

Chapter I

The Dig (Present)

Dream

Tess gasped involuntarily as the first chunk of the wall broke away in her fingers, dropping onto the dusty floor of the dig. A tear trickled down her cheek, fell onto the small piece of antiquity, and was instantly absorbed. After so many dreams—dreams of this wall, the clay jar behind the wall, and the papyrus inside the jar—Tess knew this wall so intimately that her crime caused her enormous pain.

Tess knew that the dig dated to the first or second century, so the papyrus would fetch, depending on its contents, a million dollars or more on the private antiquities market. It would secure her financial future—alone, without Tom.

She also knew that the removal of antiquities was a serious violation of Turkish law. If she were caught, she would face fines and imprisonment and professional humiliation. Her career, if it were one, as an archaeologist would be over. No expedition would ever hire anyone who even removed a valuable find, much less to sell it for private gain. “Risk-reward. No pain, no gain,” she thought.

While she wasn’t eager for pain, Theresa Priscilla Swift, honors graduate of Dartmouth College, winner of the school’s highest archaeology award, was prepared to take the risk. “After all,” she thought, “it was my dream. No one else would suspect anything lay behind this wall. No one else would ever find the jar.” If she took it and sold it, the contents would eventually be revealed to the world, and if she were careful, no one need ever know her role. The find might have made her a household name and secured the career, but she wanted the money more.

A tiny drop of perspiration fell from under her dark blonde hair onto her shoulder and tracked slowly down her back as she raised the small hammer again.

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The dream started when Tess was 15, a popular sophomore at Dunwoody High School in suburban Atlanta. She got mostly A's in her classes, even though she did relatively little to deserve them; and she had a B sprinkled here and there just to fit in. When she had gotten a C in French the previous term, she had pretended to laugh it off. In truth, it had bothered her more than she let on because it could hurt her chances of getting into an Ivy League college where she planned to continue her perfect life, preparing to be the perfect doctor.

She didn't care much about boys, viewing them as a potential obstacle to her plans, but she went out occasionally—always with the most popular boys—but nothing was going to sway Tess from the course she had set.

She hadn't—couldn't have—anticipated the dream, of course.

The first time, she awoke with the vague recollection. As she showered and dressed for school, she dragged it up from her subconscious. It wasn't much—she saw herself reaching through a small hole in a decrepit wall and felt something soft behind it. She tried looking around the image in her mind, but it didn't work. All she saw was the wall.

At breakfast, she mentioned it to her father. "Dreams are supposed to be your brain sorting out information," he said, "sending unimportant things into deep memory while leaving the important stuff near the surface."

Tess looked at her father, frowning her brow. "What crummy old wall with a hole in it was my brain sorting out?"

Tess's mother, refilling her husband's coffee cup, offered her opinion. "Maybe there's something you haven't been able to figure out, and reaching into the wall represents your mind looking for the answer."

Her father chuckled derisively and blew softly on the coffee without looking up, "Just when did you become so Freudian?" He shook his head and muttered something else under his breath.

"I was just trying to help," she said. "You don't have to be sarcastic!"

Tess rose abruptly, grabbing her monogrammed L.L. Bean book bag and heading for the door. "Gotta go. You two have been a big help."

After that, Tess didn't mention the dreams to her parents, but additional pieces kept appearing at irregular intervals. She saw the complete wall sometimes, 20 feet long and about seven feet high, but falling down in several places. Once she saw that the wall was in a pit about 15 feet deep. In another episode, she saw a nearby table with what looked like pieces of broken pottery

lying on it, each accompanied by an index card. In each recurrence she would reach into the hole, but the dream always ended before she discovered what lay behind the wall.

At first the dream intrigued her, and she eagerly anticipated the next installment. But after a couple of years, nothing new appeared, and she became frustrated. When she became aware of the dream, she would try to force herself to grab the object behind the wall, but each time she awoke. She sensed she was meant to know what was there, which made each premature end all the more maddening.

During her sophomore year at Dartmouth, she made an appointment with a psychiatrist at Mary Hitchcock Hospital. The night before it was scheduled, the dream came again—this time with an unexpected new element. She was squatting in front of the wall as usual, but instead of reaching into the hole, she realized she was holding a simple pottery jar. She turned it, but there were no markings. It looked like something out of a beginning ceramics class, but somehow she knew it was ancient. The dream ended abruptly and Tess awoke. She turned on the light next to her bed and looked down, actually expecting to see the jar. She could still feel its rough, cool surface. She groaned, waking her roommate, Andrea.

“Bad dream?” Andrea asked, barely opening her eyes.

“Not really,” Tess said, but then decided it was safe enough to confide in her. After all, she had known Andrea for more than a year, and they had grown quite close. She told her about the recurring dream—the pit, the wall, the table with its broken pottery, the soft object behind the wall, the jar.

Andrea, who was barely listening by the time Tess finished, said, “Sounds like an archaeological site to me.”

“But what would I be doing at some stupid archaeology site?” Tess asked, but Andrea had fallen back asleep. Tess turned off the light, but opened and closed her hand a few times, trying to regain the feeling of the jar.

Waking before Andrea the next morning, she called the psychiatrist’s office and canceled her appointment. She had decided that the dream was going to reveal itself after all, but in its own time, and no shrink could hasten it along. She got dressed quickly and trudged through the mud and wet snow covering the Green. Searching the computer records at Baker Library for books on archaeology, she saw one that appeared to be a basic primer and climbed up into the stacks to find it. She sat in one of the many study desks in the dark corners and alcoves, and read through the musty book, leaving only when the flickering lights announced closing time.

The next day, she went to the Registrar’s office and changed all her courses for the new term that would begin in three weeks. The chemistry and biology classes were replaced with

archaeology and history. Two days later, her advisor called her, just as she was about to head off to the library again.

“Theresa,” he said, “I just got a notification of your course changes. What’s going on?”

Tess cringed at the use of her full first name, which she hadn’t even heard since her high school graduation. “I’ve decided to change my major,” she answered, hoping in vain that a matter-of-fact tone would forestall further questions.

“Really? What do archaeology and history have to do with medicine? Have you discovered some obscure new specialty in ancient medical practices?”

“I’ve decided I don’t want to be a doctor anymore, sir.” Tess was surprised to realize that the statement, uttered without thinking, was actually true. She was nonetheless embarrassed, recognizing that such impulsive behavior was out of character.

“Listen, Theresa,” the counselor said, “Why don’t you come on over today so we can sort this out. I thought you were set on medicine, and this kind of overnight metamorphosis concerns me. This isn’t about a boy, is it?”

“That’s rather patronizing and sexist, isn’t it? Isn’t a girl allowed to change her mind?” Instantly struck by her own words, she quickly continued. “Look, sir, that was a stupid thing for me to say, but this is something that’s been forming in my mind for some time. I didn’t mention it because, well, it was just something I had to work out for myself. And please call me ‘Tess’.”

“Have you at least discussed this with your parents?” he asked.

“My father supports whatever I want to do. And mother doesn’t really care.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Touché,” she said. “Okay, I’ll discuss it with them.”

“And you’ll come over to see me?”

“Okay. How about three o’clock? I have some other things I have to do today.”

“See you then, Tess, and, while it’s your life, I hope you’ll have a better explanation of this later.”

Her “other things” that day were more library work and an appointment with the head of the archaeology department. And while she would meet with her counselor, she had no intention of talking to either of her parents.

The meeting with Dr. Armbruster went better than Tess expected. The archaeology department was always begging for more students to justify its precarious existence, so the department head was delighted to have a new student—all the more so a bright, attractive, articulate co-ed. Tess impressed him with her basic knowledge of the subject and her apparent dedication to the field.

Together, they mapped out a tentative course of studies, although Tess decided that an area of focus would have to wait until the dream played out.

With the counselor later, she was considerably less convincing, but in the end, there was little he could do if she was bent on her new path. Or so Tess thought.

The remainder of the winter trimester was very difficult for her. She was no longer interested in the courses in which she was enrolled, but she had to pass them. Her average had been high enough to survive two weeks of benign neglect. A D on one final exam was enough, however, to pull her final grade in the course down to a high C, and it was this that prompted her counselor to write a brief letter to her parents.

Tess had told her father she was going on a Dartmouth Outing Club trip during the week between the winter and spring terms, but what she really did was camp out in the archaeology section of the Baker stacks. She arrived when the library opened at seven and left when it closed at midnight, and since Andrea had gone home to Tennessee for the week, there was nobody in the room to answer the phone that rang several times each day. Consequently, Tess was shocked to find her father and a campus police officer waiting in her room when she arrived late Friday night.

Tess's father thanked the officer and dispatched him, turning to Tess. He looked neither angry nor relieved and said nothing while she hung her coat in the tiny closet and deposited her book bag on her desk. She felt like the accused waiting for a District Attorney's killer question, but her father merely sighed, shook his head slowly, and asked, "How was the trip?"

"I guess you know I didn't go," Tess said, avoiding his eyes.

"Yes, that was relatively easy to discover after I got the letter."

"What letter?" Tess asked, anxious to turn the subject from her deception.

Her father pulled an envelope from his inside coat pocket and handed it to her. Tess immediately saw the official Dartmouth logo and the words, "Office of the Dean of Students" in the return address. She wanted to be angry with the counselor, but she knew he was just doing his job. The letter was brief and to the point, seasoned with praise for Tess as a promising pre-med student. He reported the D on the cellular biology final and the sudden, radical change in her course of studies. He closed with a simple statement that he felt compelled to convey his concerns to her parents. She slid the letter back in the envelope and returned it to her father.

"Can we talk about this in the morning, Daddy?" she asked. "It's really late, and I'm too tired for a confrontation."

"Just answer one thing, Tess. Is it drugs, sex, or just simple rebellion?"

She looked down, wishing that she had just faced the issue earlier. She had hoped to avoid all this until she went home at the end of the spring term. She was not really even ready to

explain this to herself. She briefly considered trying to put him on the defensive by asking him to explain Melissa Applegate, but she knew that wouldn't work, and it wasn't fair to bring her father's affair with the graduate assistant into the conversation. That would reduce the discussion to pointless recriminations.

So she simply shook her head. "None of those, Daddy. I swear it. I'll explain it in the morning. Okay?"

Her father looked somewhat relieved. He had always stressed the importance of honesty with his children, and, despite the obvious lie about the Outing Club trip, he still believed he could trust Tess. He kissed her on the forehead, nodded and said, "All right. I have a room at the Inn. Meet me in the lobby at eight. We'll have breakfast and get to the bottom of this."

He departed abruptly, leaving Tess to an almost sleepless night. When she finally did doze off around three, the dream returned.

She was squatting in front of the wall, tapping it gently but insistently with a small hammer. Pieces of the wall slowly fell away. When she finally broke through, air rushed across her arm, hissing into the small crack

She worked even more deliberately, chipping off pieces, pulling them from the wall, and laying them at her feet until the hole was big enough to reach in. She felt the soft object and pressed gently. She could feel something hard under the surface—something hard wrapped in something soft. She enlarged the hole slowly, then, half-standing, she reached in and pressed the object between her palms, carefully lifting it up. As the light from the setting sun at her back first caught the object, she saw the sheepskin wrapping. Ever so slowly she pulled the package through the hole, being sure not to knock it against the ragged edges.

Peering around to be sure no one else was in sight, she brought the package out completely, laying it on the ground. She slowly unwrapped the sheepskin covering.

"Christmas was never like this," she thought in the dream, a wry smile curling up the corners of her mouth. Even though she knew what was inside this package, she still gasped when the surface of the jar first peeked out from the folds of the sheepskin. When it was completely free, she picked up the jar in one hand and slowly rotated it just as she had in the dream just three weeks earlier. Plain and crude, Tess nevertheless considered it a thing of incomparable beauty.

She gingerly removed the small piece of sheepskin stuffed in the neck and looked inside the jar. She saw the papyrus scroll, its edge slightly frayed and she shivered involuntarily. She inserted her hand and tentatively touched the edges of the scroll, testing its strength. It was firm, but didn't seem at all brittle, so she grasped it between her fingers and started to slowly pull it out.

But when the scroll was about half out, a strong gust of wind rolled across her shoulders. The papyrus instantly exploded into thousands of tiny pieces and scattered across the site. Tess stood in shock and dismay, dropping the jar to the hard ground, where it shattered. The wind gained strength, lifting the precious pieces in a large eddy. Tess screamed as they were carried up until they disappeared over the rim of the pit. She buried her face in her hands and moaned.

She remained that way until she felt something brush past the back of one hand. She looked up and a single piece of papyrus floated past her eyes, fluttering back and forth until it settled on the ground directly in front of her. Blinking back her tears, she stared at the tiny scrap. Small, strange symbols were written in dark ink on the surface. She squinted, trying to bring them into sharper focus as she reached down.

Tess opened her eyes and sat up with a start, suddenly fully awake. She strained to hold the details of the dream in her mind, but already they were shadowy and vague. She experienced a profound sense of loss, so strong that she fell back onto the bed, where she lay gasping for air. As the powerful emotion ebbed, Tess groaned in relief, and an image floated gently across her consciousness—the fragment. The image started to recede, so she squeezed her eyes shut and strained to make out the writing. She could just make out the four symbols. She leapt out of the bed and stumbled to her desk, banging her knee painfully on the metal bedstead, and she swore under her breath. She ripped a piece of paper from a notebook and scribbled what she had seen. Relieved that she had been able to hold them in her mind, she drew a deep sigh. Then she rewrote the contents of the fragment more carefully:

αγαπ

She recognized the last one—*pi*. “Mathematics,” she thought. “This is all about some math problem?” She knew that wasn’t it, but even so, she smiled to herself. “No way! I am not becoming a math major. They’d all think I was crazy...and they’d be right!” She was mystified. How could a mathematical symbol fit into this puzzle?

Suddenly remembering her breakfast appointment, Tess glanced at the clock on her bedside table—7:45. She threw on some clothes and ran a brush through her hair. Initially, she decided she had no time for make-up, which she frequently eschewed here in New Hampshire, but then she realized an unadorned face would deepen her father’s concerns.

No self-respecting southern girl ever appeared in public as she really was, and while her family wasn’t really southern, they had readily adopted the morals and customs of the region when her father had moved to Atlanta to become a professor of Literature at Emory University ten years earlier. Being late was almost expected of a proper southern lady, but not to wear make-up was unthinkable, so she proceeded to the small bathroom in her room and took the time

to look the part. She even changed into an embroidered sweater and pressed slacks, rejecting a dress as taking it too far.

At 8:20 she entered the lobby of the Hanover Inn. Parents who were proudly delivering their students back to the prestigious school packed the lobby, so it took Tess a few minutes to find her father. He was sitting in a leather easy chair, casually reading the Boston Globe. When he looked up and smiled warmly at her, she was vindicated. He showed no hint of impatience, and his expression showed he was pleased with her appearance. He hadn't said anything the night before, but he must have been dismayed when she appeared in the dormitory room doorway, disheveled and dressed in the standard Dartmouth uniform—faded blue jeans and a Big Green sweatshirt.

She leaned down and kissed him on the cheek.

“Feeling better this morning, sweetie?” he asked with just a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

“Much! I've been spending some late hours in the library all week.”

Her father raised his eyebrows slightly but was silently relieved to learn that at least she had been studying. “Well, I knew you weren't in your room. I've been calling all week.”

“I'm sorry, Daddy. I didn't mean to worry you. I've had a lot going on.”

“Apparently,” he said with some renewed suspicion, while standing and taking his daughter's elbow to lead her into the dining room.

When they returned to their table after filling their plates at the plentiful breakfast buffet, he opened the discussion. “Please tell me, Tess, just what is going on?” No accusation—just a hint of disapproval.

She tried to be casual, not really thinking it would work, but hoping that it would at least keep the conversation calm. But then, when had her father been anything but calm? He had been calm when he announced that the family was packing up from Des Moines and moving to Atlanta. He had been calm when his wife confronted him about his affair with Melissa. He had been calm when he announced the divorce the day after Tess's high school graduation. He had even been calm when her brother Dan had been killed in an automobile accident three summers ago. He would remain calm now, but that wouldn't make it any easier.

As it turned out, however, it hadn't been that hard. Her father was not impressed by her claims about a newfound but long harbored passion for archaeology. He was not convinced by her explanation for not informing him. But in the end, he concluded that this was a momentarily lapse and that she would resume her earlier path after dabbling in the dirt for a term. There was really no harm in it—medical schools even seemed to prefer students with varied interests. If the archaeology and history courses themselves didn't dissuade her, surely the summer internship she had described would. The thought of Tess at a Sioux Indian dig in Wyoming struck him as

decidedly dissonant. So he left Hanover, not wholly at ease, but reasonably confident the phase would pass.

Tess had not mentioned the dream. If she had her father probably would have pulled her tuition for the spring term and forced her to return to Atlanta for an extended rest and numerous sessions with his psychiatrist friend.

Her father had been wrong, of course. Not only had she stuck with the archaeology major, she added a minor in Greek. Her father could not envision his lovely, refined daughter routing around in the hot Greek sun, but her subsequent grades won him over. A 4.0 average from the spring term of her sophomore year on demonstrated the genuineness of her devotion to the field. In fact, it was only that aberrant C in cellular biology that kept her from being class valedictorian.

At her graduation, he beamed with pride when she strode to the platform to accept the archaeology department's top honor. When she was announced as a *summa cum laude* graduate, he dropped his perpetual reserve and let out his best rendition of a rebel war whoop, embarrassing Tess's mother. She yanked at his suit coat to pull him back down into his chair and muttered "Really!" under her breath. It was their first joint activity since the divorce and the enmity between them remained.

Tess delayed putting to use the scholarship award that had accompanied the archaeology prize, deciding instead to accept an offer to join National Geographic as an archaeological assistant.

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Now, nearly six years after her graduation, she squatted before the wall in the ruins of the ancient Ephesus dig, playing out her the scenes in the dream that had visited her so often, although not once since the day her father came to Hanover. And, of course, she was also planning to commit a serious crime.

She lifted the small hammer to the wall and gave it a tentative tap. She looked furtively around the site even though she knew the rest of the team was attending a daylong seminar by the famous British archaeologist who had arrived the week before after the team first unearthed the ancient monument at the other end of the dig.

Tess had feigned a terrible headache that morning and been left to sleep in, promising she would join the group later if she felt better. As soon as the expedition bus had left their modest hotel in Seçuk to travel the 35 miles to Izmir, where the British archaeologist was speaking, she had dressed hurriedly and taken one of the expedition's decrepit old Volvos and driven the two miles to the dig.

She was relieved to find that no government guards were on-site today. There were more archaeological sites in western Turkey than there were guards, and the private expeditions always

engendered more suspicion in the Turkish Office of Antiquities than did a respected National Geographic team, so guards were only occasionally posted at theirs. Nevertheless, since her plan required absolute solitude, she heaved a huge sigh when she found the site completely deserted.

Tess went immediately to the wall, working carefully, but quickly, laying pieces of the wall on a towel from her hotel room as they broke away. She knew there was some risk in removing all the pieces she broke away—any of her team members could easily tell the difference between pieces showing evidence of proper archaeological procedures and those of a natural event. With luck, no one would carefully examine the perimeter of the hole since she was doing her best to make it look natural.

When the wall had been uncovered a month earlier, it had been thought to be relatively unimportant, but was extensively photographed. Tess had volunteered for the camera duty and carefully avoided shots of the spot behind which she knew the jar lay. She was pretty sure everyone would assume the hole had already been there when it was discovered later. Given the excitement over the discovery of the ancient Roman monument across the dig, no one would return to serious study of the wall for some time. If she carefully removed evidence of her work, she was confident no one would connect the hole and the empty space behind the wall with her.

By late in the afternoon the hole was big enough for the wrapped jar to come through. She had deliberately avoided reaching into the narrow space between the false wall and the structure's true outside wall. She knew what was there and needed no tactile confirmation. Before she removed the jar, she performed a little ceremony, pulling up the corners of the towel and tying them into a neat bundle. She closed her eyes and conjured up as many images from the dream as she could, particularly the destruction of the scroll by the sudden wind. She took a deep breath and reached down into the opening.

Despite absolute confidence, her blood surged when a finger lightly brushed the sheepskin. She hesitated, remembering the doubt that had crept in when the dream failed to return for eight years and the sense of purposelessness she felt when she failed to encounter anything remotely resembling the ancient wall. All that evaporated, of course, as the team methodically worked to clear ages of earth packed against the wall. She had recognized it long before it was fully revealed, and she had waited two more months for the opportunity that was playing out today.

She pressed more insistently against the sheepskin until she encountered the resistance of the clay jar. She lifted it to the opening, working it through inch-by-inch. Finally, the package lay in her hands. She brought it to her nose and breathed in the musty smell of the sheepskin. She caressed it lightly and rubbed the soft skin against her weathered cheek. She closed her eyes again and recalled what she could of the solitary fragment that had drifted down to her as the rest of the destroyed papyrus had scattered over the rim of the pit.

She knew enough now, of course, not to open the jar until she was in a more controlled environment. In fact, she did not even unwrap the jar. She placed it gently on the ground behind her and reached back into the secret space between the walls to be sure she left no evidence of the package's existence. Feeling something slice across the tip of one finger, she yanked her arm out with a slight cry.

A drop of blood formed on her finger, and she licked it off. It was a tiny wound that wouldn't even require a bandage, but she told herself to clean it thoroughly as soon as she returned to her hotel room. There was always a slight risk at a dig from ancient germs that might have miraculously survived their long captivity.

She reached back in, feeling around more carefully this time, and grasped a small piece of pottery with a jagged edge. Removing it, she realized immediately it was an *ostrakon*, a piece of broken jar or pot commonly used as a note or message pad when papyrus or parchment weren't available.

On the *ostrakon* the Greek word ἀγαπητος was written in sharp, clear letters. She knew the word was *agapetos*, "beloved," and it held special significance because that was one of the words she had theorized was the partial word from the small papyrus fragment in her dream. She had written the letters ἀγαπ on the paper she still kept after the final occurrence of the dream eight years ago, but she had no way of being sure of the positions of the letters in the full word. She had found at least twelve different words in which the letters fit, but *agapetos* was her favorite, and she immediately considered the *ostrakon* to be definitive proof of her conclusion.

It was an irrational leap, she realized, something her field of discipline assiduously avoided, but she didn't care. *Agapetos* was the word on the *ostrakon*; *agapetos* was therefore the word on the papyrus. She briefly considered returning the *ostrakon* to its hiding place, leaving the team something to discover behind the false wall, but she impulsively pocketed it. Then she grabbed her flashlight, put her arm through the hole and put her face to the opening. Turning on the light, she inspected the rest of the space.

She saw several other *ostrakon* scattered on the floor, but as she expected, there was nothing else of significance. She wondered if the other *ostrakon* would hold keys to the papyrus scroll she would soon be examining, but this time she decided it would be safer to leave them to the team. When they realized that wall had hidden a secret safe of sorts, they would be suspicious if it contained nothing. Why build a safe and put nothing in it?

She suddenly decided that the *ostrakon* were love notes passed between an ancient couple and lovingly stored in their secret hiding place. The word *agapetos* would certainly fit that theory, and it was so satisfying that she was certain of it. The team would find the *ostrakon* and be delighted with such a personal discovery.

Tess was right on both counts. Two weeks later, after Tess had abruptly resigned her position, one of the youngest members of the team noticed the hole and looked inside just as Tess had. He called over one of the senior men and together they extracted 27 *ostrakon*, each containing some personal pronouncement of love or devotion. They came to call the secret place the “Lover’s Vault” and were thoroughly enchanted by the find—so much so that nobody even thought to question the convenient hole in the wall. When the find was described eight months later in a professional journal, the story was picked up by Time magazine, which published a short, endearing story that compared the love letters to the Old Testament “Song of Solomon.”