting the place where nine hundred and sixty people chose death over slavery had been an emotional experience. But this was eclipsed by the discovery of the ossuary.

Now, the rugged landscape unfolded around her as she drove through the Judean Desert following Route 90 along the coastline of the Dead Sea. She felt like a schoolgirl dazzled by her first crush. *It is illegal to dig, but I have to,* she thought. *Once I tell them, the authorities would never let an amateur like me anywhere near this place again*.

She passed the sign for the Qumran Caves—the Dead Sea Scrolls. A shepherd had stumbled across them. *The soil here is full of history,* she thought. *This person might have died recently or thousands of years ago.*

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In the King David Hotel, Michael was just reaching for his shirt when Evelyn burst through the door of their room saying, "I found a skeleton near Masada!"

"A skeleton near Masada," he repeated. "Was he crossing the road?"

"I'm serious. It was in a stone ossuary." She sketched the shape of a rectangle with her hands. "I was photographing Masada when the rock I was standing on slipped from under me and rolled into a trough. When I looked down, I saw a straight edge. Nature doesn't have straight edges, so I brushed the earth aside. It was a lid. I tried to remove it, but it was stuck. I got the crowbar from the car."

"How come nobody had seen it before you?" he asked.

"There might have been more soil on it. Wind erosion? Rains? And mini earthquakes happen here all the time, you know—the Masada Fault Zone."

"And you're sure it's human."

"Look at these." She scrolled through the images on her camera. "The calvarium has been sawn off. It must be human. And the orbits—the eye sockets can't be anything else."

Michael zoomed in. "Alas, poor Yorick." He frowned and shook his head. "I should've come with you. The gynecologists' brunch was a dead affair—more dead than your skeleton."

"I'm going back this afternoon," she said, looking at him in what could only mean invitation.

"You might get me interested in archeology, after all." He kept scrolling through the images. "They must have taken out the brain," he said. "Otherwise why remove the calvarium?"

"It could've been somebody important."

"Well, darling, there was a massacre at Masada."

"But this is a reburial. It's not just a body dumped in a shallow grave."

"How do you know about reburials?"

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"My Greek grandfather. He would have been an archeologist had he had the chance. And, you know, he was the one who taught me Greek."

How beautiful and full of life she is, he thought as she paced the room. Beyond her, outside the window, the midday sun was illuminating every corner of Jerusalem. "So, when are you going to report it?" he asked.

"I want to examine it before the authorities tie me up in red tape. I won't contaminate it. I just want to document it."

"Cheer up … It only took them twenty years to release the Dead Sea Scrolls. At that rate, you'll still be this side of sixty-five."

"Why wait for twenty years for something you can do this afternoon?"

Michael noticed Evelyn's eyes were not focusing on him. She was consumed by her find. He watched her sink into the armchair, her arms draped over the sides of the chair, her long legs on the footrest. He forced his eyes up to her face. Her mixed Greek–Maltese ancestry had produced light olive skin and green–brown eyes under long brows that almost met above a Grecian nose. But it was not only her appearance that enchanted him. It was how she tilted her head when listening, how she raised her shoulders when uncertain, how she bit her lip when in suspense. A simple flick of her wrist as she dismissed something could set his heart racing. *If I don't help her, she will do it alone,* he thought.

"Michael, this could be the find of my life."

"Evelyn, I thought that was *me*."

Warm air coming through the car window caressed Evelyn's face as they headed back to the site that afternoon. She glanced at Michael

as he was driving, his blue eyes fixed on the road. His hair, once blond, was increasingly white, but his toned body suggested a younger man.

Why remove the calvarium unless you want to extract the brain? she kept thinking. "I can't take my mind off that skull," she said. "Do you think they preserved the brain?"

"I can be certain of only one thing, Evelyn—it wasn't the Egyptians who buried him. They heedlessly discarded the brain and sent millennia of pharaohs brainless to the afterlife."

"And there wasn't much love lost for the brain amongst the Jews either." She looked at her GPS. "Slow down; we need to stop in five hundred meters. We really have no idea how old it might be."

"Just as well you took the coordinates. It all looks the same around here."

Evelyn did not respond and simply led the way to the depression, following the rocks she had noted before. Crouching down, she swept away the earth with her hands, revealing the lid of the ossuary.

Michael glanced over at the security station. "Are you sure we're allowed here?"

"We're certainly not supposed to be doing this." Using her hand as a visor, she also looked across at the station. From this distance, it seemed innocuous, a toy house. Even when she had visited Masada, the guards were nowhere to be seen, but they were no doubt observing everybody.

"Good idea to pretend we're here for something else." Michael opened his arms. "Evelyn Camilleri, kiss me, darling."

She let him pull her into an embrace and kissed him on the cheek. "Look at all the blue tents over there. If they allow campers, this can't be such a sensitive area. Besides, this depression is deep enough to hide us."

"Yes, but is there a depression to hide the car?"

"I just hope they don't think it has broken down. Last thing we need is help."

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They spread out a sheet, weighting down its corners with rocks. "Ready?" She lifted the lid of the ossuary, this time with Michael's help.

Michael leaned over the opening and, motionless, stared inside. Watching him, it became real for her. She had discovered a skeleton, from who knows how long ago. She had brought the past into the twentieth century.

Evelyn recorded the length and width of the ossuary in her notebook. Slipping on gloves, she reached in and gently pulled out the skull. The calvarium was just underneath it. After showing Michael how to dislodge dust from the bones, they started arranging them in rough anatomical order on the sheet.

Something glittered among the small bones at the bottom of the ossuary near two clay containers, but the assembling of the skeleton had to come first.

There was no thickening of the skull or joints and the dentition was nearly intact, indicating the skeleton belonged to a young person. She picked up the pelvis. It was small and heart shaped. "This is male, isn't it, Mr. Gynecologist?"

"There is no way a baby could've come out of that."

Something caught her eye. She picked up another bone and showed it to him. "Look. There's a scratch on this one. It has to be a metacarpal, right?"

"It's been a mighty long time since I did anatomy, but, yes, it looks like it."

On close inspection, the size and curved prismoid form of the shaft confirmed it. Despite the dust and age, the abrasion was clear.

Evelyn glanced at Michael, who had stood up and was stretching as if to touch the Judean sky. She watched him squat once more and resume ordering the bones on the sheet, as if he were assembling the pieces of a puzzle. This time, he was examining each bone to determine if it belonged to the left or right side of the body and then matching

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it to the joints it should have formed. After he finished ordering the major bones, he started inserting the smaller ones.

"Here he is," he said. "We've built a man from a pile of bones."

She took a big breath. "He's coming together. Good height, broad shoulders, long tibia and femur. Good size skull, too."

"He is taller than you, Evelyn." He showed her a small bone. "Look. This tarsal has an abrasion too."

She took it from him. "Abrasions on the hands and feet?" she murmured.

"I haven't checked every bone. There could be more with marks."

"The ones we've checked so far seem clean," she said.

"This could go back to the battle of Masada. Maybe a Roman officer was given a second burial."

"He must have been *somebody* to remove his brain and rebury him. But Romans didn't rebury. They usually crem—"

A roar drowned her voice. Two low-flying military planes were disappearing into the distance, outpacing the noise they were making. Evelyn threw her arms around Michael who said, "Evelyn, we've got to put him back. They were above us. If they saw us, we'll be surrounded in minutes."

Grabbing the sheet by its corners, they brought it close to the ossuary, returned the bones, replaced the lid and covered it with earth. They hastened to the car.

"Do we drive off?" he asked.

"I've never been more scared in my life," Evelyn said. She grabbed his hand and placed it on her chest. "Can you feel my heart? You look troubled, too."

"Well, this is a lot more exciting than you promised, Evelyn."

He added, "Anyway, how can you expect me to be calm when you put my hand on your breast?" He stroked her hair. Reclining his seat, he said, "The removal of the calvarium must have been postmortem."

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Realizing what he had just said, she asked, "Why so?"

"Because there is no evidence of fracture. It was done with precision."

"Oh, of course. But the fractures to the hands and feet? They may not be postmortem."

"What are you thinking?"

"Michael, could it be crucifixion?"

"Perhaps you have discovered a criminal."

"But why would a criminal be reburied? Remember, this is a *reburial*."

"This proves the money and the power was in the hands of the criminals even then."

"Shouldn't crucifixion have left more marked bones, though? Perhaps I'm wrong. So few skeletons have been found with signs of crucifixion. This is very confusing."

"Who knows, Evelyn. Perhaps the bones scratched one another."

They sat in the car, letting the desert consolidate its silence.

❧

"Can you stand some more excitement?" she asked.

With no sign they were being watched, they had retraced their steps and the skeleton was once again taking shape before them.

Evelyn noticed another marked bone. Its length and thickness indicated it was one of the true ribs. It did not have the sharp angle of the first rib, or the thickness of the second. There was a blemish on its inferior surface, on the sternal side, as though a sharp object had nicked it. "Michael, I wonder what this is."

"It's a fractured middle rib from the right cage."

"Yes, but do you think it has any significance?"

"It could have been an old fracture, darling. Who knows?"

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"I have to read up. It could be someone known to history—a general, a governor, a high priest."

"Carbon dating would narrow the window."

"It's probably from the Roman occupation," she said. "Crucifixions were not popular before or after."

"Let's arrive at the data before we arrive at the conclusions, if you will."

"Yes, but indulge me for a moment," said Evelyn. "We know of someone who was crucified and was speared at the side. Perhaps …" She trailed off, hoping he would complete her thought.

"Oh, come now!"

"You're right," she said feeling deflated. "Of the thousands of crucifixions, what are the chances?"

"You know, darling, one of the most common injuries to the thorax is a rib fracture. Really, even a strong cough can do it."

"Yes. I'm getting ahead of myself."

"Overinterpreting data is not your style, Madam DNA. And the marks on the hands and feet may also be nothing sinister."

Evelyn was handing him small bones, which he was inserting into the skeleton, when she found buried in the dust an ornate bangle with little pendants. It was heavy—possibly solid gold. "Michael, look," she said, handing it to him.

"Let's grab this and forget about the skeleton, Evelyn."

"Yeah, right, Mr. Graverobber."

"It's a well-to-do skeleton, though the bling could have been ill-gotten."

"Don't condemn my skeleton. He's innocent until proven—"

"Evelyn, a car!"

She dropped the bangle and thrust the camera at him. "Quick, take my photo!" She stood on a rock and posed with Masada as the

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backdrop, while the car took forever to pass by and disappear down the gently sloping road.

She picked up the bangle again. It formed almost a full circle, its ends ballooning as they confronted each other. Using a tissue she gingerly removed the dust and then held it up to the light. It was bright yellow, its five little pendants catching the sun. One of them bore an engraving. "MM," she muttered. *Is this whispering a story or am I making it up?*

Showing it to Michael, she said, "It's Greek, or maybe Latin. Look, what do you think it stands for?"

"Michael of Masada," he said. She did not respond. "Come on, Evelyn, even prisoners of war have humor."

"You don't think this is serious? It could be an offering from His lover."

"Whose lover?"

"Could be from Mary of Magdala."

"Evelyn, sorry to say, amateur archeologists have also discovered Noah's Ark—in a few places."

"Inexperienced I am, but I am not fabricating anything."

"I thought we dismissed that hypothesis."

"I know. I know. Science is doubt in the face of evidence." Feeling light-headed, she sat down and tried to think of all possibilities. But her mind was stuck on one.

Michael sat next to her. "Jesus was supposed to have been resurrected in body and spirit. His followers would have left not a skerrick for you to find."

She nodded. "More to the point, Jesus would have been buried in Jerusalem. According to custom, there would have been a secondary burial—His bones would have been reburied in a limestone ossuary a year later."

"This is not a limestone ossuary, Evelyn. So, our friend was not even Jewish then."

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"No. But it is stone. Anyway, we can philosophize later. For now, let's see if the ossuary is marked."

She reached for the crowbar and loosened the earth.

Michael scooped it away with his hands. "You know, if it wasn't for the salt, this would have been good soil for the garden."

Eventually they freed most of the ossuary. Circles with radii resembling daisy petals adorned the sides. There was no writing.

She wiped sweat from under her nose and over her eyebrows. "That was a waste of time." As she returned to the assembled skeleton, she noticed a tiny plant with a solitary yellow blossom. "You're a flower in the desert," she whispered.

"Evelyn, that is the nicest thing you've said to me all day."

She smiled at him. *Everything is barren here,* she thought. *Where did it find the colors to bloom?*

❧

With the sun now dipping toward Masada, Evelyn cast a long shadow on the desert floor as she stood up to stretch. *I'd better duck back down before my luck runs out with the security station*.

"Look at this." Michael showed her a piece of wood he had taken out of the ossuary earlier. "There may be a carving here."

Evelyn took the roughly hewn block in her hands. It was the size of a book. As she dusted it off, a letter that resembled an "R" emerged amongst what seemed to be fragments of other letters carved superficially into the desiccated wood. "Iēsus Nazarēnus, Rēx Iūdaeōrum," she said and breathed in sharply. "Michael, it must be. Look where the 'R' is." Her mind raced back two thousand years, to when Jesus attempted to kindle love in the minds of people. "The Titulus," she whispered.

"The what?"

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"Titulus Crucis. Remember, the piece of wood the Romans put on the cross; we saw it depicted at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher."

"Wait … This is moving too fast."

Evelyn took the camera and began photographing the bones, zooming in to capture the blemishes.

The sun was now resting on Masada.

"Darling, it's getting dark. We should put all this stuff back."

"We will, but I'm going to take a bone."

"You're going to take a bone … You're not going to take a bone."

"Yes, and a piece of the wood. For carbon dating. It could be a hoax, like the Shroud of Turin."

"I know I suggested that, but it won't confirm anything, even if the dates matched. Evelyn, there were so many crucifixions back then."

Using her Swiss Army knife, she carved out a tiny fragment of wood from the block. Wrapping it and a small bone in tissue, she placed them into her backpack. All that she could think about was that it could be Him. *Unless it is a fraud, but, if so, what would have been in it for the fraudsters?*

She gave a quick wipe to the two clay vessels they had set aside earlier when they were concentrating on the bones. They were both dark orange, one cylindrical the other spherical, both sealed.

As the dust lifted off the sphere, an engraving appeared. On closer examination, she could make out curved lines, like a diagram. *Could this contain the brain?* The cylinder seemed unmarked. "I'm going to take the pots. They may hold the key."

"You're crazy. This is … you're really crazy. Do you know how risky it is to smuggle them out of Israel, let alone into Australia?"

"Michael, I have to know what's inside," she said, placing them in her backpack.

"This is the best way to extend our holiday here indefinitely."

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They returned everything else to the ossuary. In the fading light, they reburied it, heaping earth over it and placing two rocks on top.

The desert that kept the secret for so long will do the rest, she thought.

As they were walking away, she turned her head to look back one last time.

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