

A SPECIAL PREQUEL TO THE
JACK WEST JR NOVELS

MATTHEW REILLY

JACK WEST JR
AND THE
HERO'S HELMET



About Jack West Jr and the Hero's Helmet

Jack West Jr.

Adventurer. Scholar. Warrior.

He is known for his cool head under pressure . . .

. . . and also for the battered fireman's helmet he has worn

throughout his adventures.

This is the story of how he got it.

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MACMILLAN
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BEWARE OF THE HALF TRUTH.
YOU MAY HAVE GOTTEN HOLD OF THE WRONG HALF.

UNKNOWN

THE TEMPLE OF DENDUR

South of Aswan, Egypt



Source: Brooklyn Museum Archives, Goodyear Archival Collection
(via Wikipedia)

1

THE TEMPLE OF DENDUR 8:35 P.M. 24 DECEMBER 1994

Night had fallen by the time Jack West Jr was able to erect his high stepladder and get up close to the roof of the stone temple.

He peered at a single crumbling 2,000-year-old sandstone brick. It was weathered and worn yet oddly beautiful. It was one of eight such bricks that ran along the roofline of the gate of the Egyptian Temple of Dendur.

Peering closer, Jack saw it, and his heart almost skipped a beat.

There, in the top left corner of the brick, was the inscription that he had based his entire thesis upon: a tiny shepherd's crook hewn into the off-yellow stone.

He couldn't believe he was about to do this. If what he had postulated was true, then it would make his name in the world of international archaeology . . . and he was only twenty-five.

He gazed at the stone brick that surmounted the Egyptian temple's entrance and for the hundredth time wondered if there was indeed something embedded *within* that lone brick—

'Mommy! I wanna go *home!*' a child's voice said from somewhere nearby and Jack turned from his perch.

The Sackler Wing of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art was emptying and the kid who had cried out was one of a dozen or so people remaining in it. The ancient Egyptian Temple of Dendur stood in the middle of the Sackler Wing, a stupendous high-ceilinged glass-walled space that had been purpose-built to

house the structure when it had been gifted to the United States by the Egyptian government in 1978.

It had taken thirteen years to dismantle the 800-ton temple—one piece at a time—from its original position on the Nile south of Aswan, ship it to New York, and then re-erect it, once again one piece at a time.

Jack never tired of coming to the Met to see the Temple of Dendur—to see something so monumentally old contained inside something so monumentally modern always gave him a thrill—but apparently that was not the case for this lad.

Jack saw the kid—a sullen-looking boy in NBA everything—and his harried parents. The mother grabbed him by the hand and led him out of the great glass-walled hall.

Jack looked at his watch. It was 8:40 p.m. The Met closed at nine, but they cleared out all the exhibits at 8:45. And when the clock struck 8:45, he would be allowed to do his thing.

Back in those days Jack West Jr was twenty-five and already a decorated member of the SAS. A veteran of the Gulf War—during which he had famously stolen Saddam Hussein's own 747 to escape from Basra—he had sandy blond hair, blue eyes and, at that time, he still had his own left arm. The incident underneath the Kanyamanaga volcano in Africa in which he would lose that arm—and save a newborn baby girl whom he would later name Lily—would not happen for another fifteen months.

But in 1994, having only been recently listed as one of the top ten special forces soldiers in the world, Jack had surprised many when he had abruptly taken a leave of absence from the military. He was going to study ancient history at Trinity College in Dublin under the tutelage of Professor Max T. Epper, the famous Canadian scholar and Jack's good friend.

Jack's main area of interest was Egypt and, with Epper, he had co-authored several articles for scholarly journals about topics as diverse as the location of the lost Mouseion of Alexandria, the true

date of the construction of the Sphinx and the capstone that had once stood atop the Great Pyramid of Giza.

But this trip to New York City was something new again.

Jack had come here with Max to find evidence to support his first solo article in the highly esteemed *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*: after many letters and phone calls, the Met had finally allowed him to come and use a non-invasive technique to see if there was an ancient weapon buried within one of the bricks of the Temple of Dendur.

As the last members of the public ambled out of the Sackler Wing, Jack and Max went about setting up their Ground Penetrating Radar kit at the top of the twenty-foot stepladder.

One of the Met's conditions of their visit—in addition to the absolutely inviolable order that they were not to in any way touch or penetrate the ancient brick—had been that they had to do their work after hours, so as not to impinge upon the general public's viewing time, hence the late hour and the odd date, Christmas Eve.

As Max handed up the last pieces of the GPR kit, Jack caught sight of a figure standing at the back of the hall: a lone man in a tan trench coat with the collar turned up.

Jack frowned. 'Hey, Max. Trench Coat Guy is still here.'

Max Epper turned from his position at the base of the stepladder. 'So he is. Maybe he's as keen on Egypt as we are.'

'Or maybe he's employed by the Met to keep an eye on us,' Jack said. They'd been accompanied by two uniformed security guards ever since they'd arrived earlier that afternoon but this guy had the distinct look of a senior executive who wanted to watch them himself.

'Power please, Max,' Jack said as he lined up the Ground Penetrating Radar sighter at the suspect brick: the second one from the left atop the temple's front-facing roof. The GPR worked by sending a pulse of high-frequency microwaves into the stone; those waves would then bounce back off any object embedded inside the

rock and the pattern they formed would give Jack a clear image of that object.

If it was in there.

'Power is on,' Max called from an outlet by the wall. 'It's now or never. Fire it up.'

'Right,' Jack said. 'Now or never.'

He hit the switch and the GPR fired its pulse into the 2,000-year-old sandstone brick.

The GPR unit pinged and its screen refreshed at ten-second intervals. As it did so, like a naval vessel's radar, the image on it materialised, becoming clearer with every renewal of the screen.

Jack's eyes never left the monitor.

The rectangular outline of the stone brick was depicted in pale grey. Slowly, with each refreshing of the image, a white object began to appear within it.

Jack felt his heart begin to race as the image resolved into something resembling a 't'.

'Come on, baby . . .' Jack breathed.

His postulation in his article was that there was a knife in the brick, a knife that had belonged to Osiris, the famed Egyptian god of the afterlife, the underworld and resurrection. Of course, Jack didn't think Osiris had been a god at all: his theory was that Osiris had been a famous warrior or king, just one whose great deeds during his life had been elevated to god-like status over the millennia.

As the image resolved further, Jack began to smile. The 't' was looking more and more like the hilt and crossguard of a knife.

'Max!' he called. 'Get ready to be happy. I think we got it . . .'

At which moment, all the lights in the Metropolitan Museum of Art suddenly went out, the Sackler Wing was plunged into darkness and an emergency siren began to blare in Jack's ears.

2

Jack spun from his position atop the stepladder and immediately he smelled it. Smoke.

He couldn't tell where it was coming from, but it was definitely in the air. 'This is not happening,' he said. He looked around the vast darkened hall, suspicious at the timing of the interruption.

No, it's just a bad coincidence.

A way-too-pleasant automated woman's voice came in over the loudspeakers: 'Ladies and gentlemen, this is an evacuation. Please proceed calmly to the nearest exit. We apologise for this inconvenience. Your cooperation is appreciated.'

Jack reluctantly descended the stepladder, rejoining Max and the two security guards at its base.

As they headed for the exit, Jack saw Trench Coat Guy also turning to go.

Jack, Max and the security guards wended their way through the splendid corridors of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, joining the moving crowd of people heading for the front entrance: the last remaining visitors to the museum and a handful of staff members who had still been in the building.

Sirens could be heard outside.

As Jack and Max came to the front entrance of the Met and headed out, a gaggle of five firefighters with helmets that read FDNY PRECINCT 17 shoved past them, rushing inside, leaving a red

fire engine, also labelled '17', parked on the kerb of Fifth Avenue at the base of the Met's high entry steps, its flashing emergency lights bathing the area in a strobing red glow.

Jack sighed.

It was cold out here. A light snow fell on Fifth Avenue. More Fire Department of New York trucks arrived.

'Who would believe it?' Jack said to Max. 'Just as I saw the knife . . .'

After a few minutes, the five firefighters emerged, their commander holding up his hands. 'It's okay, folks. Just a broken fuse that set off the smoke detectors. It's all good now.'

The five firemen hurried away, climbing back into the truck marked '17'. Max and the security guards turned to head back inside.

At that moment, a small boy standing near Jack said to his father, 'That's not right.'

'What's not right, son?' the boy's dad said.

'Truck 17 is a ladder truck, not a regular engine,' the boy said.

Jack frowned. 'Excuse me, kid, but what did you say?'

'I love firetrucks,' the boy said earnestly. 'Every fireman has the number of his truck on his helmet. If his helmet says "17", then he's from truck number 17. FDNY truck 17 is famous; it's a ladder truck. But that one over there'—he pointed to the engine marked '17'—'is just a regular fire engine. It's got the wrong number on it.'

Jack gazed at the No. 17 fire engine as it began to pull away from the kerb.

As he was doing this, the commander of one of the *other* firetrucks ascended the stairs and called out as if he were the most senior man there: 'Okay, what's going on here?'

Jack turned to Max. 'Max, quick, go back inside now. Check the temple. Keep your cell phone on.'

'What about you?' Max asked.

Jack was already stepping slowly towards the fire engine marked '17'. 'I'll be here, watching *them* . . .'

Professor Max Epper knew that tone of voice, so he knew not to argue.

He hurried back inside the museum, with the two guards. Max was also younger then, faster, too. Within a minute, he burst back into the Sackler Wing and beheld the Temple of Dendur in its glorious exhibition space.

He saw it right away.

Saw the roof of the temple.

The second brick from the left—the brick Jack had been analysing—*had been vandalised, smashed open*: the top half of the oblong stone was now simply gone, crudely hacked away with a pickaxe or something similar . . . like a fireman's axe.

Max spoke into his phone. 'Jack, your brick's been smashed open. Whatever you found inside it, someone just took it!'

Outside, on the front steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Jack held his phone to his ear, walking slowly toward the fire engine marked '17'.

At Max's words, his eyes snapped up to the truck's cab and locked onto the 'commander' of the firetruck and in that instant their eyes met and they both knew exactly what the other was thinking. The commander of the fake firetruck yelled to his driver, 'Go! Go!'

The truck squealed out from the kerb, wheels spinning on the snow-slicked road.

And Jack West started running after it.

3

It was the brief wheel-spin in the snow that allowed Jack to catch it.

That ever-so-brief skid on the spot allowed Jack to cover the last ten yards and dive full-length for the tailgate of the escaping fire engine.

His fingers caught the truck's rear bumper just as the big red truck peeled away from the front entrance of the Met—lights blazing, sirens wailing—and started speeding south down Fifth Avenue.

Jack's feet bounced on the icy road as he was dragged along behind the accelerating firetruck.

A cluster of metal hose valves and switches were mounted above him, plus a thin seven-foot access ladder attached to the rear flank of the fire engine; it led up to the roof of the truck and all the various hoses and firefighting paraphernalia up there.

Jack reached for the little access ladder, clutched hold of it and began climbing.

With its lights flashing and sirens blaring, the truck zoomed down Fifth, the already sparse Christmas Eve traffic parting before it like the Red Sea before Moses. Only a few of the drivers who pulled over to let it pass glimpsed the tiny figure climbing up the little ladder on the tailgate of the furiously speeding firetruck.

Jack reached the top of the ladder and beheld the roof of the fire engine, just as a man dressed in a firefighter's outfit came rushing at him, face twisted in anger, fists flying.

For this man was no New York City firefighter: he was an imposter dressed as one.

Jack grappled with the imposter in the flashing red glare of the fire engine's lights, wrestling desperately from his inferior position at the very edge of the roof, trying not to get thrown off the back of the speeding firetruck.

One thing was instantly clear: his opponent could fight. Jack had been an elite soldier and this guy clearly had similar training.

Suddenly, his assailant threw a punch but Jack caught the man's fist, and in a fleeting instant, Jack saw a tattoo on the man's wrist.

A tattoo of a fish with a crucifix inside it.

Jack's mind whirled. He knew that symbol, but seeing it on this man's wrist, in the middle of a desperate fight, didn't make sense.

It was the mark of Opus Dei, the notoriously secretive, ultra-conservative cabal within the Catholic Church. *But what did Opus Dei or the Catholic Church have to do with ancient Egyptian temples?*¹

The next moment, Jack's attacker head-butted him with the leading edge of his FDNY helmet . . . or at least he tried to.

Jack dodged the blow at the last second and said, 'That's dirty pool, asshole. Can't let you do that again.'

So Jack reached out and snatched at the man's helmet at the same time as the man drew a gun from his waistband.

Jack saw the gun and his eyes went wide, and on a reflex he shifted his weight and grabbed something next to him as he yanked on the chin-strap of his attacker's helmet and threw them both backwards . . . *off the rear of the speeding firetruck and onto Fifth Avenue!*

Jack's attacker hit the road hard—helmetless—and tumbled away down Fifth Avenue, receding quickly behind the truck.

But Jack didn't.

1 This was many years before Jack discovered that the modern Catholic Church—with its many references to sun-worship—was the contemporary incarnation of an ancient Egyptian sun-cult known as the Cult of Amon-Ra. See: *Seven Ancient Wonders*.

The object he'd grabbed from the roof of the fire engine was one of its firehoses, which meant that when he hit the roadway, the firehose went taut and like a whip snapping, it dragged Jack along behind the speeding firetruck. It was only the snow-slicked road that stopped Jack from being seriously grazed by the experience.

Strangely, by virtue of the way he'd grabbed his attacker's chin-strap, Jack now gripped the firehose with the strap of the man's fake 'FDNY 17' helmet wedged between his fingers and the firehose. He didn't dare let go of the hose, so the helmet was coming with him.

A few seconds later, the firetruck's lights and sirens suddenly went quiet and the fire engine swung left off Fifth Avenue, sending Jack rolling onward down Fifth.

When he finally rolled to a stop he scrambled off the snow-covered road, diving onto the sidewalk to narrowly avoid being hit by a couple of honking taxi cabs. Lying on his belly on the icy sidewalk, Jack saw the fake fire engine parked down a side street—50th Street—its fake firemen scrambling out of it and disappearing into an alleyway behind the old dark building that adjoined 50th and fronted onto Fifth Avenue.

One of the 'firemen', Jack saw, carried a piece of the brick from the Temple of Dendur under his arm.

Jack's eyes rose, taking in the grim dark building they'd scurried behind.

It had two horn-like belltowers and its brooding Neo-Gothic entrance stood in stark contrast to the more modern glass and steel buildings of New York around it.

It was St Patrick's Cathedral.

The pre-eminent Catholic Church in New York City and seat of the Cardinal of New York, one of the four most powerful Catholic clergymen in America.

Gasping for breath, Jack dragged himself off the ground and ran for the alleyway after the fleeing 'firemen'.

The moment he turned the corner of the alleyway, he froze. What he saw shocked him.

He saw a lone man standing amid the five fake firemen. The man had already shot dead four of them—they lay on the ground, in icy puddles of melted snow with holes in their foreheads—and now the lone man stood, bathed in shadow, with a silenced pistol levelled at the head of the leader of the group.

Jack ducked behind a dumpster and watched fearfully as the lone man took the piece of sandstone from the fake fireman.

Even from this distance, from behind the dumpster, Jack could see the handle of the ancient knife embedded in the broken-open sandstone brick.

The Knife of Osiris.

And then, making Jack jump, the lone man spoke to the commander of the fake fire team. ‘This is not yours to take. It belongs to my master. It is not yet time to use the keyblade.’

The gunshot that followed barely made a sound.

The back of the fake fireman’s head blew out, spraying blood, and he collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Then, holding the broken brick from the Temple of Dendur in one hand and the silenced pistol in the other, the lone man turned to go. As he passed through a beam of light, Jack saw his face and recognised him.

It was Trench Coat Guy, the man who had been silently watching Jack and Max all afternoon in the Sackler Wing.

Jack ducked away from the alleyway, crossing Fifth Avenue and taking cover inside a liquor store so as not to be seen by the man.

He watched from afar as the man in the trench coat emerged from the side street flanking the cathedral, carrying the ancient brick under his coat.

Jack watched him. There was something about him—about the way he carried himself, a kind of eerie self-possession—that Jack had seen in only one kind of person before: *assassins*.

Jack West was many things—a great soldier, a good fighter and

a fair historian—but without serious weaponry, there was no way he could get the better of this guy tonight.

The man in the trench coat looked both ways before he hailed a cab and disappeared into the New York night.

Jack could only watch him go.

He stepped out onto the sidewalk of Fifth Avenue, peering down the long wide boulevard on that cold winter's night, before suddenly he looked down at his own right hand.

Still gripped tightly in it—indeed, Jack had forgotten he was even holding it—was his only memento of what would remain one of the most bizarre evenings of his life: the helmet of the fake fireman he had fought on the back of the firetruck, a helmet marked FDNY PRECINCT 17.

Jack would never forget the Knife of Osiris or the strange word the assassin had used to describe it: keyblade. He would also wear that helmet for many years, using it to ward off falling rocks and troublesome waterflows in booby-trapped places all around the world . . . and also as a constant reminder to himself that not everyone is always who they seem.

THE TEMPLE OF DENDUR



(as it appears today in the Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York City, U.S.A.)

THE END

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About Matthew Reilly

Matthew Reilly is the internationally bestselling author of the Scarecrow novels: *Ice Station*, *Area 7*, *Scarecrow*, *Scarecrow and the Army of Thieves* and the novella *Hell Island*; the Jack West novels: *Seven Ancient Wonders*, *The Six Sacred Stones* and *The Five Greatest Warriors*; and the standalone novels *Contest*, *Temple*, *Hover Car Racer*, *The Tournament*, *Troll Mountain* and *The Great Zoo of China*.

His books are published in over 20 languages, with worldwide sales of over 7 million copies.

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And coming 18 October . . .

THE FOUR LEGENDARY KINGDOMS

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