

One



Fourteen years later—

A lovely spot for a garden, the woman mused.

Her name was Maria, as had been her grandmother's. For almost seven decades she had lived at the base of the southernmost of Rome's fabled Seven Hills, on land owned by her family for as long as anyone could remember. Long before, when the Roman influence had spread far and wide throughout the earth, the once celebrated Via Appia—the Appian Way—had passed nearby, a major thoroughfare of the once great empire. At that time, when senators and noblemen in chariots traversed the region, her family's land had been a prized location, along the primary trade route, the chief highway to Greece and points east.

Now, it was just—lovely.

Sun dappled the ground around her as it penetrated the overhanging forest of olive, sycamore, and lotus trees covering the two and a half acres of her inheritance. Mimosa brought a splash of yellow, and when the time was right, additional color dotted the trio of orange trees her grandfather had planted in celebration of her birth so many autumns ago.

Well within sight of her terra-cotta-roofed house, she

chose a spot, smiled, and brought her shovel down. The ground was soft, thanks to recent rains, and the grassy soil yielded easily.

Tomatoes here, she mused, smiling. Nothing but the best for the recipes Mother taught me. And courgette and aubergine ...

Little by little, in the cool of the morning, she patiently turned the earth, casting it aside to reveal the rich, dark loam in which her well-chosen seeds would find a home. Her mind delighted in visions of sumptuous family meals yet to come.

Clunk.

Her blade hit something hard.

Oh no, she worried. Stones to be moved.

She scraped the steel edge of the shovel along the ground, trying to determine the size of her problem.

Whatever it was, it was flat on top.

For another hour she worked to clear away the soil, laying bare an unyielding thistle in her otherwise promising garden. When she had uncovered a straight length of more than eight feet and a width of two feet, her spade happened upon something immediately recognizable, a rounded fragment, its edges chipped and worn.

Sightless eyes looked up at her, the nose between them gone. What remained of a chiseled jaw displayed a resolve long since silenced, its polished marble contours discolored by unforgiving ages within the earth.

She stopped, dropped her shovel, and reached into a pocket for her phone.

“Il Museo di Archeologico di Roma,” she told the operator.



It was an aging institution, its halls and corridors filled with erudite ghosts, the shadows of the hundreds of thousands who had walked there, played there, learned there. You could smell it in the air, feel it in the oiled wood trim, sense it in the plastered walls.

Knowledge.

Oldefield University was a rarity. Touched little by the advances of time and technology, it was a minor academe, nestled in a forest, hidden by the shade of towering oaks, maples, spruces, and pines, its campus more than a mile from the main road. The school was as beautiful as it was secluded, its buildings white-trimmed masterpieces of dark red stone separated by vivid, verdant lawns and precisely trimmed flowering shrubbery.

Tradition here had always been held in the highest regard, with change coming only grudgingly as necessity—and the school's continued existence—dictated. Its first parking lots, finally laid in the 1950s, came only after prolonged and heated debate. The campus had no air-conditioning, nor had it ever needed any. It did have a computer research lab connected to the rest of the world via small rooftop satellite dishes, but the facility had yet to supplant the books shelved within the university's vast library, home to bound volumes dating back to the early 1700s. A few professors, more each year, chose to bring personal computers into their classrooms, while others stayed with more conventional means of record keeping. Students, their class sizes small, were given direct and generous instruction with emphasis placed heavily on hands-on experience.

The school was timeless, ageless, and answered to no other educational or political entity.

And, as a result, it was impoverished.

Anna stood in the hallway outside the office of the dean of archaeology, looking into the reflective pane of a framed portrait as she tugged gently at her wispy bangs, unable to get them to stay just as she wanted.

Flexible hold, my eye!

Frustrated with her hair, she gave up and adjusted the bow collar of her white blouse. Her heart drummed within her.

You look fine, she told herself. *Oh, who am I kidding?*

She checked the delicate hands of her designer watch, a gift from the university several years earlier when she was awarded the Carl Ferguson chair.

That was such a lovely evening.

It was exactly noon. The moment had come.

It'll be okay ... You'll get through this!

She smoothed her pale pink skirt and blazer, drew a deep breath, and walked into the office, her fingers subtly and fretfully kneading the strap of her purse. The smile she wore as she closed the door behind her and approached the secretary's desk was a mask.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Meridian," greeted the younger woman. "Dean Mercer is expecting you. You may go right in."

"Thank you, Amy."

The hinges of the heavy walnut door squealed a little as she opened it.

"Anna," said Albert Mercer, an elderly man sitting behind a massive, cluttered desk. He rose to his feet as she entered. "Please, come in."

The room spoke of treasured knowledge attained at great price. Heavy bookshelves of rich wood, filled to the limit with hardbound literary classics, research works, and meticulous histories, lined the walls.

Anna's heels met lush carpet, her steps silent as she entered. Unhurriedly approaching the desk, she felt like a child sent to the principal's office. She feared she knew why she was there. She prayed she would be proven wrong.

"You look lovely, my dear."

"Thank you."

"Have a seat," he said, gesturing toward a plush leather chair opposite his own. "There's a matter we must discuss."

Anna sat without a sound, clutching her purse in her lap, her fingers still rubbing the smooth, darkened strap. Mercer took his seat.

"How are things with your staff?" he asked. "Are the new grad assistants to your liking?"

"Yes, Albert," she said. "Everyone's quite eager to get out there and get their hands dirty. As usual, they all have visions of King Tut dancing in their heads."

"The idealism of youth." Mercer nodded with a slight smile. "I well remember. I must admit ... I, too, fancied myself Howard Carter once."

"It does take a few years for reality to set in," she agreed. "Lots of work, very little glamour. And no Indiana Jones ... at least not when you know what you're doing."

"Anna," the dean began with obvious reluctance, "reality *is* a harsh master. I would like very much not to have to tell you this, but ..."—there was a long pause—"the board of regents met this morning. I'm sure you knew that."

“Yes,” she said, crossing her legs. Her breath held fast.

“Know that we all hold your late husband and his accomplishments in the highest regard. Know also that those sentiments have also extended to you. However ...”

He was choosing his words carefully—too carefully. She looked down at her hands.

Please, just get it over with.

“It’s no secret that there are those here who don’t believe your carrying on of Samuel’s work has brought the desired results, or that you are qualified to attempt as much. The past five expeditionary seasons have yielded nothing of consequence, and some on the board believe the expense of such fieldwork is no longer justified. And despite your degrees in both history and archaeology, it’s no secret among those of us who know you that the former is your first love.”

“I see.”

“In Samuel’s memory, we have gone beyond expectation and beyond what is justified in allotting the budgets within which you’ve worked, and this has caused, shall we say, *unrest* among some within the faculty. They see you as receiving favored treatment and have become increasingly dissatisfied with their own annual departmental budgets.”

Watching his sharp gray eyes in silence, she nervously rubbed a couple of toes together within the confines of her tight pink pumps.

“In addition to this,” Mercer continued, “the university’s fund-raising efforts have proven less than stellar the past few years. The alumni have moved on with their lives, it would seem. While several very generous contributions have been made, some anonymously, we’ve still fallen well short of our

goals. This past decade has seen a steady decline in operating funds, and we've reached a critical point."

For a moment he dropped his gaze.

"We've tried to do without new equipment for so long, due to the expense and many other reasons, but it has now become essential. While it means dropping other programs altogether, we have no choice but to implement a serious advancement of our ... *technology* level." The word seemed distasteful to him. "For the fall semester, we will place at our students' disposal radically updated computer labs and such, and we will have to continue to modernize if we're to continue drawing new blood to Oldefield."

"I know," Anna said. Many, both faculty and students, had said it was time to bring the school into the twenty-first century, she recalled. Many others had said it was time to bring it into the twentieth.

He rose from his seat and stood beside a floor-mounted globe near the desk. "The tangible has become ineffectual, I'm afraid. Or at the very least, undesirable. Globes, wall maps, models—things you can touch and hold and sense—have fallen by the wayside. The scent of old, time-proven research volumes that have gone the way of the Pony Express."

"Progress," Anna said. "It's inevitable, if our students are to compete in the world."

"Indeed," replied the dean. "But it carries a great price. The purely experiential approach we've always cherished is a luxury we no longer can afford."

Anna lowered her head and closed her eyes, awaiting the blow.

"Effective immediately," Mercer said as gently as he could,

“it has been decided to restrict your teaching to the lecture hall. There will be no further archaeological expeditions. No more digs. I know that all these years you’ve carried on in honor of your husband’s unfulfilled efforts. Fought to see his dream brought to fruition—”

“Not solely because of that,” she interrupted.

He nodded. “In any case, the time has come to bring such ventures to a close. Perhaps you’d prefer to return to history at the end of the semester? Dr. Lowell is departing, as you know, which will leave us wanting in that department.”

“I’d heard.”

“Will you consider it?”

“Consider it,” she repeated, “yes. But Albert ...”—he looked up from the slowly spinning globe into her golden brown eyes—“what about the dig already under way?”

“Ah, Rome,” he recalled.

“What do I tell Roberto? Are they just supposed to drop their shovels and catch the next plane home?”

“Where do things stand?”

“A good bit of progress has been made since I was called back here,” Anna said. “Much of the foundation has been cleared. Only this morning I was told that a series of descending stone steps had been uncovered. More than a dozen as of yesterday, and there may be many more.”

“Leading down to who knows what,” he said. “Could be nothing.”

“Yes,” she agreed, “but whatever’s down there is highly unusual. The Romans didn’t incorporate cellars into their common architecture, but the stone used, the location, and even a handful of coins we’ve come across ... every indicator

says we're dealing with Nero's Rome. The fragment of a shattered marble bust found by Signora Verducci fits the era. We're dealing with a sizable foundation and whatever's under it, though we're not yet certain what the above-ground structure was. A villa most likely, or even a temple, as yet unknown. But we have every reason to believe there may be something of real significance at the bottom of those steps."

"Like what?"

She hesitated.

"A wine cellar?" he wryly proposed.

She smiled, appreciating his sense of humor. "No."

"So what reason do you have for such optimism?"

She was silent.

Mercer turned, swept a curtain aside, and peered through the tall, broad window behind his desk.

"Anna," he began, "for so long you've been like a daughter to me. I've watched you, seen your passion for your work, your love for your students and your profession."

She followed his gaze, looking out the window at the campus, the students, even the budding branches as they yielded to the gusty spring winds.

"And," he added, "I understand the sheer power of hope."

Her mind flashed back to that day in Qumran, to the faith she had clutched to her heart that somehow, against all odds, her husband would emerge alive. But her faith in miracles had been crushed as the hours, then the days, then the weeks had passed—as the rescue team, soon reclassified a mere *recovery* team, had laboriously cleared the cavern tunnel.

"If I were to allow the dig to continue," Mercer said, "even through the end of the month—"

“We could make history.”

“I was going to say,” he continued, “if I allow it to continue, it may jeopardize your very career at Oldefield. Unfortunately, there are those here who wouldn’t be heartbroken to see you go, some who might not hesitate to use any wedge at their disposal to displace you. For many, archaeology is, as they say, a ‘boys’ club’ ... and for some, despite their respect for Samuel, you’ve never been welcome. No, it isn’t lawful, or in the least, fair. And you could pursue legal action in return, were you to be released from your obligations here. But your case would be virtually impossible to prove, and they’d surely find other grounds for your dismissal.”

“I understand.”

He turned to face her.

“So, my dear ... what is it to be?”

She rose to her feet and swallowed hard.

“The end of the month, then.”

He nodded. “Very well. The end of the month. Your duties here shouldn’t keep you beyond the end of the week, and then ...” He took her hand and gave it a fatherly pat. “Give young Mr. Giordano my regards, will you?”



The fire sizzled and popped, an eternal ballet, ever unchanging.

Anna’s office was a storybook place built one hundred years earlier, when ornate trim in dark, polished wood had been the order of the day, and fixtures were as much works of art as they were functional. More than a dozen people had

claimed the room as their own throughout the years, including her husband before her.

In the light of the hewn fireplace, her eyes shone—warm, dark, and expressive, deep russet flecked with gold. Her lashes fluttered like ravens' wings. Her hair was as spun cinnamon. Her lips were full and supple, her complexion pure and silken. A teacup in her hands, she sat staring into the flames in the darkness of the room, lost in their poetic motion. And as she watched, she found something appealing, even comforting there, amid the dancing light.

Fire, the same now as it had been when the first person saw it. The same sound, the same radiance, the same heat ...

If she tried hard enough, she could almost allow it to transport her back through the ages, as if every fire ever set shared with its descendants a link through which she could travel to one and all. Back to ancient Egypt, where pharaohs ruled in luxury and slaves toiled under a merciless sun. Back to the height of Incan civilization, where ruthless blood sacrifices appeased gods of the worshippers' own making. Back to Stonehenge, where mystical Druids celebrated the changing seasons with fire, water, and blood.

Back to Qumran, five minutes before two good men died.

She took a deep breath. Usually, as daily life brought its challenges, she pushed the memory to the back of her mind, and there it lingered at the fringes like an ember refusing to be extinguished. But now and again it would rise, flaring to life, demanding from her something she refused to give herself.

Forgiveness.

I should have remembered the battery. Maybe if I'd stayed ...

She closed her eyes. The self-imposed burden remained a heavy one.

Maybe I would have heard something. Maybe I could have warned them.

Logic found no place in her thoughts, not here.

I should have let Sam go back to the hotel, instead of me. He wanted to, but I stopped him.

Her guilt, so long entrenched on so many fronts, would not be buried.

I should have died instead of him. He should be the one sitting in this office now, not me.

Her scarred heart had refused to heal.

The ark wasn't even there. Nothing was there. Then, he died ...

She took a sip from her cup, the warm tea a blessing.

And another good man with him.

She remembered a gentle face smiling from across a high-school campus.

And a little boy grew up an orphan, raised by an aunt with little patience, a woman he had barely known before that moment.

Another sip.

All for nothing!

Anna gazed into the quivering flames but didn't see them.

Oh, Sam ...

After a moment she sensed another presence in the room.

"I knocked a few times," said a welcome voice. "The door was unlocked, and I saw the firelight under it, so ..."

Anna turned from the light as a dark shape moved into the room. Her eyes would take a moment to adjust, but she knew the voice well.

“I’m sorry, Jack. The bell’s not working.”

John “Jack” Dyson, her fellow archaeology instructor and close friend, gently shut the door behind him. His collar was loosened, his tie gone. His hair the hue of harvest wheat.

“Getting late,” he commented. “Long day.”

No reply came.

He paused to set some papers on her desk and crossed to the stone-lined hearth, where he stood watching her. Standing next to her chair, his hand found her shoulder.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I will be.”

In the interval since Qumran, the shaken professor had reassessed every aspect of her life. Every moment, every decision she could recall had endured her harsh scrutiny under an unforgiving magnifying glass. Only after she had finally determined herself worthy—and after many long talks with those closest to her—had she chosen to remain in the field.

Dyson was a brilliant man whose dedication to truth, and to discretion in the procurement of that truth, had won her trust. The prospect of working with him, though she might not admit it, had also played a part in her decision.

And as their friendship had blossomed, becoming something that transcended mere professionalism, she was grateful to have been swayed.

She glanced up at him, finding the sparkling eyes she had come to cherish. His presence had become for her a far greater comfort than she dared admit, whether to him or to herself. So often she had fed upon his strength, the many times her own had failed her, and he had always been there, day or night, anywhere she had needed him to be. But despite her

reliance on him, she had kept her heart locked away, its passions reserved for one who never again could share in them.

Anything else, she told herself, would be unfaithfulness.

Several moments passed in silence as both watched the curling, writhing flames.

“Anna,” Dyson finally ventured, the firelight splashing his rugged face, “I heard about the board’s decision. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you, Jack.”

“It’s a pity about Rome,” he said.

“We’re not giving up just yet.”

His eyes widened. “We’re not?”

“Dean Mercer allowed us through the end of the month. That’s three more weeks, give or take. And in that time, something has to happen.”

“Something has.”

She brightened. “What?”

“I got a call from Roberto. He said he tried to call you ...”

“I turned off my phone.”

Dyson nodded subtly. “It’s a villa. First century.”

Anna set her cup aside, rose, and crossed the room, wringing her hands as she considered the news. She stood before a multipaned window, the moon beyond shining over the wooded landscape.

“He’s sure?”

“He said he was,” Dyson replied, his voice tight with excitement. “And the more they’ve dug, the more they’ve found the foundation intact.”

“I’ve been away too long. Where do things stand?”

“It’s going quickly. They’ve unearthed another ten steps, all inlaid with silver. That makes twenty-six. All in red

travertine ... exceedingly rare in the region, and surely expensive. Whoever had them made was a noble.”

“Twenty-six steps so far,” she repeated.

Twenty-six of thirty-three, she prayed.

“What exactly are you hoping to find?” Dyson asked. “You haven’t told me.”

She traced the pane with a long, burgundy-polished nail. She recalled vivid images, the essence of an unrelenting and recurring dream that had haunted her for weeks.

One she dared not share. Not yet.

She went to him and took his hand in hers. “Just ... thank you for being here. It means a lot.”

“Where else would I be?” he replied with a soft smile.

After a few moments he seemed to detect something recognizable in the air.

“Pizza?” he asked, puzzled. “Since when do you call out for pizza?”

“I ... used to. Not so often anymore.”

A glint shone in her eye, caught by the light of the fire. Her scent reached him, a harmony of soft perfume and ...

“Ah,” he noted. “Pepperoni.”

“And sweet corn.”

It had been Meridian’s favorite. In his memory, with the extinguishing of his lifetime’s desire now upon her, she had placed the order and had known the concert of its flavors for the first time in more than a dozen years.

Sam ...

“I should get back to the dig,” Anna said, moving to the desk.

“None too soon. They need you.”

She pulled her purse from a drawer, which she locked afterward. “I’ll call the airline. Care to come along?”

“Already taken care of.” Dyson smiled, handing her a folded printout. “The red-eye to Rome. You leave in three days ... Best I could do. Unfortunately, I can’t go with you. Finals week.”

“Right,” she said, disappointment in her eyes. “I’ll keep you updated.”

“I’ll be waiting for your call,” he said, smiling.