

P R O L O G U E

Three Years Ago

Hasad Arvadi's legs wouldn't cooperate. He strained to pull himself to the wall so he could spend his final moments propped upright, but without the use of his legs, it was a hopeless task. The stone floor was too slick, and his arm strength was sapped. His head dropped to the floor. Breaths came in ragged gasps. He remained on his back, the life draining from him.

He was going to die. Nothing would change that now. This inky black chamber, a room hidden from the world for millennia, would become his tomb.

Fear over his own fate was long past. Instead, Arvadi wept in frustration. He had been so close to his life's goal—seeing Noah's Ark with his own eyes—but that opportunity had been snatched from him with three pulls of a trigger. The bullet in each knee made it impossible to move. The one in his belly ensured that he wouldn't last another five minutes. Although the wounds were excruciating, they weren't as painful as falling short of reaching the Ark when it was within his grasp.

He couldn't bear the awful irony of the situation. He finally had proof that the Ark existed. Not only existed, *still* exists. Waiting to be found where it had lain for six thousand years. He had unearthed the last piece of the puzzle, revealed to him in ancient text written before Christ was born.

We've been wrong all this time, he had thought as he read. Wrong for thousands of years. Wrong because the people who concealed the Ark wanted us to be wrong.

The revelation had been such a triumphant event that Ar-

vadi hadn't noticed the pistol aimed at his legs until it was too late. Then it had all happened so fast. The crack of gunshots. Shouted demands for information. His own pathetic pleas for mercy. Fading voices and dimming light as his killers stole away with their prize. Darkness.

Lying there awaiting his own death, thinking about what had been taken from him, Arvadi seethed with fury. He couldn't let them get away with it. Eventually someone would find his body. He had to record what had happened here, that the location of Noah's Ark wasn't the only secret this chamber held.

Arvadi wiped his bloody hand on his sleeve and pulled a notebook from his vest pocket. His hands were shaking so violently that he dropped the notebook twice. With tremendous effort, he opened it to what he hoped was an empty page. The darkness was so total that he had to do everything by touch. He removed a pen from another pocket and flipped the cap off with his thumb. The silence in the chamber was broken by the sound of the plastic cap skittering across the floor.

With the notebook resting on his chest, Arvadi began to write.

The first line came easily, but he was rapidly becoming light-headed with shock. He didn't have much time. The second line was exponentially more difficult. The pen grew heavier as he wrote, as if it were being filled with lead. By the time he got to the third line, he couldn't remember what he'd already written. He got two more words out onto the paper, and then the pen dropped from his fingers. His arms would no longer move.

Tears streamed down his temples. As Arvadi felt oblivion closing in on him, three terrible thoughts echoed in his mind.

He would never again see his beloved daughter.

His killers were now walking the earth with a relic of unimaginable power.

And he would go to his grave without gazing on the greatest archaeological discovery in history.

O N E

Present Day

Dilara Kenner wound her way through the international concourse of LAX, a well-worn canvas backpack her only luggage. It was a Thursday afternoon, and travelers crowded the vast terminal. Her plane from Peru had arrived at one-thirty, but it had taken her forty-five minutes to get through immigration and customs. The wait had seemed ten times that long. She was impatient to meet with Sam Watson, who had begged her to come back to the United States two days early.

Sam was an old friend of her father's and had become a surrogate uncle to her. Dilara had been surprised to get his call. She had stayed in touch with him in the years since her father had gone missing, but in the last six months she had spoken to him only once. When he had reached her on her cell phone in Peru, she had been in the Andes supervising the excavation of an Incan ruin. Sam had sounded unnerved, even scared, but he wouldn't elaborate about what the trouble was no matter how much Dilara prodded him. He insisted that he had to meet with her in person as soon as possible. His urgent pleas finally convinced her to turn the dig over to a subordinate and return before the job had been completed.

Sam also made one more request that Dilara found puzzling. She had to promise him that she wouldn't tell anyone why she was leaving Peru.

Sam was so eager to meet with her that he had asked to rendezvous with her in the airport. Their planned meeting spot was the terminal's second-level food court. She got onto

the escalator behind an obese vacationer wearing a Hawaiian shirt and a bad sunburn. He was trailing a roller carry-on and stood blocking her path. His eyes settled on her, then looked her up and down slowly.

Dilara was still in the shorts and tank top she wore at the dig, and she became intensely aware of his attention. She had raven hair down to her shoulders, an olive tan that she didn't have to work for, and an athletic, long-legged frame that caused less discreet men to ogle her inappropriately like this creep was now.

She threw the sunburned guy a look that said *you've got to be kidding me*, then said, "Excuse me" and muscled her way past him. When she reached the top of the escalator, she scanned the massive food court until she spotted Sam sitting at a small table at the balcony railing.

The last time she had seen him, he was seventy-one. Now, a year later, he looked more like eighty-two than seventy-two. Frosty white tufts of hair still clung to his head, but the lines on his face seemed to be etched much more deeply, and he had a pallor that made him look like he hadn't slept in days.

When Sam saw Dilara, he stood and waved to her, a smile temporarily making his face look ten years younger. She returned his smile and made her way to him. Sam clasped her tightly to him.

"You don't know how glad I am to see you," Sam said. He held her at arm's length. "You're still the most beautiful woman I've ever met. Except perhaps for your mother."

Dilara fingered the locket around her neck, the one with the photo of her mother that her father had always carried. For a moment, her grin faltered and her eyes drifted away, lost in the memory of her parents. They quickly cleared and returned to Sam.

"You should see me caked with dirt and knee-deep in mud," Dilara said in her flat, midwestern cadence. "It might change your mind."

“A dusty jewel is still a jewel. How is the world of archaeology?”

They sat. Sam drank from a coffee cup. He had thoughtfully provided a cup for Dilara as well, and she took a sip before speaking.

“Busy as usual,” she said. “I’m off to Mexico next. Some interesting disease vectors predating the European colonization.”

“That sounds fascinating. Aztec?”

Dilara didn’t answer. Her specialty was bio-archaeology, the study of the biological remains of ancient civilizations. Sam was a biochemist, so he had a passing interest in her field, but that wasn’t why he was asking. He was stalling.

She leaned forward, took his hand, and gave it a comforting squeeze. “Come on, Sam. What’s with the small talk? You didn’t ask me to cut my trip short to talk about archaeology, did you?”

Sam glanced nervously at the people around him, his eyes flicking from one to the next, as if checking to see whether they were paying undue attention to him.

She followed his gaze. A Japanese family smiled and laughed as they munched on hamburgers. A lone businesswoman to her right typed on a PDA between bites of a salad. Even though it was early October, the summer vacation season long over, a group of teenagers who were dressed in identical T-shirts that said TEENS 4 JESUS sat at a table behind her, texting on their cell phones.

“Actually,” Sam said, “archaeology is precisely what I want to talk to you about.”

“You do? When you called, I’d never heard you so upset.”

“It’s because I have something very important to tell you.”

Then his deteriorated condition made sense. Cancer, the same disease that took her mother twenty years ago. A breath caught in her throat. “Oh my God! You’re not dying, are you?”

“No, no, dear. I shouldn’t have worried you. Except for a little bursitis, I’ve never been fitter.” Dilara felt herself sigh with relief.

“No,” Sam continued, “I called you here because you’re the only one I can trust. I need your counsel.”

The businesswoman next to Sam picked up her salad plate and rose to leave, but the purse slipped off her lap to the floor near her feet, causing her to trip. She stumbled into Sam, who caught her.

“I’m sorry,” the woman said with a light Slavic inflection while she retrieved her purse. “I’m so clumsy.”

“I’m just glad you didn’t take a bigger spill,” Sam said.

She frowned when she looked down at Sam. “Oh no, I got salad dressing on your arm. Let me get that for you.” She took a handkerchief from her purse, unfolded it, and dabbed his forearm. “At least you weren’t wearing long sleeves.”

“No harm done.”

“Well, sorry again.” She smiled at Sam and Dilara and headed for the trash can.

“You’re as gallant as ever, Sam,” Dilara said. “Now why do you need my counsel?”

Sam looked around again before speaking. He flexed his fingers, like he was working out a cramp. His eyes returned to Dilara. They were creased with worry. He hesitated before the words came out in a rush. “Three days ago, I made a startling discovery at work. It has to do with Hasad.”

Dilara’s heart jumped at the mention of her father, Hasad Arvadi, and she dug her fingers into her thighs to control the familiar surge of anxiety. He had been missing for three years, during which she had spent every spare moment in a fruitless attempt to find out what had happened to him. As far as she knew, he had never set foot in the pharmaceutical company where Sam worked.

“Sam, what are you talking about? You found something at your work about what happened to my father? I don’t understand.”

“I spent an entire day trying to decide whether to tell you about this. Whether to get you involved, I mean. I wanted to go to the police, but I don’t have the proof yet. They might

not believe me before it's too late. But I knew you would, and I need your advice. It's all starting next Friday."

"Eight days from now?"

Sam nodded and massaged his forehead.

"Headache?" she asked. "Do you want some aspirin?"

"I'll be okay. Dilara, what they're planning will kill millions, maybe billions."

"Kill billions?" she said, smiling. Sam was pulling her leg. "You're joking."

He shook his head solemnly. "I wish I were." Dilara searched his face for some hint of a prank, but all she could see was concern. After a moment, her smile vanished. He was serious.

"Okay," she said slowly. "You're not joking. But I'm confused. Proof of what? Who's 'they'? And what does this have to do with my father?"

"He found it, Dilara," Sam said in a lowered voice. "He actually found it."

She knew immediately what "it" was by the way Sam said it. Noah's Ark. The quest her father had dedicated his whole life to. She shook her head in disbelief.

"You mean, the actual boat that . . ." Dilara paused. The remaining color had drained from Sam's face. "Sam, are you sure you're all right? You look a little pale."

Sam clutched his chest, and his face twisted into a mask of agony. He doubled over in his seat and fell to the floor.

"My God! Sam!" Dilara threw her chair back and rushed over to him. She helped him lie flat and yelled at the teenagers with the cell phones. "Call 911!" After a paralyzed moment, one of them frantically dialed.

"Dilara, go!" Watson croaked.

"Sam, don't talk" she said, trying to keep her composure. "You're having a heart attack."

"Not heart attack . . . woman who dropped purse . . . handkerchief had contact poison . . ."

Poison? He was already delirious. "Sam—"

“No!” he yelled feebly. “You have to go . . . or they’ll kill you, too. They murdered your father.”

She stared at him in shock. Her deepest fear had always been that her father was dead, but she could never allow herself to give up hope. But now—*Sam knew. He knew what had happened to her father!* That’s why he had called her here.

She started to speak, but Sam gripped her arm.

“Listen! Tyler Locke. Gordian Engineering. Get . . . his help. He knows . . . Coleman.” He swallowed hard every few words. “Your father’s research . . . started everything. You must . . . find the Ark.” He started rambling. “Hayden . . . Project . . . Oasis . . . Genesis . . . Dawn . . .”

“Sam, please.” This couldn’t be happening. Not now. Not when she might finally get some answers.

“I’m sorry, Dilara.”

“Who are ‘they,’ Sam?” She saw him fading and grasped his arms. “Who murdered my father?”

He mouthed words, but only air came out. He took one more breath, then went still.

She started CPR and continued the chest compressions until the paramedics arrived and pushed her back. Dilara stood to the side, crying silently. They worked to revive Sam, but it was a futile effort. They pronounced him dead at the scene. She made the obligatory statement to the airport police, including his baffling allegations, but for such an obvious heart attack, they shrugged it off as incoherent babbling. Dilara collected her backpack and walked in a daze toward the shuttle that would drop her off at her car in the long-term parking lot. Sam had been like an uncle to her, the only family she had left, and now he was gone.

As she sat in the shuttle bus, his words continued to ring in her ears. Whether they were the ravings of a demented elderly man or a warning from a close friend, she couldn’t be sure. But she could think of only one way to check whether Sam’s story had any truth to it.

She had to find Tyler Locke.