

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

Chapter 1

Emilie's study carrel was shrouded in the back corner of the university library, like a tiny tomb buried far from civilization. Walled in on three sides, Emilie hunched over her laptop with her back to the stacks. She stopped typing and checked her watch once more.

Twelve minutes. Her fingers sprinted over the keyboard. Twelve minutes to finish this paper, proofread, print, and get to her eight P.M. class, or yet another assignment would be late.

She paused in her typing to pick up the glazed bowl from the desk in front of her. For the hundredth time in the past hour, she held the bowl to her body as she peered over her shoulder.

Someone's there. I can feel it.

Emilie hadn't relaxed since Dr. Horobin had pulled the ritual washing bowl from its glass case in the University Museum three hours ago. It was a huge favor, letting his research assistant turn the thing around in her own hands as she finished the paper she was writing about it. There were people who would do anything to acquire this piece. If something happened to it, she'd never forgive herself. Or be forgiven.

She skimmed her fingers around the Akkadian writing on the rim. Over two thousand years ago someone had lettered these symbols onto the bowl before sending it to a Babylonian temple for a god's purification ceremony. *The words connect me to him.* She felt part of a great, cosmic surge of humanity, directing its own destiny through the ages, with the words her link to an ancient stranger.

Emilie set the bowl in front of her computer and pounded out the concluding paragraph. As she scrolled to the top of the document to proof it, the floor creaked behind her.

"Who's there?" She craned her neck to sweep a glance behind her. No answer. She shivered against the dry chill of the library.

Only one other person knew she was here with the bowl, and Emilie was beginning to regret telling him. She shouldn't have trusted Charles. *I know better than to let anybody get close enough to scam me.*

The quick read-through of her paper revealed her as a babbling idiot. No time for improvement. She still needed to print it.

As she clicked on the Save icon, the compressed silence of the library shifted. Emilie sensed breathing a few feet away.

She jerked her head around. No one. Still, she had heard something. Confined by shelves 120.2 to 146.7, she could see little except the aisle tunneling away from her desk. The tight space closed in on her, its weight heavy

on her chest.

She clicked her laptop shut and slipped it into her carrying case. She nestled the bowl in the bag's outer pocket, then hitched the strap over her left shoulder.

The stairwell door beside her granted a quick escape. She would trek down to the bottom floor, exit onto the street, and get the bowl back to the museum. She'd be a little late for class, but it was better than carting this thing around all evening.

Halfway down the second set of steps, she heard the door above her swish open again. She froze, her right foot hanging in midair above the next step. Two footfalls drifted down to her, then silence. No, not silence. The heavy breathing. Her fingers tightened around the metal handrail. She lowered her right foot as though the next step might be a landmine.

The footsteps above pounded downward. Feeling like the unpopular girl in a horror flick, murdered in the second scene, Emilie stumbled down to the next platform, her computer case banging against her hip. The footsteps echoed her own.

She couldn't lose the bowl. Where should she go? Could she find a security guard?

The blood beat a rhythm in her head as she fled down the last set of steps and shoved through the street exit door. The cold city night slammed against her. She regretted not detouring onto the bottom floor of the library. Now she was alone in the street.

Emilie hunted for a way to get out of sight. Across the street, a city park offered shrubs and statuary. Should she take her chances there? She'd eaten lunch there many times. In the dark, the stone figures morphed into the monstrous nighttime shadows on her childhood walls.

The door handle pushed into the small of her back, reminding her that her pursuer would be more dangerous than a hallucination.

A taxi cruised past. Emilie watched in fascination as the man and woman inside laughed, heads together, in the lighted back seat.

Which way? C'mon, Em. Make a decision! A subway entrance gaped at her from halfway down the street, inviting her to descend.

She ran to the entrance and took the steps two at a time down to the black-and-white tiled slime of the underground tunnel. The tracks and the platforms were deserted at this hour. A train's disappearing lights warned that she would be alone for a while.

Except for muggers. Emilie looked away from a shabby man leaning against a wall, looking like he could eat her for dinner. Probably homeless. And harmless. *Don't freak out.*

She couldn't stand here on the platform waiting for her pursuer, so she slid down the wall until she reached an alcove and tucked herself into it,

breathing through her mouth and concentrating on the sounds around her. A fluorescent tube above her flickered and buzzed.

Who would chase her? It had to be someone after the bowl. She should have known Charles was too good to be true. Then again, at thirty-one, she had given up scrutinizing every guy who seemed to like her. Her stupidity had endangered the artifact, and possibly her life. Once again, letting a man gain her trust had proved to be a fatal mistake.

He's still following. Heavy shoes fell on the steps she'd come down, pausing at the bottom. Emilie held her breath.

The shoes rasped against the concrete floor, coming closer.

Emilie closed her eyes in terror, her thoughts oddly focused on how long it would take someone to discover her body.

And then the footsteps receded. She waited as she heard him ascend the steps, and let out her breath in inches.

An instant later, the ragged man from the platform rounded her corner. He slid across the space between them until she felt as though he had pinned her to the wall.

"Hello, little lady." His reeking breath issued from a broken-toothed smile.

Emilie leaned back, trying to press herself through the wall behind her. Beyond her alcove, she heard the scraping footsteps pause on the steps, then return in double-time.

Don't scream. Don't scream! You'll never graduate if he steals the bowl.

Fear blazed out from the center of her body to her fingertips. The man in front of her still grinned. She held her computer bag in front of her, sending out a vague prayer that the bowl wouldn't be damaged by using it as a shield. Or could she use her bag as a club? She stiffened her grip and prepared to slug him.

"Ms. Nazzaro?"

Emilie's heart skipped at the sound of her name. The decaying man in front of her turned toward the sound, too. She leaned around him, searching for a familiar face.

"Ms. Nazzaro, are you okay here?"

A boy, maybe eighteen or nineteen, in a dress shirt and khakis, stood on the platform.

Harmless-Homeless Man moved away, disappearing down the tunnel.

Emilie's shoulders dropped, tension seeping out through every pore of her body. "I'm sorry," she said, lowering her bag to her hip. "Do I know you?"

The boy blushed. "I'm in Dr. Horobin's Cultural Anthropology class."

"Of course." Emilie tried to cover. As his research assistant, she sometimes sat in on Dr. Horobin's undergrad classes, but the faces had never distinguished themselves in her mind.

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"I—I wanted to ask you a question," he said.

"Were you following me?" Emilie asked. "From the library?"

He picked at some imaginary lint on his shirt. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to disturb you, but when I saw you leave—"

"What can I do for you?" Emilie wished he'd mentioned his name.

"I was wondering if, maybe, when you were free, we could get some coffee or something."

Emilie waited, unsure if this was the actual question. Apparently, it was. A date? She'd run down three flights of stairs and through the subway to get away from a kid with a crush? She was almost old enough to be this kid's—older sister.

She smiled. "That's sweet of you. I appreciate it. But I'm afraid it wouldn't be appropriate, you know?"

He dropped his head. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

"But I'm glad you were here," Emilie added, turning toward the stairs. "I think you may have saved me from some trouble back there."

He brightened. "Glad to help."

They walked together up the stairs, into the night air. Emilie stopped and took a deep breath to fight off the oppressive closeness of the subway.

Her companion paused beside her. "Can I walk you somewhere?"

"DuWalt."

Emilie's would-be suitor left her at the door to the DuWalt Building, and she stood for a moment inside the door, undecided. She hadn't printed her paper to turn in, and she was already late for class. And she hadn't returned the bowl. Which first?

She'd go to class, explain to the prof, and hope for the best.

The door was closed when she reached the classroom. As she reached for the doorknob, a fleshy hand closed around hers.

"Emilie Nazzaro?"

No way, not again. Do I have a bull's-eye painted on me tonight? Emilie looked up into an expansive brow hanging over a jaw heavy with teeth. *I think I found the Missing Link.* She pulled her hand away. "I'm sorry, I need to get to class. Can it wait?"

"You need to come with me."

"If this is about that project for Dr.—" She reached for the door again, but a paw clamped around her upper arm. "Excuse me," she said, twisting away and trying to push past him. She might as well have rammed a wall.

"It's important, Ms. Nazzaro. It's about your father."

Emilie drew back as though slapped. "What do you know about my father?"

Cro-Magnon Man said nothing.

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Emilie watched his eyes, trying to read him. "I have a class, a paper due."
"Miss it."

She tried to edge around him again. Could she outrun him? Behind him, the hall was empty.

"Can I at least tell the professor I need to leave?" She grabbed at the doorknob.

"No need." His fingers fastened around her wrist and pried her hand from the knob. He dragged her several steps down the hall, then stopped and twitched his head like an animal surveying the terrain. Emilie peered over her shoulder through the window to the classroom, at the rows of younger graduate students who were always punctual, and wished that for once she'd been on time.

The first stars of the night glittered in the Turkish sky above Pergamum. Jack flattened himself against the splinters of a doorway on the village's cobble street. The adrenaline rush had kicked in a half-hour ago, when he had followed Layna Sardos from the café to the crumbling rowhouse where she had disappeared, fifty yards from where he now stood.

Jack was certain Layna hadn't seen him follow, even though the two had finished a bottle of wine together only moments before they left. She had kissed him goodbye and called him "Mr. Cal-e-mon," her slurred Greek accent butchering "Cameron," the name Jack had chosen as this week's identity.

Jack's legs were cramping, but he didn't dare shift positions. How long until Layna and the others would leave the house? He could almost feel the weight of the statue in his hands. Only a little longer and it would be his.

The clatter of cart wheels on cobblestone reached him from the bottom of the street. An aging farmer in the traditional Turkish vest shuffled past, bearing his unpurchased olives home from the market. "*Iyi ak^oamlar,*" the man said as he passed, nodding his gray head in Jack's direction.

Jack returned the nod. "*Iyi ak^oamlar.*" Good evening. *And keep walking, old man.*

In the yellow stone wall of the rowhouse Jack watched, a blue door opened. Laughter floated down the street, past the old man's tumbledown cart, to where Jack stood in the shadows.

The cart's wheels scraped the street again. Jack watched as Layna tossed her unveiled black hair over her shoulder and turned toward the old man. Jack slowed his breathing and froze, pushing farther into the dark. He would wait for his moment.

Layna turned away from the cart of olives and continued up the street. She and her fat companion would be gone several hours, Jack knew. Long

enough to drink another bottle of Ankara wine from local Turkish vineyards. Layna's laughter hadn't fooled him. He knew she looked for happiness in the bottom of a bottle.

Jack had planned his assault well, knowing that only one person remained in the house. A negligible defense for such a treasure.

Ahead, Layna and her escort turned a corner and disappeared from sight. Jack waited for several minutes, to be certain.

This is life, Jack thought, his eyes on the blue door and his heart pounding like a chisel on stone. *This is life at its best*. He had only to finish this job, bring the statue to Vitelli, and he would be lounging on the beaches in the south of France by the end of the week.

His time had come. Jack jogged across the street and turned his back to the row of homes. His careful slide to the blue door took only a minute. When he stood beside it, Jack inhaled the night air and reached for the knob. It turned in his hand. Another mistake by these would-be professionals.

Jack edged the door inward, and the hinges protested. He waited, but from inside he could hear the gentle snoring of a man already deep into his wine. *Fools*.

The interior of the village home was dark. He extended his hands to check for obstacles. Nothing. He closed the door behind him.

The snoring stopped.

Jack waited. The smell of tobacco and coffee loitered in the air. And something else. Layna's perfume. Strong. Too strong.

Years of experience screamed at him to back up, get out. *Something's not right*.

A match flared. An oil lamp faltered, then blazed.

"Men," Layna said, "meet Jack Cameron."

Two goons stared at him like stone bulls at a palace entrance. The fat one from the street he knew. The other, younger, Jack had never seen.

Who's the fool now?

Jack reached behind him for the door. The younger man anticipated him. He cracked a fist against Jack's forearm. Jack swung his left fist at the man's face. The contact knocked the man backward. Jack delivered a sharp kick to his chest. The man staggered back and fell to the floor. Layna screamed.

The fat man charged at Jack. He yanked open the door and raced into the street, empty-handed.

He ran toward the Temple of Aesculapius. It was his best chance to escape.

Down the main street, a quick turn to the left. Jack could feel his pursuers behind him. He flew past the recent additions of parking lot and ticket office, now closed. The colonnaded street ended in the ruined stone courtyard. At the far side of the courtyard, a stairway led to a large square.

Jack hurtled across the courtyard, up the steps, and into the square. A

dozen columns, pools, and shrines provided ample places to hide.

Were all three of them following him? Did they leave the statue unguarded? He searched the square for the best refuge. *I've got to get back to that house somehow.* He didn't want to contemplate his fate if he returned to Vitelli without the statue.

Jack ran to the stairway entrance to the underground tunnel. The tunnel shot under the Asclepium, to the temple of Telephus, the previous god who had been buried when Aesculapius came to town. From that temple, Jack could head up to the surface and retrace his steps to the village.

He took the tunnel slowly, careful that his footsteps wouldn't echo up to the square. The ruins of this temple to the god of healing had started all this, when south stoa excavations had unearthed the golden cult image of the god. Jack hoped he had buried himself far enough underground now. His hand slid against the wall as he tunneled through the blackness. Two millennia of dust filtered through his fingers.

Slower, Jack. Slower. His feet scraped gravel and stone. Dust filled his throat. He clenched his teeth. *Don't cough.*

Moonlight trickled into the tunnel ahead. Jack trotted, anxious for fresh air.

He reached the paved outer road that circled the temple, bypassing the arched openings into the interior. He was now on the south side of the Temple of Aesculapius. His three pursuers would be on the north side, where he had led them in.

You've done it again, Jack, old boy. He circled the outer Pantheon-like wall of the temple. He would run back down the same street where he had entered. Maybe he'd get lucky and the statue would still be in the house.

He was halfway to the street when a figure vaulted from the shadows. In the sliver of time before impact, Jack saw his opponent, outlined against white stone. Then the stars above him exploded in his head.

Chapter 2

The university's visitor parking lot huddled at the outskirts of campus parking. Emilie had plenty of time to ask herself what Cro-Magnon Man could possibly want with her before they got near the dark sedan. And what could he know about her father? She dug her heels in when her escort unlocked the passenger door and opened it for her. This was crazy.

"Get in," he said.

"No way. Where do you think you're going to take me?"

In response, he shoved her into the car and slammed the door.

She contemplated jumping out again, but he could probably outrun her in five seconds. Emilie had time to slide her bag onto the floor before he was in the car beside her. *Does he know I have the bowl?* Emilie tried a bluff. "If I'm not in class, someone will know—"

He started the car and backed out. "Ms. Nazzaro, you're not in danger. My employer wants to talk to you. He sent me to get you."

Emilie's fingers tightened around the door handle, just in case. "What employer?"

Her driver watched the road, barreling through a stop sign at the edge of the parking lot as though it were invisible. "Thomas Fitzwater."

Emilie sat back in her seat, a combination of relief, curiosity, and annoyance fighting for top spot in her emotions. Fitzwater. How many years since she had heard that name? Ten? Fifteen? But why contact her now? What could he tell her about her father? And why send a psycho to storm the campus and grab her like she were part of a bad movie?

Her driver didn't offer conversation during the forty-five minute ride, and she didn't beg. She'd ask Fitzwater her questions. She tried not to think about how the missed class might affect her grade. Only one week remained of the spring semester. A few summer courses, and she'd be finished with her M.A. in Middle Eastern Studies. All she needed was to pass the comprehensive exam that would qualify her for the Ph.D. program, and she'd be one step away from realizing her goal. *A few years behind, but no later than anything else in my life.*

When they pulled up to a wrought-iron gate, distant memories sparked. A swimming pool. Black-tied waiters serving drinks to her parents poolside. The gate swung open to reveal the circular drive in front of a grand estate, and Emilie felt a tiny thrill, reminiscent of childhood. Yellow light gleamed from dozens of windows like firelight flickering in a medieval castle. Her driver parked the car in front of the steps and led her into the house.

In the spacious foyer, more than a dozen pottery pieces and bronze statues rested on tables or in corners. Emilie touched a bronze bull on the hall table beside the door. *A reproduction. Good.* A butler-type approached, and she dropped her hand to her side.

"Mr. Fitzwater is expecting you. Follow me, Miss."

Emilie left Cro-Magnon man behind and followed the butler across the entry hall and up a winding staircase. Her feet sank into the red carpeted steps, and another fragment of childhood memory surged and then melted away.

Emilie hadn't realized what she'd been expecting until the butler swung open a door to reveal a shriveled man behind a desk. Could this be Thomas Fitzwater? Had he always been so small?

Fitzwater stood. "Ah, Ms. Nazzaro. Come in, please. Sit, sit."

Emilie took three tentative steps into a massive study, lit only by a half-dozen candles flickering around the room. Music played softly—some kind of flute warbling notes in no particular melody—and the sweet odor of incense hung in the air.

Fitzwater dismissed the butler. "Look at you, little Emilie. I'd not have known you." He tilted his head back and forth, as if to inspect her from every angle. "Pretty, I think. Though I've never cared for the long, straight hair hanging about the face like that." He pulled on his bottom lip and nodded, as though deciding whether to purchase the collectible in spite of its flaws. "Still, attractive."

Emilie managed a smile at the underwhelming compliment.

"A bit too much of your father around the mouth, perhaps."

"Mr. Fitzwater, I don't appreciate being forced from my classes like this."

He dropped to his chair. "You're wondering about my little game. Cloak and dagger—very mysterious, no?" He grinned, revealing still-perfect teeth. "Please, sit down."

Emilie felt as though she floated through the murky room to a chair in front of the desk. "I'm not a child any longer, Mr. Fitzwater. Your—employee—said this was about my father?"

Fitzwater folded his leathery hands and placed them on the desk blotter. "Yes, yes. Quite right. About your father. Well, of a sort, I suppose. But then I had to get you here, didn't I?"

Emilie bristled. "Why am I here?"

"Yes, you're curious. I can see that. Right to it, then." He grabbed a remote control from his desk and pointed it to the flat-panel TV mounted behind him. An image burst onto the screen, and Emilie couldn't stifle her quick intake of breath.

"You recognize it?" Fitzwater nodded, smiling.

Emilie felt the air around her grow heavy and warm. "It's been years."

"But you remember, don't you, little Emilie?"

She remembered. The clay tablet's image was seared onto her brain forever. The tablet that had killed her father.

The sparks behind Jack's eyelids sputtered and faded. He forced open his eyes.

"He's back."

Layna's voice bounced around inside his brain. He put a hand to his throbbing forehead. *Stupid, stupid, stupid Jack.* A quick glance told him all he needed to know. He lay on the floor in the house with the blue door, all three of his targets watching him. He sat up, wincing at the rockslide in his head.

Layna leaned over him. "So now it is my turn to ask questions." She spoke in English, though her Greek accent lay heavily on it.

The fat man laughed. "Is that all you will do, little Layna?"

"Shut up, Ozko." Layna dragged a chair until it scraped Jack's leg, then hiked up her long skirt and straddled the chair. "For whom are you working?"

Jack fumed at the cute way her lips pouted when she spoke. He had been a idiot for those lips. "Who do *you* work for?"

Layna leaned in and traced the scar along his jawline. "Do not make this difficult."

Jack pulled away, laughing. "That won't work anymore, my dear."

Layna put a hand on her hip. "My handsome Jack. So charming yesterday." She swung a leg over the chair and stood. "So hostile today."

"Must be having a bad day," Jack said.

She smiled down at him. "You were not honest with me, Mr. Cameron. All that sweet talk, the gifts, the wine."

Jack rubbed the back of his head. "At least I didn't clobber you."

Her smile faded. "Do you think you are better than we? You also would do anything to get the statue. Lie, steal, cheat." She tossed her hair and turned away. "You are no better than we."

Jack shrugged.

Ozko crossed the room. His heavy beard parted into a thick-lipped grimace, revealing several missing teeth. "Enough," he said. "Tell us who hired you to steal the statue."

Jack folded his arms.

Ozko nodded to the younger man. "Yazil."

Yazil crossed the room in one stride and backhanded Jack's face, slamming him shoulder-first into the floor.

Layna returned to lay a hand on Jack's arm as he stood. "He must be German. That blond hair." She squeezed Jack's upper arm. "And he is big."

Ozko nodded. "German, *ja*?"

"*Ja*," Jack said, nodding. *Whatever.*

Ozko smacked his hands together. "I knew it. That German pig has been sending fools to ambush us for months." He laughed. "He will not be so bold when he sees what we can do." Another nod to Yazil, who pulled out a small, jet-handled blade.

Ozko circled behind Jack, grabbed a handful of hair, and yanked his head backward. "Shall we give you another scar to match?" he asked, his face inches away from Jack's.

I don't think so, buddy.

Jack twisted in Ozko's grasp until he faced his opponent. He pulled his head back several inches, then jerked it forward. His forehead slammed into Ozko's. The man's grip released. Jack finished him with a right cut to the jaw.

Yazil would not be so easy. The two squared off. Jack kept his eyes on the blade. He lunged, going for the wrist. Yazil pulled back. Jack got his fingers around Yazil's arm and twisted. He ducked under Yazil's swinging free arm, his back to Yazil's chest. The younger man's fingers slackened around the knife handle. It clattered across the floor into the shadows.

Yazil jammed his arm against Jack's windpipe. He couldn't get a breath. He released the wrist and pulled away from Yazil and turned. Head lowered, he hammered Yazil's chest.

With an *oomph*, Yazil smacked into a table. The oil lamp teetered, then fell. Oil flooded across the table and poured over the edge. The flame followed.

The burning table distracted Jack's attention, and Yazil tried to drive a fist into Jack's stomach. Jack twisted away. Yazil stumbled. Jack clasped his fists and smashed them into the back of Yazil's neck. He fell without a word and lay still.

Where was Layna? The floor caught fire. The room was filling with smoke. Had she gone out the back? The flames blocked the back of the room. Wherever she was, did she have that knife?

There she is. Why was she on the floor? Had the smoke taken her out already? Or did one of them hit her without realizing it? Either way, she was no danger to him. He had to find the statue.

The room was dark in spite of the flames. The fire spread in all directions. Jack scanned the room, but it was already filling with smoke. *I've gotta get out.*

He opened the door. The rush of oxygen mushroomed the fire.

Get Layna. Jack groused at his inner voice, but complied. He ran back, wrapped his hands around Layna's upper arms and dragged her into the street.

He left her across the street on the cobbled walkway, then ran to the next rowhouse beside the blue door.

"*Yangin!*" He pounded on the first door, then ran to another. "*Yangin! Fire!*"

As the first doors opened, Jack sprinted down the street into the darkness.

Two hours later Jack pounded on another door, this one in the Hotel Oba in Ýzmir, seventy miles south of Pergamum.

The door flew inward. A beefy hand grabbed his wrist and dragged him in. "You got it?"

Jack looked down into George's pasty complexion and exhaled. "I ran into some problems."

The other man shook his head, heavy jowls quivering. "Vitelli's called three times. You'd better call him."

Jack sighed. "He's not going to like what I have to say." He crossed to the phone and dialed the call. The connection was grainy, but sufficient.

"Jack?" Vitelli said. "*What've we got?*"

"I'm sorry, sir. There was some difficulty. I didn't get it."

A long silence followed, broken by Vitelli's cigar-smoke cough. "*Where is it?*"

"I'm not sure. It may have been in a burning house."

Vitelli swore. Jack cringed, waiting for more.

"*Not good, Jack. Not good. I was counting on getting that statue.*"

Jack stared through the window at the night sky of Ýzmir. After tonight, he was supposed to head for the south of France. Something told him that wasn't going to happen.

"Jack?"

"Yes, sir?"

"*Get yourself together. I've got a new job for you.*"

Jack nodded. A new job was better than what he had feared.

"*But, Jack,*" Vitelli's voice lowered to a mutter, "*No more failures. If you fail me again...*"

Jack chose to ignore the threat. "Where am I going, sir?"

"*Israel.*"

Emilie searched the onscreen image of the tablet for a long moment. The memory of it haunted her, though she hadn't seen it since childhood. The clay tablet was the size of a man's two palms and covered with Babylonian cuneiform. Emilie hated the sight of it.

"Can you read it?" Fitzwater asked.

Emilie stood and circled the desk to get a closer look. Many of the symbols were instantly recognizable to her—temple, grave, bull's blood. She followed the lines of text, skipping symbols she didn't know. It would take a while to fully decipher the Akkadian-rooted inscription.

"My father never finished translating it."

Fitzwater's head bobbed. "Eighteen years ago. Your memory is good."

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Emilie collapsed back into her chair. The incense in the room dizzied her. "I thought all the photos disappeared with him."

Fitzwater smiled. "This picture was taken three days ago."

Emilie's back stiffened. "You have the tablet?"

"I have—acquired it, yes."

"On the black market, you mean." Emilie felt her face grow warm. "I would have expected more from you. I thought you were interested in archaeology for the sake of knowledge."

Fitzwater smiled again. "Your principles are laudable, little Emilie. And yes, the tablet should never have been circulating for the past eighteen years. But let us remember how that happened in the first place."

Emilie closed her eyes. The memory of her father's betrayal still burned as though it had happened this morning. "What are you going to do with it?"

Fitzwater pressed the remote and the screen went black, leaving them in candlelight again. He laid the remote on the edge of the desk and laced his fingers together, pursing his lips. "I am sick, Emilie." He paused and gazed at the darkened window, then waved a hand around the room. "The candles, the music, the incense. It is all part of my holistic healing efforts. But my doctor tells me I don't have much longer."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not ready to die. I need a miracle."

"And you still think the tablet has healing power?"

Fitzwater's eyes watered, and he nodded. "We have forgotten so much of our history, Emilie. The Industrial Revolution has left us reliant on science and technology, but when they fail us we have nothing left. What has happened to faith? We have forgotten the days when our ancestors went to the gods for answers, for healing."

Fitzwater leaned back in his chair. "The Israel Antiquities Authority knows that I have acquired the tablet. Because it was originally uncovered in Israel, it technically belongs to the State of Israel. They threatened to pull the approval for my Ashkelon dig if I didn't donate it. I can't let the dig be closed down—the work there is my legacy. So the tablet belongs to them. But I've convinced them to give me the dig season to study the piece. I'll give it up after it's been translated. After I've had a chance to find my miracle."

Emilie exhaled. It was strange to think of the tablet behind glass in a museum. It had risen to almost mythic proportion in her mind. "Who's doing the translation work?" she asked. *Better be somebody good.*

"You are."

Emilie hoped her gasp wasn't audible. "I can't, Mr. Fitzwater. This is too important a find. I'm not qualified—"

"I know. But I trust you, Emilie. And trust is everything. The tablet will eventually be translated by an expert at Tel Aviv University, but I need someone to translate it while I can still use it. I know you will treat the tablet with

reverence because I know how you felt about your father.”

Yeah, my father was a lying thief with no principles. Emilie’s stomach turned over, something she could always count on when her emotions surged.

Fitzwater leaned forward. “I know you would never betray me. Who else can I say that about? And I believe you may be the only one who can channel the power.”

“Me?”

“Let’s not pretend, Emilie. Not with each other. Your father and Marduk Bel-Iddin were—connected, somehow. Many people believe psychic power is inherited, you know.”

“I’m not psychic!”

Fitzwater breathed heavily and nodded. “I knew you would be reluctant.” His eyes watered again. “Emilie, you are my last hope. My life is in your hands.”

Emilie shifted in her seat. The request was ludicrous. There was no way she was qualified to decipher the tablet, and it would take her three times as long as it would take an expert. But if Fitzwater were willing to give her the opportunity, how could she refuse it? The archeological value of the relic alone was worth doing the job. And if the tablet held the power that her father believed, it had the potential to change the world.

But would her father’s fate be hers if she took on this project? Emilie’s mother insisted it was guilt over betraying his family that had been the end of him, but Emilie had always felt there was more.

“I don’t know,” she said, twisting the belt from her jacket around one finger.

“The tablet must be kept safe while an epigrapher is deciphering it,” he said. “I know you’re as anxious as I am to find the answers your father pursued. And it’s your chance to answer all the questions you must have about your father’s death.”

“Mr. Fitzwater, I’m not finished with my degree yet. I don’t know—”

He waved away her concerns. “I still have contacts at the University. I’ve asked about you. I believe you can do the job.” He leaned his head against the back of his chair. “And as I said, you’re the only one I can trust.”

Emilie considered the offer. Was Fitzwater really so paranoid about theft that he would settle for a student? Or did he really believe she had inherited some special connection to the tablet? She had not dismissed the possibility of this type of power in the world, but was there a chance that she had it?

“Where is the tablet now?” she asked.

“In Ashkelon, at the current dig. The IAA won’t let me take it out of the country, of course. You’ll have to go there to decipher it.”

Emilie hadn’t been on a dig site in years, and working with a valuable piece like this was the chance of a lifetime, a young epigrapher’s dream job.

She could make certain that it was handled properly, and maybe make a name for herself at the same time. *If I don't fail totally.*

"I could go in August," she said. "After my summer courses are finished and I take my exams."

Fitzwater shook his head. "Not August. Next week."

She hid her disappointment. "I'm afraid that's impossible. I have two summer courses I have to finish if I'm going to get into the Ph.D. program in the fall."

"Perpetual student?"

Emilie stifled her annoyance. "I'm going to teach, eventually."

"Postpone your classes."

"That would mean postponing my degree. My life is already behind schedule, Mr. Fitzwater. I'm sorry, I can't do it." Emilie felt some relief at having made the decision. It was a crazy idea, anyway, and a project better left to experts.

Thomas Fitzwater dropped his head, frowning. "You disappoint me, Ms. Nazzaro. But I'm afraid I must insist."

Emilie bristled. "Mr. Fitz—"

"I've already spoken to Professor Krager."

"My advisor? How did you—"

"You'd be surprised how willing to accommodate they can be when dealing with one of their biggest donors."

"Still, you can't force me..."

Fitzwater tapped a finger on his desk. "Professor Krager assures me that if you will work with me, they will work with you."

"And if I don't?"

"Pack your bags, Emilie. You're going to Israel."

Twilight crept into the second floor study where Thomas Fitzwater smoked his final cigarette of the day. He stretched backward in his leather chair, watching the sun dip below the line of juniper trees at the edge of his property. He'd reached his self-imposed limit on cigarettes early today, but he would respect his own ban. He had no intention of actually succumbing to the cancer diagnosis he had manufactured for Emilie Nazzaro.

His private phone line rang. Thomas stubbed out the cigarette and reached for the phone.

"*Fitzwater?*" The male voice boomed across the telephone wires.

Thomas sat straighter. "What can I do for you, Mr. Al-Mirabi?"

"*We here are counting on the piece you promised, Fitzwater. How much more of a delay must we endure?*" Al-Mirabi's impatience traveled along the overseas lines as if he were on the other side of Thomas' desk.

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"There have been some complications." Thomas twisted a pen in his left hand. "The Israeli government learned that the relic was in my possession."

"I expect you are working to resolve the problem?" Al-Mirabi said.

"Yes, of course. The details are all set. I am only awaiting the execution of the plan. I assure you that the relic will be in your hands very soon."

"You can guarantee this?"

"I personally guarantee it."

"I have been convinced by others here that you are committed to our cause. I hope you will not disappoint."

"No, Mr. Al-Mirabi. It is only a matter of time. I realize that acquiring such pieces is crucial to your—to *our*—efforts."

"The fate of the world rests on what we do here, Fitzwater. You realize that?"

Thomas tapped the pen on his desk. Al-Mirabi's power trip was well known, but Thomas did agree that this covert, worldwide coalition held the power to turn governments on their heads. "I won't disappoint you, Mr. Al-Mirabi. As we speak I have someone moving into place to recover the tablet."

"And its disappearance will not be linked to you? We cannot have any hint of impropriety traced back to our organization."

"I understand. And I assure you, the blame for the tablet's disappearance will fall on one person alone. She is completely unaware of her purpose there. My employee on the inside will make certain she is in the right place at the right time."

"Good. You are only one stone in a grand, new building, Fitzwater, but each stone will be of utmost importance if we are to raise up our new world leader."

"All for peace, Mr. Al-Mirabi." Thomas offered the bywords of their organization as a farewell.

"All for peace, Mr. Fitzwater."

Thomas replaced the phone and reached into the top drawer of his desk for his cigarettes. Remembering his limit, he tossed them back in, closed the drawer, and settled for chewing the end of his pen instead. Al-Mirabi's call was troubling—not because Thomas doubted that the tablet would soon be in the coalition's possession, but because Al-Mirabi obviously doubted *him*.

He was a recent addition to the organization, anxious to prove his worth. Anxious to be an important part of the new government that would soon arise from the ancient dust of Babylon.

And although she would never know it, Emilie Nazzaro would play a crucial role.

Chapter 3

Emilie jammed one last pair of socks into her suitcase before pressing a knee into the top and yanking the zipper closed. Dr. Krager's face flashed before her as she gave the zipper another nasty tug and stood the suitcase on end. Her academic advisor had been a friend as well as mentor to her over the years, but there had been nothing of friendship when he called her into his office.

Vague promises, that's all he can give me. Meanwhile, my life gets put on hold again.

Emilie dragged her suitcase down the hall of her apartment and deposited it near the worn brocade couch her grandmother had handed down to her. She only had a few more minutes before she needed to leave for the airport. She glanced around, and asked herself what else needed to be done before she left for seven weeks.

Seven weeks. A strange country, a team she'd never met. Emilie breathed deeply. Would they resent her late arrival or would they make her part of them? And what about the warnings Fitzwater had issued when she met with him again last night? Would there be tomb-raiding thieves around every corner, waiting for her to get careless with the tablet?

A knock at the door canceled her self-pity. She swung the door inward and smiled at Margo on the other side.

"You ready?" Margo asked.

"Almost. I really appreciate this, Margo." She stepped aside to let her friend in. "The dictionary should define 'friend' as the person who volunteers to drive you to the airport."

Margo laughed and breezed into the apartment. Her willowy body, perfectly accessorized, set off Emilie's T-shirt and jeans and what her grandmother had always called Emilie's "plain Jane" look. Emilie didn't mind. She knew where she belonged in the food chain. She was one of the "personality people," whose inner beauty makes them attractive.

Yeah, right. Not that any men have gotten close enough to see it lately. No grown men, anyway.

Margo lifted a double-ringed hand to smooth a few errant hairs. "I still can't believe they're forcing you into this." She hefted Emilie's suitcase and then dropped it with feigned astonishment at its weight.

Emilie smiled. "I'll get it. Just let me look around one more time." She took a quick inventory of the apartment. She yelled from her bedroom, "I just hope I do a good job." Satisfied that she'd not forgotten anything, she headed back to the living room.

"You'll be great, as always," Margo said.

Emilie frowned. "I get the feeling that if anything happens to that tablet, my career goes with it. Dr. Horobin nearly kicked me out of the program when

I didn't return that bowl right away!" She hefted the suitcase. "Okay, let's go."

Margo dropped Emilie curbside at JFK airport in New York. Her flight wasn't scheduled to leave for four hours, but El Al Airline's myriad of security procedures would fill up her time. She endured the luggage checks, where airline personnel searched her bags and interrogated her as though she were an international spy. The airline had the best security in the world, but there was a cost.

She finally found her seat onboard the 747 jet bound for Tel Aviv. Seat 23F required climbing over a couple in their fifties who looked dressed for a night out rather than an eleven-hour flight. Emilie smiled and nodded, but didn't make conversation.

As the plane crossed the Atlantic, Emilie tried to sleep, but her thoughts were too scattered to give her peace. She thought back to her conversation with Mr. Fitzwater last night. He had her father's journals in storage, he'd said. He would send them along to her in Ashkelon. Emilie didn't know whether to be angry that Fitzwater had kept the journals or to tell him to toss them into the trash. Sitting on the plane now, however, she wished she had the journals to read. Instead, she pulled out a couple of the reference books she'd brought to brush up on her Akkadian cuneiform.

I'm never going to be able to do this. She thought back to the brief conversation she'd had with her advisor, Professor Krager, just before leaving. *He wasn't exactly subtle. If I protect Fitzwater's interests, my academic placement will be guaranteed. Fail him, fail everything.*

The woman beside her leaned in. Heavy perfume drifted across Emilie's space. A pair of glasses hung from a gold chain around the woman's neck, lying against the stylish black dress. She lifted the glasses and studied Emilie's book. "That looks complicated. Is it Greek?"

Emilie closed the book slightly. "Akkadian."

"Ah." The woman nodded. Her accent was New England, Boston maybe. "You're on a tour to the Holy Land, too?"

"Not a tour, exactly. More like a research trip."

Emilie's seatmate nodded to the man beside her. "Harry, we're sitting with an adventurer."

Harry sat forward. His slightly rumpled suit and bad comb-over didn't seem to mesh with his wife's chic look. "Oh? Like Indiana Jones?"

Emilie laughed. "I'm afraid adventure's not very high on my priority list. I'll just be doing some academic work over there."

"Are you a teacher?" the woman asked.

"Leave her to her books, June," Harry said, going back to his magazine.

Emilie closed the book. "That's okay. It's a long flight. I have plenty of time to study." She smiled at June. "I plan to teach someday."

"Our daughter's a third grade teacher in Charleston," June said.

Emilie shook her head. "I don't think I could handle third-graders. I'd like

to find a small university somewhere and tuck myself away there for a few decades.”

June frowned. “Sounds lonely.”

Emilie shrugged. “Or just safe. Most relationships aren’t worth the risk anyway.”

June patted Emilie’s hand and several bracelets jangled. “You’ve been hurt.” When Emilie didn’t respond, June changed the subject. “We’re so excited to finally see the Holy Land. Is it your first time?”

Emilie nodded.

“Imagine, walking where Jesus walked, seeing things the way He saw them.”

“Actually, I’ll be spending my time in Ashkelon. It’s on the coast, in the southern part of Israel. I don’t think Jesus ever got down that far. And it’s a fairly modern city.”

“Oh.” June’s excitement seemed to deflate. “But still,” she brightened, “going to any part of Israel is like a spiritual quest, don’t you think? You have to feel closer to God there.”

Emilie opened her reference book again. “I’m afraid I gave up on trying to believe in God a long time ago.”

“Hmmm. Then you truly are alone.”

“I’m doing okay by myself so far,” Emilie said, and flipped the book back open.

June took the hint and found a magazine to read.

By the time the plane circled Ben Gurion International Airport, Emilie had decided there was no sense in whining about the forced trip. She’d get in, get the work done, and get back out. Perhaps she could even fit in a summer class.

It was mid-morning in Tel Aviv, and the combination of flying all night and being thrust seven hours forward in time made Emilie ready for a hot shower and a bed. But Israel’s airport security personnel had other plans. When Emilie had satisfied all of them that she was neither spy nor terrorist, she consulted the letter she had crushed into her purse before leaving home. One of the team members should be meeting her outside the airport soon. She threaded her way through the crowd toward the exit, hoping for a comfortable bench outside where she could park her exhausted self.

Ten yards from the exit, two figures closed in on either side of her, narrowing her vision. The man on her right pulled her suitcase from her grasp.

“Excuse me!” She stopped walking. They grabbed her elbows and kept moving.

“Come with us, Ms. Nazzaro,” the other said. They pushed past the throngs of people.

“Can I help you?” Emilie glanced from one to the other. Were these the team members who were supposed to pick her up?

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She watched the larger man signal his partner to open a narrow door leading off the waiting area. Her hope that they were from the dig site dissolved.

"In here." Before she had a chance to react, he shoved her forward. Emilie stumbled into a dimly lit room. The two men pushed in behind her.

Jack straightened up and shielded his eyes. The Ashkelon dig site was only a few hundred yards from the sea, but the glare on the white sand made it difficult to see. He scanned the beach for the tenth time that morning. *Nothing. Where is he?*

"Cabot!"

Jack dropped back to his knees in the dirt and turned his head. "Yeah?"

Victor Herrigan, the Ashkelon Excavation Director, stepped into Square 38 where Jack worked. When Jack didn't stand, Herrigan folded his arms over his chest and waited, as though commanding complete attention. Jack stood.

"I have a job for you, Cabot."

Jack ditched the pick he'd been using to hack away at the Middle Bronze Age. "Anything's better than this."

"We've got an addition to our staff coming in this morning. You need to do an airport pickup."

Jack glanced toward the beach once more. "Why me?"

"Because you're the only one rich enough to rent a car while you're here." Dr. Herrigan looked at his watch. "You have half an hour before you need to leave. Check with me then." He nudged the pick with his toe. "In the meantime, get back to work."

Jack gave Dr. Herrigan a mock salute before retrieving the pick. *Great. If Muwabi doesn't show in the next half hour...*

He'd been on the Ashkelon dig for two days, and already muscles he didn't know he had were yelling at him to quit. But after the disaster in Turkey, there was no way he would give up on this one.

Jack stretched again and watched the volunteers for a minute. Some squatted or kneeled, carefully brushing off the pieces of the past. Others, like himself, dragged picks through the dirt, hoping to hit something amazing without damaging it. Nearly a hundred volunteers worked the grid. He could never check out all of them. He needed Muwabi. He checked his watch. *Twenty-six minutes. He'd better get here.*

The volunteer in the square beside him sat back on her heels and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. She wore a white T-shirt and khaki shorts, but both were stained with mud. Her black hair was pulled into a ponytail, and sweat beaded on her neck. "So how's the new guy doing?"

"Feeling my age," he said, grinning. "I'm Jack Cabot, by the way."

She stood and swung her pick. "Jenn Reddington."

They worked in silence for a few minutes. Jack managed to search the beach only twice.

"Anything exciting turn up here yet?" Jack asked.

She laughed. "Are you kidding? I would have thought the whole world was talking about it, from the way Dr. Herrigan's been acting."

"So what's the big discovery?"

She leaned on her pick and shrugged. "Nothing we dug up, unfortunately. Something the guy with the money bought. Some kind of sorcerer's thing."

Jack tried to look uninterested. "Where is it now?"

Jenn went back to her work. "You got me. Nobody's answering questions. They've got it under lock and key, I'm sure. Bringing in an expert to decipher the sorcery."

"Herrigan thinks someone's trying to steal it?"

"Who knows."

Jack looked up. Across the dig site, a black figure stood on the beach, watching. Jack angled his pick into the dirt again and turned his back to Jenn. He heard her shovel dig into the sandy soil. A minute later he leaned his pick against the bulk wall between squares and strolled toward the beach.

Jack's sneakers sunk into the sand. His ankles twisted, slowing down his walk toward the African man. "Where've you been?"

"You want friendly conversation or information?" Muwabi said.

Jack nodded. "What do you have for me?"

The other man shook his head. "Not much. There doesn't seem to be much black market talk about the tablet. Too quiet, in fact. Makes me think someone else is involved, and no one's saying anything."

"Any guesses?"

Muwabi shrugged. "All I can tell you is that Leon Hightower is in Ashkelon."

Jack's gaze drifted back to the dig site. "It's gotta be him, then."

"I don't know. Word is, he's here for some other buy. Somebody's brought something in from Turkey. Some kind of healing god or something."

Jack whirled. "The statue of Aesculapius?"

The other man shrugged again. "I think so."

Jack clenched a fist. If the statue wasn't destroyed in Pergamum, there was a chance he could still retrieve it! *As long as I stay focused on the tablet at the same time.*

"Cabot!" Dr. Herrigan's voice competed with the breakers.

Jack waved a hand at the Director.

Dr. Herrigan cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled. "Get to the airport!"

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Emilie's captors forced her through the door in the airport wall. She thrust a foot backward. One of the men yanked on the door. Her foot propped it open.

"Cooperate, Ms. Nazzaro," The little man pulled her back. "You are in no danger."

I'll be the judge of that. She tried to squeeze her body through the crack in the door her foot had preserved. He hauled her fully into the room and slammed the door. She was too tired for any heroics.

"Ms. Nazzaro!" The taller man was evidently in charge, leaving his colleague to do the suitcase-carrying and girl-holding.

"What do you want?" Emilie looked him in the face now, willing herself not to show her fear. The olive-skinned man definitely looked Jewish, and Emilie wondered if she were still under suspicion for some crime. He reached into his jacket. Emilie winced, but when his hand emerged, he held a business card. The other man dropped her arms, allowing her to take the offered card.

"I apologize for our rudeness in detaining you, Ms. Nazzaro. But I hope you will understand our need for discretion."

Emilie turned the card face-up in her hand and read the block lettering. "Amir Sudiwiz, Anti-Theft Unit, Israel Antiquities Authority." She fumed and looked up. "You're from the IAA?"

Mr. Sudiwiz gave a half-smile. "You are in Israel for research purposes, I understand?"

Emilie nodded. "The Thomas Fitzwater dig at Ashkelon."

"Yes." He pointed to the card. "Please keep that. You may need it later."

Emilie slid the card into her purse.

"We are aware of the work you will be doing in Ashkelon, Ms. Nazzaro. Relics such as this often gain undue attention. Rumors about ancient power still residing in artifacts can motivate undesirable people to take interest."

"I can assure you, Mr. Sudiwiz, the tablet is in no danger from me."

Sudiwiz held up a hand. "It's not you we're worried about. But certain—intelligence—has come to us that the tablet may be targeted for theft."

"Who wants it?"

Sudiwiz smiled. "If this tablet possesses healing power, Ms. Nazzaro, a good many people will want it. A find like this one is important to our country."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Sudiwiz nodded, as if glad to get down to business. "We've checked your background, Ms. Nazzaro. We want you to be our eyes and ears at the dig. Keep a close watch on your colleagues and on any outsiders who appear overly interested in the tablet. Contact us if you observe anything suspicious."

Emilie exhaled. This project kept getting more complicated. "Why me?"

"For one thing, because you are new. It was easy to intercept you, rather than try to contact someone on the inside already. And none of these people know you. They don't know what to expect from your behavior. You won't seem suspicious to them."

"I don't know."

Sudiwitz pointed to her purse. "You have my card. All we ask is that you make a simple phone call if you sense anything amiss. Can you do that for us? For Israel?"

When you put it like that. She nodded. "I'll call you if I see or hear anything."

"Thank you." He pressed her hand in his. "Thank you."

As the three emerged from the storage room, Emilie glanced around the airport self-consciously, but no one seemed to be paying attention. The Israeli agents melted into the crowd, and she was left alone again.

Outside in the heat, she scanned the sidewalk and street, not knowing what to look for.

"Hey, are you Emilie?" The American voice behind her materialized into a well-built, blond man wearing a black T-shirt, cutoff jeans, and heavy boots.

"Yes." She dropped her suitcase and extended a hand. "Emilie Nazzaro."

He thrust a hand toward hers, clamping his fingers around her own. "It's your lucky day, Emilie."

She smiled. "Why is that?"

"Cause you've got me for a driver!" He flashed a smile back at her. "Jack Cabot's the name."

Was this guy serious? He was more Ken Doll than human, with his surfer looks and huge smile. *And an ego to match.* "Are you part of the volunteer team, Jack?"

"Sure am." He snatched up her suitcase as though she'd packed only feather dusters. "Car's over here," he said, walking away. "We'll head straight to the dig site. I'll pawn you off on the director. I've got a beautiful girl waiting for me in Tel Aviv."

Emilie frowned at Ken Doll's back. "Don't let me inconvenience you."

"I'll deal with it," he said.

Emilie trotted to keep up with him, crossing her fingers that the rest of the team members didn't act like rich playboys on a holiday.

When they reached the car, a brand-new Mitsubishi Galant, he surprised her by opening her door. *Maybe he's not a total narcissist.*

Jack Cabot proved to have a gift for continuous talking. Emilie nearly fell asleep as they drove toward Ashkelon. The only useful bit of information she picked up was a warning about Dr. Victor Herrigan. According to Jack, he was a dictator, running the dig site more like an army sergeant than a university professor.

As they neared Ashkelon National Park, where the dig site was located,

Emilie forced her eyes open to watch through the window. The city wove a spell around her immediately, with its eclectic mix of old and new battling for control.

"So you're here to work on the artifact, huh?" Jack asked. "You must be quite the expert."

If you only knew. "I'll do my best." She wondered if her work was common knowledge around the dig. She would have expected Fitzwater to be more discreet.

"I'd love to hear more about your work. Maybe we could get together sometime, get some dinner?" He smiled across the front seat, his right hand resting on the seat between them.

Emilie lowered her window. *Did it suddenly get hotter?* "Uh..." She tapped her fingers against her thigh as warning lights went off in her brain. Agent Sudiwitz's words replayed. "...a close watch on your colleagues...anyone overly interested..." *You're not here to make friends, Em.* She glanced over at that smile. *Or anything else.* "I'll be very busy, I think."

As they drove through the main entrance of the park, Emilie's stomach did flips in spite of her determination to keep things businesslike. She hated meeting new people. She assumed the rest of the team wouldn't be as arrogant as Jack. *They'd better not be. I don't think I can tolerate seven weeks as an outsider.*

They continued through the park until they neared the beach. Emilie sucked in her breath at the sight of the expedition. She'd been a child the last time she'd seen a dig site. She hadn't expected to be so awed today. Dozens of workers crawled over the grid, laid out in ten-meter squares. The remains of the oldest arched gate in the world, still standing two stories high, loomed over the laborers as they picked and brushed their way into the past.

Jack parked the car, jumped out, and circled to her side. Another car pulled up beside them. Emilie opened her door and the heat hit her once again, along with a wave of nostalgia that came with the long-forgotten yet familiar sound of the volunteers' picks striking hardened soil.

A man twice her age opened the car door beside her. Jack grabbed Emilie's elbow and hauled her out of the car.

"I've got her, Dr. Herrigan." Jack pulled her around to face the older man. "I brought the sorceress."

Emilie looked from one man to the other. She'd been shoved around too much lately, and she was beginning to resent it. And what was this about a "sorceress"?

"You're sure this is her?" Dr. Herrigan was looking her up and down. He was well-built for his age, and much taller than Emilie, with a shock of hair the color of bleached sand.

Jack let go of her arm and raised his eyebrows at her. "She said so."

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Dr. Herrigan pulled out a pair of black-rimmed glasses to inspect her more closely. "Let me see your identification, Ms. Nazzaro."

Emily fumbled in her purse. "Is there a problem?"

"Just being cautious. You understand."

Emilie thrust her passport at him. "Is that enough?"

He studied the picture, then her face. "Do you have anything else? A driver's license? Passports can be faked."

Emilie handed him the small card. "So can a driver's license."

Dr. Herrigan grunted, but handed her license back.

Emilie stuffed them into her purse again and turned to Jack. "Why did you call me the 'sorceress'?"

"Sorry," he said. "Wasn't thinking, I guess. Everyone's been talking about you."

Great. And I'll bet you've been doing most of it.

Dr. Herrigan reached into the front seat of his Ford Focus and pulled out a black case. "Ms. Nazzaro, follow me."

Not wasting any time, are we? As excited as she was to see the tablet, jet lag had turned her legs to rubber bands, and she wished Jack would have dumped her at her hotel instead. Emilie followed Herrigan's footsteps in the dirt across the dig site to a picnic table covered by an awning, and glanced back at Jack's car. What would happen to her luggage if Jack headed off to Tel Aviv to meet his "beautiful girl"? But it looked like Jack wasn't going anywhere: He was still right behind her.

Dirt and sand had already wormed their way into her shoes by the time they reached the lean-to. Dr. Herrigan set the black case on the picnic table. Emilie sat on the bench.

For the first time today, she allowed herself to think about what was in that case. Her father had spent a lifetime searching for this tablet. What he had found had sucked the life from him, convincing him that he had a connection to the dark powers of Marduk Bel-Iddin—a connection that the passing of the ages could not destroy. Now here she was, about to unlock the secrets her father had given his life to uncover.

"Jack!"

Emilie jumped at Dr. Herrigan's sharp command. Jack Cabot shrugged and backed away from the table. He disappeared into the grid of volunteers bent over their tools.

Dr. Herrigan turned back to Emilie and licked his lips, his fingers rubbing the silver latches on the case. He remained standing, like an angry parent scolding a child. "Ms. Nazzaro, I assume you have been informed as to the delicate nature of this artifact. Discretion is vital as the work here progresses—"

"I assure you, doctor, I will be very careful."

Dr. Herrigan clenched his jaw. "In the future, Ms. Nazzaro, you will not

interrupt me when I speak. Is that clear?"

Emilie swallowed. "Yes, sir."

"You will work here at the dig site during the day. The public nature of the area should serve as a deterrent to would-be thieves. A guard has been hired and will remain nearby as you work."

Emilie nodded. Her eyes strayed back to the case. She was having difficulty focusing on his words. *Open it. Open the case.*

"Are you are anxious to see the tablet again?" Dr. Herrigan asked.

"It's been many years," Emilie said. "I was only a child."

"Yes, your father was instrumental in its recovery. However, as I'm sure he would tell you, it is an object of study, Ms. Nazzaro, not a sideshow freak to be gawked at."

Dr. Herrigan lowered himself to the bench across from her and set the case on the table between them. He twirled the numbers that locked the case, then flipped it open so that its lid obscured Emilie's view. Slowly, he slid the case in a semi-circle until the tablet lay before her, cushioned in black foam padding.

It looked just as it had in Thomas Fitzwater's photo. But having it in front of her, close enough to touch, was...different.

She reached a hesitant hand toward the tablet, then pulled it back. A moment later, she reached in again, this time laying the tips of her fingers on the face of the orange-red clay.

Her fingers tingled for a moment. A rush of warmth filled her body. The sounds of the dig dropped away and a high-pitched singing filled her ears. Her eyes fluttered and closed.

Night. An ebony sky, close enough to dip her hands in and scoop out the stars. A hot wind rushing past her lips. The cloying smell of blood nearby and the taste of charred meat on her tongue. She stood on the edge of a platform, the ground hundreds of feet below her, where flickering torchlight mirrored the stars above. She swayed, lightheaded. A hand caught her arm. A hand that reached from a black robe, from a man with a shaved head and empty eyes, who had once been so familiar....

"Ms. Nazzaro!"

Dr. Herrigan's voice pierced her thoughts. Emilie shook her head. She blinked against the afternoon sun and pulled her hand from the tablet.

"Ms. Nazzaro, are you unwell?"

She shook her head again, clearing the haunting images from her mind. *No, not unwell. But perhaps...unwise.*