

CHAPTER 1

The Offer

Tamsin

THE JOB OFFER CAME with six figures, a non-disclosure agreement, and a one-way ticket to Türkiye. It also came at three in the morning on a Tuesday, which should have been my first red flag.

Normal people didn't get career-saving offers while stress-eating store-brand cornflakes in their pajamas, scrolling through job boards that no longer had listings for blacklisted archaeologists with trust issues.

I'd been crying earlier—not the pretty kind, just the quiet, exhausted leaking that happened when I forgot to be strong for an hour. The evidence was still drying on my face when the email pinged.

I almost ignored it. Then I opened the full message.

Dear Dr. Monroe,

Your expertise in Neolithic archaeoastronomy and proto-writing traditions has come to my attention. I am funding a private excavation in southeastern Türkiye and require your expertise immediately.

The position offers complete autonomy over research methods, unrestricted access to site materials, and compensation commensurate with the urgency of the work.

If interested, please respond within six hours. Travel arrangements have already been made pending your acceptance.

Respectfully,

E. Demir

Proto-writing.

The word caught. That had been my mother's obsession long before it became part of my own work. I assumed someone had done sloppy research.

Then I saw the salary.

My pulse stumbled.

I read it three times before the numbers sank in.

The salary alone would cover my student loans, back rent, and the credit card debt I'd been strategically ignoring since Oxford terminated my contract. The signing bonus would buy me time. A year, maybe.

I'd keep my tiny Bloomsbury flat.

Real groceries.

I could stop calculating how many days I could live on toast, tea, and professional resentment.

I stood at the window and watched the lights of the British Museum glow faintly through the mist.

Three a.m. in Bloomsbury.

The radiator hissed weakly behind me.

A city that did not care that Dr. Tamsin Monroe had once published in three of the top five journals in her field. Oxford had burned my career to the ground six months ago. Apparently, Mr. Demir was offering me a shovel.

Evren Demir. I knew the name. More inconveniently, I knew the man. We'd argued for forty minutes at an Oxford faculty reception six months earlier.

The tone was polite. The implication wasn't.

This was a lifeline thrown to a drowning woman. Someone wealthy enough to fund private digs didn't approach a disgraced academic unless they were desperate, sketchy, or both.

I sat back down and typed:

I'm interested.

The reply came thirty-three seconds later.

As if he'd been waiting.

I was still staring at the email five hours later when my phone buzzed with a text from Sophie.

Coffee today? Bad news about Edinburgh.

Dr. Sophie Chen. My closest friend since Cambridge, one of the few colleagues who hadn't quietly erased my name, and one of the people trying to keep me employable—including on the Edinburgh committee.

I texted back:

Can't. Flying to Türkiye in 3 hours.

My phone rang immediately.

"Türkiye?" Sophie demanded. "Academic conference?"

"Well, not exactly," I muttered.

"Then what?"

I hesitated a beat too long.

Sophie clucked her tongue. "Tam, please tell me you're not taking some dubious private contract because you're desperate."

"Not at all. I'm taking a very well-paying dubious private contract because I'm desperate," I corrected, yanking clothes from my wardrobe.

"Who's funding it?"

"Evren Demir."

The silence stretched long enough that I checked to see if the call had dropped.

"The tech billionaire?"

"That's the one. He emailed me a few hours ago."

"Oh really? He emailed you personally?"

I shoved another blouse into the suitcase. "Yep."

"Tam, that man doesn't personally recruit archaeologists—he has people for that." She paused. "What does he actually want?"

"My specialty."

"There are a dozen archaeologists with that expertise who aren't professionally radioactive."

"Maybe he likes people with nothing left to protect."

"Maybe he likes people who can't afford to ask questions." Sophie's voice dropped. "I know you need the money. I know how bad it's gotten. But I have to tell you about Edinburgh."

My stomach dropped.

"The Hartwell position?"

"The committee met yesterday. I fought for you, Tam. It didn't matter. The department head wants safe, and you are currently the opposite of safe. Bastard."

Edinburgh hadn't just been a fallback plan. It had been the version of my future where the last three years of my life meant something.

"So you're telling me to be terrified of my new employer, but also that I have no other options?"

"I'm telling you to be careful," Sophie said, more gently. "And not to pile on, but David called me, too."

I went still.

"He's revoking your Bodleian access. You'll have to find another library."

I couldn't speak.

You'd think after six months I'd have developed scar tissue.

I guess not.

"He's covering his own ass by making sure you can't recover from this. Which is why I'm worried about this Türkiye job. If something happens to you out there, who's going to know? Who's going to care enough to ask questions? Besides me, of course."

It was the right question. It should have stopped me.

Instead, I looked at the half-packed suitcase on my bed and the boarding pass glowing on my laptop screen.

London to Istanbul.

Istanbul to Şanlıurfa.

First class.

"What's my alternative?" I rasped.

Sophie didn't answer.

Because there wasn't one.

Finally, she sighed.

"Alright, text me when you land. And I want daily proof of life, please! I'd rather not have to explain to your mother's ghost why I let you get kidnapped by a billionaire."

Despite everything, I almost laughed.

"And Tam?"

"Yeah?"

"If he turns out to be running an organ-harvesting ring, at least negotiate for your student loans first."

I smiled. "I'll put it in the contract."

After we hung up, the flat went quiet.

Too quiet.

My eyes drifted to the metal box on the desk—the black spiral-bound notebooks inside.

My mother's.

Fifteen years I'd kept them like relics—or maybe evidence—moving them from flat to flat, never quite able to open them again after the first time.

Her handwriting had been cramped and urgent, the margins dense with diagrams that looked more like fever dreams than archaeological documentation.

On one page, a perfect geometric spiral labeled directional marker—not decorative in her sharp capitals.

On another, a vulture with wings spread across both pages, the negative space between the feathers filled with tiny angular symbols she'd annotated as threshold language.

I remembered tracing those lines with my finger at two in the morning, the paper soft with age, thinking:

This is either genius or madness.

And I will never know which.

My mother spent the last decade of her professional life developing theories about Pre-Pottery Neolithic symbolic systems that the academic establishment had dismissed

as fantasy—brilliant woman, they'd said, in the gentle voice reserved for brilliant women being shown the door. Grief, obviously. The loss of her husband. Understandable that the work became a fixation.

She'd died believing she was right.

Everyone else had decided she'd lost her mind.

I rested my hand flat on the closed lid, just for a moment.

Then I looked back at the itinerary glowing on my laptop screen and made myself stop wondering what she would have thought of Evren Demir's offer.

Whatever game he was playing, whatever truth he wanted unearthed, I was going to be the one asking the questions.

I had nothing left to lose.

Which, I was slowly realizing, was the most dangerous thing about me.

The flight to Istanbul passed in a blur of first-class comfort that felt obscene after months of counting pennies: hot towels, actual cutlery, a seat that reclined far enough to make me temporarily forget the arithmetic of the last six months.

By the time the smaller connection descended toward Şanlıurfa, the landscape below had turned stark and sun-bleached. Syria lay less than forty miles to the south, obscured by haze.

At the airport, the customs official glanced at my visa, made one phone call, and escorted me through with the efficiency usually reserved for diplomats.

Which told me everything I needed to know about Evren Demir's reach in this region.

Outside the terminal, the heat hit like a physical wall.

The air shimmered with dust and exhaust, the distant call to prayer threading through the traffic. Beneath it all lingered something older—an awareness I felt in my bones before my training gave it a name. Somewhere beyond the city, more than twelve thousand years of human ambition waited beneath the earth.

I expected a shuttle. A driver with a sign. Maybe a company car.

Instead, I got a sleek, unmarked SUV waiting at the edge of a private access road.

No driver.

No sign.

Just air-conditioning and intimidation on wheels.

I stood there for a moment, suitcase in hand, thinking about Sophie's voice on the phone.

Who's going to know?

Then I slid into the back seat, because the alternative was standing in thirty-five-degree heat in the Turkish highlands with nowhere to go and about sixty pounds to my name.

The door sealed shut with a soft hiss.

The vehicle moved before I even buckled in.

Completely autonomous.

Of course it was.

We left the asphalt behind and traded it for sunbaked dirt, the road narrowing as the landscape opened around us. Dust coated the windows. The horizon was all scrub and ancient stone and distant scaffolding against a sky so blue it looked artificial.

I wasn't being picked up.

I was being collected.

The SUV rolled to a stop beside a fortified compound: solar panels, satellite dishes, armed security at the gate.

A woman in cargo pants and mirrored sunglasses emerged from a prefab trailer, tablet in hand, her expression calibrated somewhere between professional and impenetrable.

"Dr. Monroe." Crisp. Efficient. "You'll be briefed in the morning. Your trailer's to the left. Shower's stocked. Full refrigerator. Clothes are on the bed. No unauthorized outside contact. No personal devices. Welcome to Göbekli Tepe."

She held out her hand.

I looked at my phone, then at her. "I'll need a way to contact my team."

"You've been issued a site phone. Calls are restricted to the emergency contact listed in your paperwork. Photography and all activity are logged and subject to review. No external applications."

Naturally.

I powered down my phone and placed it in her palm.

She exchanged it for a stripped-down black handset.

“The number was included in your security documents.”

I turned it over once, already missing the familiar weight of the one it replaced. The number matched the one buried in the packet they’d sent before my flight—the same packet Sophie had insisted on reading twice.

Which meant she already had it.

Of course she did. She’d read the paperwork more carefully than I had.

And that was it.

No orientation.

No pleasantries.

No Evren Demir.

The trailer was nicer than any accommodation I’d had during fieldwork.

Climate control that actually worked. Rainfall shower with water pressure I’d forgotten was possible. A bed that swallowed me whole.

The minibar held top-shelf whiskey on one shelf and electrolyte packets on the other, which I thought was an interesting read on my likely mental state.

I found the clothes on the bed.

Expedition wear. Quality kit.

They fit.

Every measurement correct.

Which meant someone had done their homework on Dr. Tamsin Monroe—or had been watching long enough to know my body better than most people I’d slept with.

I wasn’t sure yet whether that was flattering or sinister.

My phone buzzed.

Sophie.

Alive?

Alive and questionably employable.

Good. I hate being wrong in group chats.

I snorted.

Still in England?

Still avoiding my actual job. lol

Then her next message appeared.

Pictures.

I glanced at the site phone, then toward the excavation below. Photography was logged, not forbidden.

A distinction Sophie would appreciate.

I walked to the window and snapped a photo through the glass.

The reply came almost immediately.

Holy hell!

A second message followed.

Girl, what exactly did you agree to?

I looked back toward the box on the desk.

That was becoming an increasingly good question.

Under the shower, I thought about my mother. The land had been holding its secrets for more than ten thousand years, she'd written once. And the stone remembers things we've forgotten to ask. The theories in those last notebooks had felt different from her earlier work—more urgent, less careful—like she'd been racing a clock I couldn't hear. She'd died before she could tell me what she was racing toward.

Six hours of sleep later, I woke restless and disoriented, the unfamiliar ceiling taking a second to resolve into memory.

Göbekli Tepe.

Evren Demir.

The compound outside my window.

I opened the trailer door and stood in the dark gap of it, watching the site below. Floodlights now swept the perimeter in slow, deliberate arcs.

The site was all darkness and scaffolding—geometric steel lines cutting black shapes against a sky thick with stars. I couldn't see what was underneath yet. Just the shape of something large and deliberately hidden, waiting for morning to make it real.

I thought about texting Sophie again. But the site phone wasn't mine. Every word on it belonged to someone else—less a courtesy than a leash.

I thought about the notebooks.

I didn't open them.

Whatever was waiting out there in the dark, I wanted to see it first with my own eyes—before my mother's voice told me what to think. I went back to bed.

A soft knock woke me sometime after dawn.

Turkish coffee arrived courtesy of a silent aide who had obviously been trained to make no eye contact and take no questions.

Twenty minutes later, showered and dressed, I stepped outside.

He was waiting beside the trailer.

Not behind a desk surrounded by assistants the way I'd pictured during the flight. Not in a boardroom with glass walls and carefully orchestrated power staging.

He stood in the early morning light with his arms folded, utterly comfortable being the most significant thing in any given landscape.

Evren Demir.

Crisp white linen shirt, sleeves rolled despite the morning chill. Dark trousers that probably cost more than a month of my last Oxford salary.

He was taller than the photographs suggested, broad-shouldered. He moved like he'd never learned to make himself smaller for anyone.

His face was all clean angles and restraint, as though every expression had been negotiated in advance.

When his eyes met mine, awareness tightened low in my chest—the instinctive warning of standing too close to a heat source.

I shut it down immediately.

Men like this came with consequences.

He studied me as though he already knew the answer to every question he intended to ask.

He'd been planning this.

Not for days or weeks—longer. Much longer.

"Dr. Monroe. Welcome."

His voice was smoother than the whiskey I'd downed after losing my post. British accent with something underneath it—Turkish, perhaps, surfacing in the vowels.

"Mr. Demir."

I matched his tone. Polite. Unreadable.

Academic armor. The only armor I had left.

"I hope you're going to tell me why a tech billionaire with apparently unlimited resources personally recruited a blacklisted archaeologist who just got banned from the Bodleian."

His gaze sharpened, recalculating.

"I hope your flight was tolerable," he returned.

"It landed." I looked at him steadily. "That wasn't an answer."

A pause.

Precise. Measured. Annoyingly elegant.

He reached up and pushed his hair back from his forehead, a brief unconscious gesture that disrupted the controlled facade for half a second.

Anticipation surfaced before he suppressed it.

As though this conversation mattered more than he wanted me to know.

It vanished so quickly I might have imagined it.

"I appreciate your flexibility," he said. "We're on a tight timeline."

"Does your definition of autonomy include confiscating my phone?" I asked.

"Does yours include compromising site security on day one?"

Amusement flickered in his eyes.

"I promised you autonomy over research. Not comms."

"So my phone?"

Another pause. "Your phone is in a Faraday locker. You'll have it back when you leave."

"When I leave, or if I leave?"

His gaze held mine. "When."

The distinction seemed to matter to him.

I hated that I noticed.

I hated more that I believed him.

I nodded, noting that he'd sidestepped again with practiced ease.

"I assume I'm being thrown into the deep end." I folded my arms.

"You came highly recommended." His tone gave nothing away.

By whom?

His silence answered nothing and suggested everything.

The list of people still willing to say my name out loud was short, and none of them had access to tech moguls with private airstrips.

This offer hadn't found me by chance. It had found me when I was most breakable.

"Recommended by people who no longer return my calls?"

That earned me a second of genuine silence.

He turned.

"Follow me."

We walked past the perimeter fence without speaking. The dig was already in motion—workers cataloging fragments, hauling dirt, consulting clipboards.

But the center of the site was cordoned off with barriers heavier than standard archaeological tape.

More deliberate.

Barriers that said what was underneath wasn't just valuable.

It was significant.

My pulse quickened in the way it only ever did in the field, when the work was real and the ground had something to say.

"Standard protocol would involve a full briefing—" I said, falling into step beside him. I was walking faster than necessary. He wasn't.

He turned to look at me when I spoke, and the directness of it—the way he gave his full attention like it was a deliberate choice—made me lose my place entirely.

I cataloged it automatically, before I had the sense to stop myself.

"—before site access," I finished. A beat later.

Something moved at the corner of his mouth.

Not quite a smile.

He'd noticed.

Wonderful.

"Briefings create expectations," he said, looking forward again. "I wanted your first impression before confirmation bias set in."

"That's either careful methodology or a very polished manipulation tactic."

"They're not mutually exclusive."

I glanced at him.

He didn't appear to be joking.

We reached the cordoned section. He stopped at the platform's rim.

"Tell me what you see," he said quietly.

My first thought was: This isn't standard protocol.

My second thought dissolved entirely.

Because I looked down.

Massive limestone monoliths rose from excavated pits like sentinels that had been standing watch since before Egypt, before Sumer, before the concept of civilization itself.

Modern scaffolding wrapped around stone that predated agriculture. The oldest known temple complex in the world, built by people who supposedly hadn't yet invented writing or cities or organized religion.

Yet someone had built it anyway.

A wide circular pit cut into the dry earth, revealing carved surfaces etched with symbols that sent a chill straight down my spine despite the warming air.

My archaeologist's brain moved automatically.

T-shaped pillars. Pre-Pottery Neolithic. Roughly 9,500 BCE.

Göbekli Tepe.

Ritual site, according to prevailing theory. Possibly astronomical. Possibly funerary. Possibly something no one alive fully understood.

But it wasn't the pillars that stopped me breathing.

It was the symbols.

The geometric sequences.

The repeating animal forms.

The spatial arrangements cut into the stone with impossible exactness.

Structured symbolic language.

And I knew it.

Not from journals or museum archives.

From my mother's notebooks.

The geometric spiral I'd traced with my finger at two in the morning—there, carved into the third pillar from the left.

The vulture with wings spread across negative space, threshold language filling the gaps between feathers—there, rendered in limestone with the same obsessive precision my mother had captured in ink.

My hands went numb.

My throat closed.

The air pressed closer, suddenly charged with the sense that I was standing inside a question archaeology had never thought to ask.

For fifteen years, I had told myself those diagrams were the work of a brilliant woman unraveling under the weight of obsession.

She'd mapped these symbols obsessively.

Tracked repeating geometric patterns across multiple Neolithic sites.

Built an entire theoretical framework around the idea that symbolic communication existed thousands of years earlier than accepted academic timelines allowed.

I had spent fifteen years trying not to believe her.

And the stone beneath my feet was telling me she'd been right.

About all of it.

My knees felt unreliable.

I locked them.

"Dr. Monroe?"

The restraint vanished from Evren's voice. He crossed the space between us, one hand closing around my elbow before I registered that he'd moved.

His grip was firm. Warm.

I noticed both when I should have noticed neither.

I couldn't answer.

For a moment, neither of us moved.

The pit stretched below us, twelve thousand years of stone and silence, and I became aware of something unexpected.

He wasn't looking at the symbols.

He was looking at me.

There was no triumph in his face, no satisfaction at a gamble paying off. He watched me with an unnerving familiarity, as though he'd anticipated this moment down to the shock on my face.

The realization landed with uncomfortable force.

This wasn't just his excavation.

It was personal.

I didn't know why.

But I wondered what had made Evren Demir build an empire only to end up standing over a hole in the ground in southeastern Türkiye.

The pieces fell into place with a cold, undeniable clarity.

He knew.

The email hadn't been a coincidence.

None of this had been.

This wasn't rescue.

It was bait.

I turned to face him.

"You knew," I said.

My voice sounded steadier than I felt.

Recognition broke through before he could conceal it.

Then it was gone.

He didn't speak.

"You knew what I'd find here. You knew about my mother's research. You waited until I lost everything before you made contact."

Still nothing.

No denial, no apology.

Just Evren Demir. Beautiful and controlled and impossible to read.

That was worse than any explanation he could have offered.

I should have been furious.

I should have walked away.

But below us, the symbols caught the sun.

My mother's symbols.

Her impossible, career-ending, life-consuming symbols.

Real.

Carved in stone.

Waiting.

Fifteen years of doubt cracked open inside me.

I looked from the pit to Evren.

And I hated him for bringing me here.

I hated that he'd recognized exactly how much I wanted to be here.

Because standing at the edge of that pit, staring at proof that my mother hadn't been mad, that her life's work hadn't been wasted, that everything she'd sacrificed meant something—

I didn't care that I'd been manipulated.

I cared that I'd been chosen.