

By the time Tess and Reilly clambered down the metal steps and onto the tarmac at Dalaman Airport, it was midafternoon and they were both feeling frazzled. The few hours of sleep they had managed on the transatlantic flight had helped, but they could have used some real bed rest before continuing their journey. There was no time for that. Instead, they had added to their weariness by waiting three hours at Istanbul Airport before catching the short connecting flight to the south coast, from where they would begin their inland trek.

Reilly had spent part of the wait in Istanbul on his cell phone, briefing Aparo before having a heated conversation with Jansson, who was still unconvinced by Reilly's rash decision to accompany Tess instead of hauling her ass in to Federal Plaza. The rest of the time was spent with the Bureau's local legal liaison officer, a paunchy man called Vedat Ertugrul who had driven out to meet them and helped facilitate Reilly's passportless entry into the country. Ertugrul had only days earlier been notified of the likelihood that Vance might be headed for his part of the world. He confirmed to Reilly that, so far, none of the possible entry points had reported anything, before going over logistical arrangements and support protocols. The FBI didn't have any agents on permanent postings in Turkey. The nearest agents were currently in Athens, helping the local police investigate a recent car bombing. Relations with the Turkish government were at best strained, due to the tensions caused by the lingering turmoil in Iraq. Ertugrul assured Reilly that, if need be, he could probably arrange for a local police escort to join them in Dalaman. Reilly thanked him but declined the offer, preferring not to have to deal with language barriers and local bureaucracies. He asked Ertugrul to simply make sure they were informed of his presence on their turf. He'd keep in close contact and call in the troops if needed, although he suspected that this was something he would probably have to handle alone.

Reilly had also used the layover to pick up some more appropriate clothing. A small backpack in his hand now held his discarded work clothes and the paperwork Ertugrul gave him to use in lieu of a passport. It also carried an Iridium satellite phone he'd given him that, via the Department of Defense's dedicated EMSS gateway in Hawaii, would keep Reilly connected to the outside world from virtually anywhere on the planet.

Also in there was his Browning Hi-Power handgun, for which Ertugrul had graciously provided extra clips and cartridges.

Tess had also used the opportunity to call her aunt's house and speak to Kim and to Eileen. The call was a hard one to make. She missed Kim and felt it even more when she heard her voice on the phone, although knowing what a great time her daughter was having provided some solace. Telling her mother what she was up to, on the other hand, was a much harder exercise. Tess worked hard at reassuring her, resorting in desperation to telling her about Reilly being there with her—which only served to worry her mother even more. Why was an FBI agent accompanying her if it wasn't dangerous, she'd asked? Tess had fumbled some explanation about her being there purely as an outside expert, then used an overhead boarding announcement as an excuse to cut the conversation short. After she'd hung up, she'd felt bad about the call. But she knew there was nothing she could have told her mother, short of not telling her she was away at all, that wouldn't have alarmed her.

What Tess barely noted was the sallow-faced man who had accidentally bumped into her as she was making her way through the crowded terminal to the ladies' room in the minutes following that tough call. He'd knocked the carry-on she'd been trailing behind her right out of her hand, but had courteously retrieved it for her and made sure she was all right before moving on.

She did notice he reeked of stale cigarettes, but then from what she remembered, most of the men here smoked. What she didn't notice was the tiny black strip, roughly the size of a coin, that he had managed to stick by the small wheel well on the bottom of the bag.

With the bag now trailing safely behind her, Tess walked with Reilly as they made their way through the stifling and chaotic terminal to the car rental desk. Ertugrul had brought some hastily procured supplies, which included a crate of bottled water, two sleeping bags, and a nylon tent. A short while later, they were settled into a slightly tattered four-wheel-drive Mitsubishi Pajero on the centuries-old trail of a handful of shipwrecked warrior knights.

À

REILLY DROVE WHILE TESS took on the role of navigator. She was using an assortment of maps and notes to try and retrace the route Al-Idrissi mentioned in his journals while reconciling it with elements gleaned from Aimard's letter.

As the shore dropped away behind them, the densely packed houses and low-rise apartment buildings quickly gave way to a calmer landscape. Huge swathes of the Lycian coastline had been protected as conservation areas before the airport at Dalaman was built, sparing the area from the blight of mass-market resorts. Tess and Reilly quickly found themselves driving through a more pastoral setting of older properties, fronted by rough stone walls and rusty wrought-iron fences and shaded by pine trees. On both sides of the road, the land appeared rich and fertile, dense with shrubs, and dotted with clusters of trees. On the higher ground to their right, the cover thickened.

It took less than an hour to reach Kalycegiz, a small town resting on the edge of a large, mystical lake that once formed a natural harbor. Carian cliff tombs, intricately carved into the rocky hills bordering the lake and strikingly well preserved, loomed down on them somberly, a reminder of one of the many civilizations that had settled in this region.

About two miles beyond the town, Tess directed Reilly to turn off the main road. The asphalt was cracked and potholed; the journey from here on would be rougher, but for the time being the Pajero's rugged suspension was taking it in stride.

They drove past olive and lemon groves, past cornfields and tomato plantations on roads lined by frankincense trees, the vibrant colors and smells helping to awaken their dulled, jet-lagged senses. Then they were climbing again, into densely

forested hills dotted with the occasional sleepy village.

All around them were the poor, primitive, and picturesque reminders of a way of life that was over a thousand years old, a living history long since gone from the more prosperous West. Serendipitous sights emerged to greet them as they pressed on: a girl spinning wool with a weight as she herded her sheep; a laden wood-gatherer dwarfed by his tall and unwieldy load; a brace of oxen pulling a tree-trunk plow under the setting sun.

From time to time, Tess would get very excited as she found extracts from Al-Idrissi's journal that matched their progress. Mostly, though, her thoughts were not so much about that traveler's journey, but were instead drawn to the surviving knights who had trudged desperately across these lands all those years ago.

By now, the light had faded and the SUV's headlights were helping guide the way. The road had degenerated into a narrow, rock-strewn path.

"I think we should call it a day," Reilly said.

Tess consulted her map. "It can't be far. I'd say we're about twenty, thirty miles away."

"Maybe, but it's getting dark, and I wouldn't want to hit a rock or something and risk breaking an axle out here."

She was eager to reach their destination but, as he maneuvered the Pajero onto a fairly level patch of ground, she had to concede that he was right. Even a flat tire would be bad news.

They both climbed out and looked around. The last, faint traces of the setting sun glowed from behind wisps of pink-gray clouds in an otherwise clear sky. Overhead, the waxing crescent of the moon seemed unnaturally close. The mountains around them were still and deserted, enshrouded by a disconcerting quiet he wasn't used to. "Any towns nearby we can stay in?"

She checked her map again. "Nothing close. Last one was about seven miles back."

Reilly made a quick visual check of the area's vulnerabilities and decided it was as good as any for an overnight stop. He headed for the SUV's rear door. "Let's see what our man in Istanbul's got for us."

Â

WHILE REILLY WAS BUSY putting in the last of the aluminum struts and setting up the tent, Tess had managed to get a small fire going. They were soon working their way hungrily through the cache of supplies Ertugrul had provided, washing down slices of *basterma* sausages and *kasseri* cheese *boreks* with bottled mineral water.

Reilly watched Tess's eyes beam with delight as she opened a small carton and pulled out a piece of *lokma*, wolfing it down, her fingers dripping with syrup.

"This local guy of yours is a godsend," she managed before popping another piece into her mouth. "Try these, they're delicious. I couldn't get enough of them the last time I was here. It didn't help that I was pregnant at the time."

"So what brought Vance out here?" he asked as he sampled a piece.

"My dad was working on a dig not too far from the Ararat Anomaly. Vance was desperate to have a look, and my dad invited him in." Tess explained how in 1959, a U-2 spy plane on its way back from a reconnaissance flight over the then Soviet Union flew over Turkey and took some images that intrigued the CIA's photo analysts for years. Word eventually leaked out and, in the late nineties, the pictures were finally released, causing a small sensation. Way up in the Armenian mountains, not far below the summit, was something that looked like a ship. Close-ups revealed what appeared to be three large curved wooden beams, resembling part of the hull of a large vessel.

"Noah's Ark," Reilly said as he flashed back to vague headlines in the press.

"A lot of people were fascinated by it, my dad included. Trouble was, even when the Cold War began to thaw, the area was still very sensitive. The mountain's only twelve miles from the Russian border, less than twenty to Iran. A few people were granted permission and tried to climb up to see what it really was. James Irwin was one. The astronaut. Walked on the moon, and later became a serious convert to Christianity. He tried to climb up for a closer look at the anomaly." She paused. "On his second attempt, he fell and died."

Reilly frowned. "So what do you think? Is it really Noah's Ark?"

"The consensus says it isn't. Just a curious rock formation."

"But what do you think?"

"I don't know. No one's actually reached it or touched it. What we do know is a story of a flood and a man with a boat and with a whole bunch of animals, it's in writings going all the way back to Mesopotamia, writings that predate the Bible by thousands of years. Which makes me think that maybe something like that really did happen. Not that the whole world was flooded. Just a big area somewhere in this part of the world. And one man survived it and his tale passed into legend."

Something in the way she said it seemed so definite, so final. Not that he necessarily believed in Noah's Ark, but it felt funny, he said.

"What?"

"I would have thought archaeologists, of all people, would be drawn to the mysteries of the past with more of an open mind than others, with a sense of wonder about what could have happened at a time that's so distant and removed from what we have today; and yet your approach is so rational and analytical. Doesn't it take away from the, I don't know, the magic of it?"

She didn't seem to see anything paradoxical about it. "I'm a scientist, Sean. I'm like you, I deal in hard facts. When I go out and dig, I look for evidence about how people lived and died and fought wars and built cities; myths and legends I leave to others."

"So if it can't be scientifically explained?"

"Then it probably didn't happen." She set down the box of *lokmas* and wiped her face with a napkin before stretching back lazily and rolling over to face him. "I need to ask you something."

"Shoot."

"Back at JFK."

â€œYeahâ€¦

â€œHow come you didn't pull me off that plane? You could have arrested me, right? Why didn't you?â€

From the vaguest hint of a smile and the glint in her eyes, he knew what she was getting at. She was taking the lead, which was just as well given his grating hesitation to move in that direction himself. He ducked it, for now, with a noncommittal â€œI don't know,â€ before adding, â€œI knew you'd be a real pain in the ass and probably scream the house down if I took you in.â€

She edged closer. â€œDamn right I would.â€

He felt a slight quickening in his chest and shifted his position, sliding down and leaning in more to face her. â€œPlus, I figured, what the hell. Let's see if she's as smart as she thinks she is.â€

She leaned closer still. Her face was now hovering inches away from his, her eyes moving over his face. The curling smile widened. â€œHow magnanimous of you.â€

The sky, the forest, the campfire; it was perfect. He could feel the warmth of her lips radiating out, beckoning his, and for a brief moment, he felt everything else fall away. The rest of the world simply ceased to exist.

â€œWhat can I tell you, I'm a magnanimous kind of guy. Especially when someone's out on their own; pilgrimage.â€

She held the minute gap separating their lips. â€œSo given that you're here protecting me,â€ she whispered, â€œI guess that kind of makes you my own personal Knight Templar?â€

â€œSomething like that.â€

â€œYou know,â€ she mused, eyeing him playfully, â€œaccording to the official Templars' manual, you're supposed to stand guard all night while the pilgrims sleep.â€

â€œYou sure about that?â€

â€œChapter six, subsection four. Check it out.â€

The feeling was unreal.

â€œYou think you can handle that?â€ she asked.

â€œNo sweat. It's what we Templars do.â€

She smiled. And with that, he leaned in and kissed her.

He moved in closer and the kiss turned more urgent. They melted into each other, lost in the moment, their minds free from thought, consumed by a sublime rush of feel, smell, and taste; and then something intruded, a familiar undertow nagging at him, pulling his mind to a darker place, to the face of his devastated mother and to a man in an armchair, his arms hanging lifelessly to his side, a gun lying innocently on the carpet, the wall behind him splattered with blood.

He pulled back.

â€œWhat?â€ Tess said dreamily.

He frowned inwardly as he sat up. His eyes had taken on a haunting, distant glaze. â€œThis; this isn't a good idea.â€

She raised herself and snaked a hand through his hair, pulling his mouth closer to her. â€œOh, I beg to differ. I think it's a great idea.â€ She kissed him again, but just as their lips touched, he drew back again.

â€œSeriously.â€

Tess pulled herself up on her elbow, momentarily dumbfounded. He was just looking at her, dejected.

â€œOh my God. You are serious.â€ She looked at him askance and flashed him a cheeky grin. â€œThis isn't some Lent celibacy thing, is it?â€

â€œHardly.â€

â€œOkay, so what then? You're not married. I'm pretty sure you're not gay, althoughâ€ She made a â€œmaybeâ€ gesture. â€œAnd last time I checked, I thought I looked pretty damn good. So what is it?â€

He was struggling to put it into words. It wasn't the first time these feelings had sneaked up on him, but it had been a while. He hadn't felt this way about someone for a long time. â€œIt's hard to explain.â€

â€œTry.â€

It wasn't easy. â€œI know we hardly know each other, and maybe I'm jumping the gun here, but I really like you, and; there are things about me I think you need to know, even ifâ€ He didn't continue, but the implication was clear.

Even if I end up losing you because of it. â€œIt's about my dad.â€

Which completely threw her.

â€œWhat does this have to do with us? You said you were young when he died, that it hit you hard.â€ She saw Reilly wince. From the first time he mentioned it back at her house that evening, she knew she was trespassing on difficult ground, but she needed to know. â€œWhat happened?â€

â€œHe shot himself. For no reason.â€

Deep down, Tess felt a knot unwind. Her imagination had taken her to some even darker places. â€œWhat do you mean, for no reason? There had to be a reason.â€

Reilly shook his head, and his face clouded. â€œThat's the thing. There just wasn't. I mean, none that made sense. He was never outwardly gloomy or moody. We eventually found out he was sick, he was suffering from depression, but there wasn't any reason for it. He had a good job, he liked his work, we were comfortable, he had a loving wife. By all outward indications, he had a great life. It didn't stop him from blowing his brains out.â€

Tess leaned into him. â€œIt's an illness, Sean. A medical condition, a chemical imbalance, whatever you want to call it. You said it yourself, he was sick.â€

â€œI know. The thing is, it's also genetic. There's a one in four chance that I'll get it.â€

â€œAnd a three in four chance that you won't.â€ She smiled supportively. He didn't seem convinced. â€œWas he getting treated for it?â€

â€œNo. This was before Prozac became the new aspirin.â€

She paused, mulling it over. â€œHave you had yourself checked?â€

â€œWe have routine psych evaluations at work.â€

â€œAnd?â€

â€œThey haven't found anything wrong.â€

She nodded. "I don't see it either."

Her voice softened. "In your eyes. I could see something, a bit of distance, like you're walled off, always holding something back. At first I thought it might be your MO, you know, the badge talking, the strong, silent type." She was beaming with conviction and reassurance. "It doesn't have to happen to you."

"What if it does? I've been through it, I saw what it did to my mom. I wouldn't want to put you, or anyone I care about, through it."

"So you're going to shut yourself off from the rest of the world? Come on, Sean. It's like telling me we shouldn't be together just because, I don't know, your dad died of cancer. Who really knows what's going to happen to any of us? You just live your life and hope for the best."

"Not everybody wakes up one morning and decides to ride a bullet out of this world. The thing is, I recognize a part of him in me. He wasn't that much older than I am now when he did it. I look in the mirror sometimes and I see him, I see his look and his stance, and it scares me."

She shook her head with obvious frustration. "You said your priest helped you through it?"

He nodded absently. "My dad wasn't into religion. He questioned faith out of existence, and my mom, well, she kind of toed the line, she wasn't particularly spiritual anyway. After he died, I just shut down completely. I couldn't understand why he did it, why we didn't see it coming, why we didn't stop it from happening. My mom was a total wreck. She ended up spending more and more time with our priest who, in turn, started talking to me about it. He helped me understand why neither of us was to blame and showed me another side of life. The Church became my sanctuary, and I never forgot it."

Tess visibly rallied herself, speaking now with renewed determination. "Well, you know what? I appreciate the concern and the warning, it's very gentlemanly of you, but it doesn't scare me in the least. You needed me to know, and now I do, okay? But I don't think you can go on like that, you can't let something that I probably never happen ruin your life. You're only helping to turn it into a self-fulfilling prophecy. You're not him, okay? You've got to let go, live your own life, and if that's not working, well then maybe something's fundamentally wrong in the way you live your life. You're alone, which isn't a great start, and God knows you haven't exactly chosen a bright and merry line of work."

"It's what I do."

"Well maybe you need to do something else." The grin made a timely, and welcome, reappearance. "Like shutting up and kissing me."

Reilly's eyes moved over her face. She was trying to make sense of his life, drumming heartfelt optimism into him, and yet he hardly knew her. He felt something familiar, something that he was starting to recognize only happened when he was around her: in a word, alive.

He leaned into her and pulled her onto him, tightly.

À

AS THE TWO FIGURES on the screen drew closer, their gray-blue heat signatures merged into one misshaped lump. The muted voices were now gone too, replaced by the muffled sounds of clothes being discarded and of bodies moving against each other.

De Angelis cradled a warm cup of coffee as he watched the screen with disinterest. They were parked on a ridge that overlooked the depression where Tess and Reilly had set up camp. The tailgate of the beige Land Cruiser was open, revealing two screens that glowed in the darkness. One was a laptop, from which a lead snaked out to a Raytheon Thermal-Eye infrared surveillance camera that sat on a tripod, dominating the landscape before it. A parabolic directional microphone nested on a second tripod. The other screen belonged to a small, handheld PDA. It blinked with the position of the GPS tracker that clung clandestinely onto the underside of Tess's travel bag.

The monsignor turned and looked down on the dark valley below. He was quietly pleased. Things were under control, and that was how he liked it. They were close and, with a bit of luck, they would beat Vance to it. He still didn't know exactly where they were heading; he would have preferred to have audio capability inside their car, but the opportunity to plant a bug there hadn't presented itself. Not that it mattered. Whatever they found, he would be right behind them, waiting to scoop it up.

That was the easy part.

More difficult was the question of what to do with them once that was achieved.

De Angelis took one last lingering look at the screen before flicking the last of his coffee into the bushes.

He wouldn't be losing sleep over it.