

Chapter 3



Tess Chaykin's lungs hurt. So did her eyes. And her back. In fact, there wasn't much of her that didn't hurt.

How much longer are they going to keep me like this?

She'd lost all sense of time—all sense of anything, for that matter. She knew her eyes were taped shut. As was her mouth. Her wrists too, behind her back. And her knees and ankles. A twenty-first-century mummy of shiny silver duct tape and—something else too. A soft, thick, padded cocoon, wrapped around her. Like a sleeping bag. She felt it with her fingers. Yes, that's what it was. A sleeping bag. Which explained why she was drenched in sweat.

That was just about all she was sure of.

She didn't know where she was. Not exactly, anyway. She felt like she was in a cramped space. A hot, cramped space. She thought she might be in the back of a van, or in the trunk of a car. She wasn't sure of it, but she could hear the distorted, muffled sounds coming in through the tape around her ears. From outside. The sounds of a busy street. Cars, motorcycles, scooters, rumbling and buzzing past. But something about the sounds jarred her. Something felt out of place, wrong—but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

She concentrated, trying to ignore the heaviness in her head and break through the fog that was clouding her memory. Vague recollections started

to take shape. She remembered being grabbed at gunpoint on the way into town from the dig in Petra, Jordan, all three of them—she, her friend Jed Simmons, and the Iranian historian who'd sought them out. What was his name? Sharafi. Behrouz Sharafi, that was it. She remembered being locked into some grotty, windowless room. Not long after that, her abductor had made her call Reilly, in New York. Then she'd been drugged, injected with something. She could still feel the prick in her arm. And that was it, the last thing she remembered—how long ago was it now? She had no idea. Hours. A whole day, maybe? More?

No idea.

She hated being in here. It was hot and cramped and dark and hard and smelled of, well, car trunk. Not like the trunk of some scuzzy old car that had all kinds of stinky residue wafting around. This car, if it was one, was clearly new—but still, unpleasant.

Her spirits sank further the more she thought about her predicament. If she was in the trunk of a car, and if she could hear noises outside . . . maybe she was on a public road. A sense of panic swelled up inside her.

What if I've just been dumped here, just left to rot?

What if no one ever realizes I'm in here?

A vein in her neck started throbbing, the duct tape around her ears turning them into echo chambers. Her mind raced wildly, spurred by the maddening internal drumbeat, wondering about how much air there was in there, how long she could survive without water or food, whether or not the tape might make her choke. She began to picture an agonizingly slow and horrific death, shriveling up from thirst and hunger and heat, just wasting away in a dark box as if she'd been buried alive.

The fear of it hit her like a bucket of ice water. She had to do something. She tried twisting around to change position, maybe get some leverage to try to kick up against the lid of the trunk or whatever the hell it was she was in—but she couldn't move. Something was holding her down. She was pinned down, strapped into place by some kind of restraint that she could now feel was tugging against her shoulders and her knees.

She couldn't move at all.

She stopped fighting against the ties and settled back, heaving a ragged sigh that echoed in her ears. Tears welled up in her eyes as the notion of death solidified around her. The beaming face of her thirteen-year-old daughter, Kim, broke through her despair and drifted into her conscious-

ness, beckoning her. She imagined her back in Arizona, enjoying the summer at the ranch of Tess's older sister, Hazel. Another face glided into the picture, that of her mother, Eileen, who was also there with them. Then their faces dissipated, and a cold and hollow feeling grew in her gut, the anger and remorse over leaving New York and coming out here, to the Jordanian desert, all those weeks ago, to research her next novel. The summer dig with Simmons, a contact of her old friend Clive Edmondson and one of the leading Templar experts around, seemed like a good idea at the time. Coming out to the desert would allow her to spend time with Clive and give her a chance to expand on all the Templar knowledge that was the backbone of her new career. Equally, if not more importantly, it would give her the space she needed to think things through on a more personal front.

And now this.

Tess's regrets swooped across all kinds of dark territories as her mind settled on another face: Reilly's. She felt sick with guilt, wondering what she'd led him into by making that call, wondering whether or not he was safe—and whether or not he'd ever find her. The thought triggered a spark of hope. She wanted to believe he would. But the spark died out as quickly as it had appeared. She knew she was kidding herself. He was a couple of continents away. Even if he tried—and she knew he would—he'd be out of his element, a stranger in a strange land. It wasn't going to happen.

I can't believe I'm going to die like this.

A faint noise intruded—like everything else, annoyingly muffled, as if to torture her further. But she could tell that it was a siren. A police car, or an ambulance. It grew louder, raising her hopes with it—then faded away. It rattled her for another reason. It was a distinctive sound—all countries seemed to have their own signature sirens on their emergency vehicles. But something about this siren didn't feel right. She couldn't be sure of it, but she'd heard ambulance and police sirens during her spell in Jordan, and this one sounded different. Very different.

It was a sound she'd definitely heard before, but not in Jordan.

A ripple of fear swept across her.

Where the hell am I?