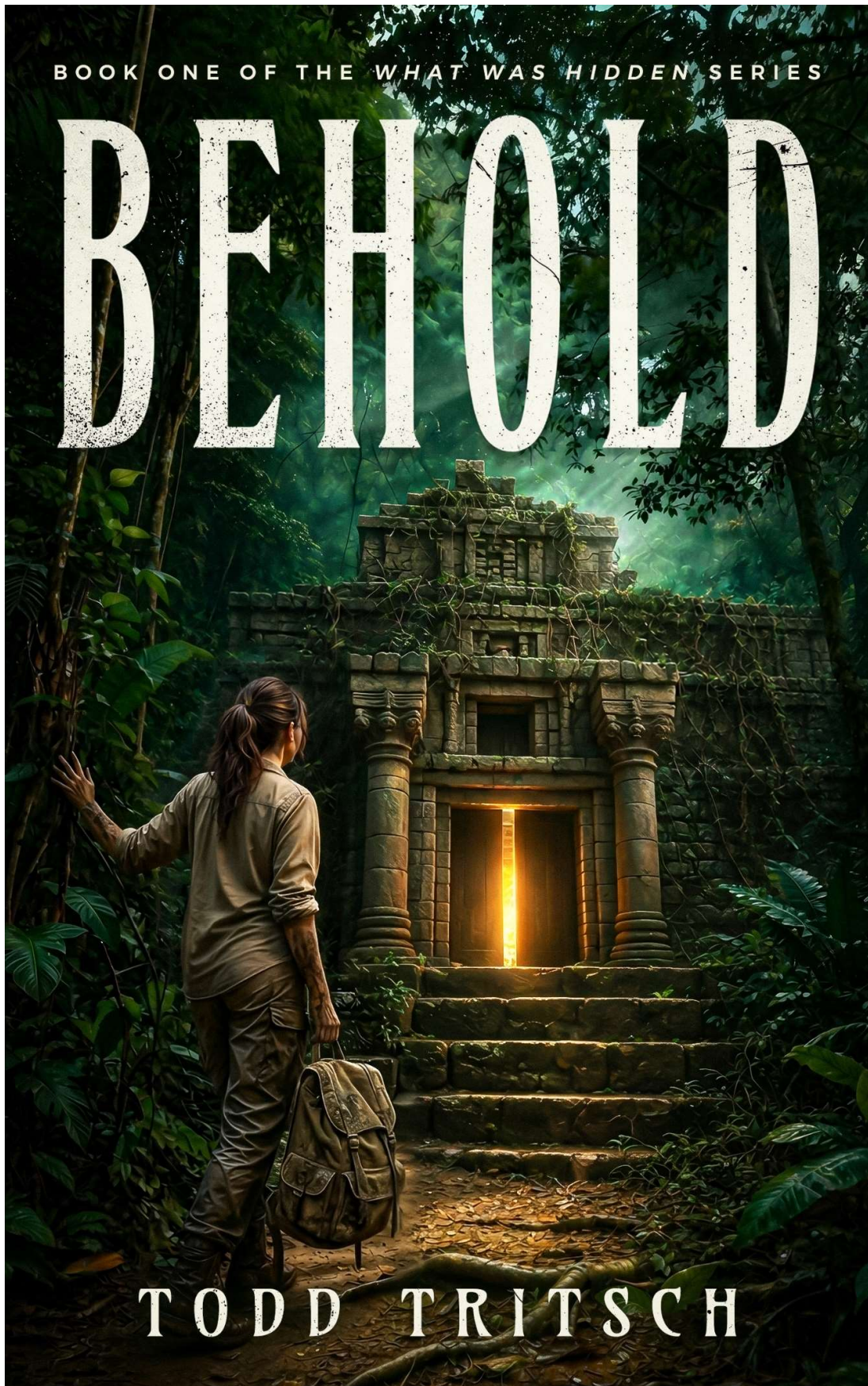


BOOK ONE OF THE WHAT WAS HIDDEN SERIES

BEHOLD



TODD TRITSCH

Behold

Book 1 of the What Was Hidden Series

By Todd Tritsch

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COMPLEMENTARY FIRST CHAPTER

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Chapter 1 - Journey

State of Chiapas, México, Modern Day

The Land Rover jolted hard as it hit another rut, and Lynnette Morgan's teeth clicked together. Her notebook slid against her knee, threatening to tumble to the floor. She caught it with one hand and braced the other against the dash, willing herself not to ask Raul again if he knew where he was going.

The jungle pressed close on both sides, a living wall of emerald and shadow, steaming and restless after the night's rain. Mist curled low through the underbrush like smoke from a dying fire, coiling around gnarled roots and moss-slick stones. An ornate hawk-eagle burst suddenly from the dense canopy overhead before vanishing into the impenetrable green that swallowed everything in this ancient place.

It should have felt like wonder, but Lynnette's skin prickled at the sight. She felt hidden eyes tracking them, and the jungle itself held its breath as they came.

Beside her, Raul leaned into the wheel, calm as ever. His sleeves were rolled high, forearms steady against the strain of the climb. She looked a moment longer than the observation required, then back at the road.

"Another fifteen, maybe twenty kilometers," he said, voice even, as if distance were a matter of will.

She arched a brow. "You said that half an hour ago."

She flipped open her leather-bound notebook, its pages dog-eared and stained with red Chiapas soil, scanning the glyph sketches from previous expeditions to Palenque and Toniná. The symbols, including serpent heads with gaping jaws and feathered deities with obsidian eyes, stared back at her like puzzle pieces scattered across a table with no picture to guide their assembly.

Her eyes snagged on the repeating maize glyph she had traced days ago. Dad would have dismissed it as superstition, but the thought struck her harder than expected, and she shut the book quickly, as though the memory itself might spill out onto the page.

Raul downshifted with a grinding protest from the old Land Rover, pointing his stubbled chin toward a faint track vanishing into the tangle of vines and ferns. "There. See that?"

She leaned forward, sweat beading along her hairline as she squinted through the dusty windshield. Barely visible beneath a canopy of dripping leaves, a hint of a path no wider than a deer trail broke from the rutted main road, its entrance half-concealed by a curtain of hanging moss. "That's not on the survey map," she said, tracing the crinkled paper with her fingertip.

"No," Raul admitted, his accent thickening as he concentrated. "This hasn't been touched in decades. The locals avoid it. Say it belongs to the old gods." He navigated toward the hidden turn, knuckles whitening on the wheel. "But if the fragment of the map we studied was oriented correctly, it should lead us somewhere worth finding."

She thought he was too sure of himself, but the look he gave her made her smile back before ducking into her notes again, not letting herself notice the warmth spreading across her cheeks.

The Rover lurched onto the track. Branches slapped against the sides, roots jolting the tires.

"I thought you said you were a careful driver," she muttered.

Raul didn't take his eyes off the track. "Careful isn't the same as timid."

She laughed, shaking her head. "Well, if we get stuck, I'm not pushing."

"Then I'd better not get us stuck," he replied with a wink.

The path narrowed to little more than a game trail. When the jungle closed in too tightly to continue, Raul killed the engine, swung his pack over one shoulder, and drew a machete in one practiced motion. "This is where we walk."

She pushed open the stubborn door, boots squelching as they met the black loam of the jungle floor. The moment she stepped away from the vehicle's thin shell, the world crashed down upon her. A weight of heat and of living, pulsing green. The air was thick as broth, viscous with humidity. Her first breath burned with the tang of decomposing wood and something bitterly floral. The second, slower this time, caused her to gag as a tendril of mist worked its way under her collar.

Raul circled the battered Land Rover, slamming the tailgate with more force than necessary. The sound startled a pair of motmot birds from a nearby branch; they flitted away, tails trailing like pendulums, vanishing into the low haze. Her chestnut hair stuck to the side of her neck and forehead. She reached for her pack, silently cursing the design team who had thought "breathable mesh" was a sufficient answer to the tropics. Her calloused hands shook with anticipation as she double-checked the main compartment: digital camera, spare batteries, graphite pencils, three field notebooks, a poncho crammed into a side pocket, and the battered binoculars that were her Mom's. She held them for a moment before returning them to their case. The touch of them steadied her, flooding her with fond memories.

Raul stood at the edge of the undergrowth, brow furrowed as if reading some invisible map in the chaos of vines and epiphytes. He moved unhurriedly even as sweat beaded along his temples. How did he always look like he belonged anywhere? She was half jealous, half proud of him, and resented both.

A mosquito, monstrous and striped, hovered in the periphery of her vision, then landed on the ridge of her knuckle. She slapped it reflexively, wincing at the bright splatter of blood. "Welcome to paradise," she muttered. She shrugged into the battered windbreaker she'd fished from the truck bed, zipped it to the chin, and snapped the hood up. It wouldn't help. Nothing would.

Raul carried his own pack with an easy motion, his body defying his 46 years with a strength and stamina that someone Lynnette's age would envy. He glanced back and waited until she nodded before he turned his attention to the thicket that marked the beginning of their trek. It was less a trail and more a suggestion: a faint depression in the riot of undergrowth, hemmed in by ferns that towered overhead and lianas dangling like the cords of unstrung instruments. Raul began slicing a path forward, precise and almost tender as he parted the vegetation. Each stroke of the blade released a rush of green scent, sharp and medicinal, stinging her nostrils.

She followed a half-step behind, careful not to crowd him. The mud sucked at her boots, every step a small battle. At one point, her foot slipped, plunging her ankle-deep in cold water, and she cursed aloud. Raul had her forearm before she finished swearing, and let go the second she was steady. "It's all uphill from here," he said, mock grave.

They navigated the first kilometer in silence, save for the thwack of the machete and the insect hum that grew louder the deeper they went. At a clearing, Raul paused and pointed. "See that?" In the slanting light, she caught the faint shadow of a stone platform, half-swallowed by moss and roots.

"Old wall?" she asked, voice low.

"Very old. Maybe even preclassic," he said, reverent. "No one's been here since..."

He broke off as a loud crack echoed through the trees. Not a branch. Something metal, something from the civilized world. They both turned instinctively, scanning for movement.

After a moment, Raul let out a breath, and the set of his shoulders eased, but when he glanced over to Lynnette, he quipped, "Don't tell me you're getting jumpy this early."

She rolled her eyes, but did not reply to his comment, digging a heel into the mud for stability.

"By the way, do you always abandon vehicles in the middle of nowhere?"

He grinned. "Only when the treasure's ahead. And when there's a GPS tracker in the glove box."

They moved single file, Raul leading with steady swings of the machete. Each cut sent a shower of dew across her face and hair, cold against her warm skin. The silence thickened, broken only by the drone of cicadas and the thwack of his blade.

Watching him work with practiced rhythm, she thought of the version of Raul her colleagues at the university saw. Dr. Raul Espinoza, in a pressed jacket, lecturing on Mesoamerican iconography at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, arguing for funding with deans, and guest-teaching in Chiapas twice a year. A different man from the one ahead of her now. She had watched him talk a department chair into submission and, a week later, watched him hack through terrain two of her classmates had sworn was impassable. Methodical precision, they said of him back in the city. In the field, he moved with the calm confidence of a man who belonged here.

Mentor. Guide. And in her heart, more than that, if she were honest. But she wasn't going to be.

The jungle changed as the sun climbed, as if each hour peeled back an older, stranger version of itself. When Raul finally held up his hand, she nearly walked into him. He didn't speak at first, only pointed. She followed his gaze, and the air went out of her. There, half-swallowed by shadows and moss, a low stone platform jutted from the wet earth. The jungle floor sloped downward here, and the platform was built to defy it, a single stubborn geometry in a world of chaos.

She shouldered her way past Raul, boots squelching in the soggy detritus. Up close, the stone gleamed dully, slick with moisture and veins of black mold. She knelt and cleared a patch of moss the size of her palm. The stone was ancient, but not primitive. Its edges, though weathered, announced the intent of the people who had placed it here. She traced a shallow groove with one finger, and the hair on her arms rose. These joints fit tighter than anything colonial, tighter even than the Maya masonry at Palenque or Calakmul.

Raul dropped to one knee beside her, his own hands already busy with brush and trowel. He worked in silence, using small, practiced motions, the way a surgeon would clean a wound. "Older than the Late Classic," he murmured, more to himself than to her.

She frowned, sweeping the beam of her flashlight across the exposed section. The light caught, just for a second, the faintest echo of a glyph. She leaned in, bringing her face so close to the stone she could smell the sweet rot of decaying leaves. The glyph was a stylized stalk of maize, its cobs fanned and symmetrical, repeated three times across the visible edge. She fished her field notebook from a cargo pocket and began to sketch, every line as quick and certain as a magician's flourish.

"Same as the fragment we pulled from the Palenque tunnels," she whispered, half in dread.

Raul nodded, lips pressed thin. "And the marker at Tuxtla," he countered. His eyes met hers, and for a single heartbeat, all the cautious distance of academia vanished. This could be the thread.

She dropped her gaze first, feigning sudden absorption in the sketch while Raul stood, scanning the perimeter. He moved with the wary grace of a soldier, as if expecting the jungle to retaliate for their intrusion. "It's a support building. Probably ceremonial. Something meant to impress, before entering the main structure." He gestured with the machete to the faint shape of a treeline further ahead, where the undergrowth thickened to the point of darkness. "That way."

She considered, chewing the inside of her cheek. "Or a place of preparation," she offered, voice low. "Ritual cleansing. You'd want to purify before approaching whatever's up there."

"Maybe both," Raul said, the humor gone out of his voice.

A sudden, brittle noise, somewhere between a bark and a scream, cut through the air. Something large thrashed in the canopy overhead, sending a rain of twigs and dead leaves spiraling down. She flinched, looked up, but saw nothing: only the endless green and the mad lattice of branches and shadows. Raul's face gave her nothing. His hand had gone to the machete.

They circled the platform, searching for ingress or inscription. On the far side, a flight of steps led up across the breadth of the platform and down into a corridor choked with ferns and debris. At the base of the stairs, a shallow trench ran parallel, its walls lined with old, blackened brick. Too straight, too precise to be a natural feature. An aqueduct, or something like it. The shape of an idea began to form in her mind, then slipped away as quickly as it came.

"Water management," she muttered. "Or maybe a symbolic barrier."

Raul crouched, examining the channel. "No standing water. But see the stains?" He pointed to the rust-red streaks along the trench floor, still visible after centuries of rain. "Iron, or something else. Blood, if you want to be dramatic."

She looked at him, a smirk half-formed on her lips. "You always did love a good human sacrifice."

He grinned, the tension easing. "Not love. Respect."

The jungle pressed in with its stifling heat and the sickly-sweet scent of the numerous nearby flowers. Even the birds had gone silent, as if watching.

They ascended the steps side by side, close enough that their shoulders brushed at the narrow turn. Neither of them moved away. Whatever else he was working on, he kept to himself. At the threshold, Raul lifted the vines with his machete, and she ducked inside. The air cooled immediately. The corridor was narrow, walls close-set and slick with condensation. Her shoulder brushed the stone, and for a moment she was aware of the centuries. The builders, priests, and petitioners who had passed through this same space, breathing the same air.

They advanced by the beam of Raul's lamp, each footstep an intrusion on the hush. The walls here were different: not blank but carved with a careful economy. Bands of glyphs ran in intermittent ribbons, alternating between pictorial narrative and abstract geometry. She gave up on the notebook and switched to her Nikon digital camera, documenting every meter.

At the far end of the corridor, the passage opened into a small chamber. Its ceiling had partially collapsed, admitting a shaft of sunlight that painted the space in a cathedral glow. The floor was uneven, littered with stones and fallen leaves. But at the center, intact and undisturbed, stood a simple altar: a block of black basalt, worn concave by centuries of use. It was unadorned, except for a single glyph carved deeply at its base: the maize stalk, this time ringed by a halo of fire.

Something caught in her throat. She knelt before the altar, fingers trembling as she brushed away the debris. There was an offering bowl, bone-dry, but the residue at its bottom sparkled faintly in the beam of her flashlight. Not blood, not pigment. Something crystalline, like salt.

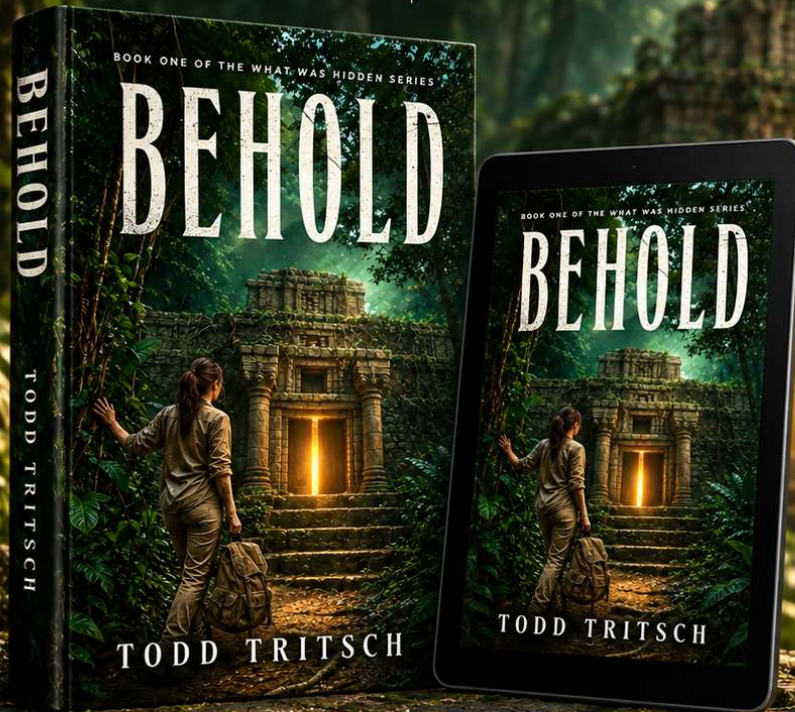
She scraped a bit into a sample vial, then stood, dusting her knees. Raul had moved to the chamber's perimeter, examining the walls. He called her over, voice thick with awe. "Look."

A sudden draft funneled through the doorway behind them, carrying with it the scent of rain and something acrid, almost metallic. She turned, startled. The light through the broken ceiling had shifted. Shadow moved where it should not, and for an instant she was not alone in the chamber.

Raul had felt it, too, maybe. He stepped closer, voice dropping. "This place. No one's been here in centuries."

"Maybe not alone," she said, her own voice barely audible. She made herself look away from the altar, back to the camera and the work. Behind her, the draft moved through the doorway again. But she could not shake the feeling that their trespass had been noticed.

Some discoveries
should never stay buried.



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About the Author

As a learning strategist, instructional designer, and entrepreneur, Todd Tritsch has worked with some of the world's most recognized organizations, helping them unlock the potential of their most valuable asset: their people. Todd holds an MBA with an emphasis in leadership and strategy and has spent decades at the intersection of human performance, business strategy, and learning accessibility. *Behold* is his debut novel and the first book in the *What Was Hidden* series, drawing on his passion for history, faith, and the questions that outlast easy answers.

