JG FAHERTY

RAGMAN



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ABYDOS, EGYPT, 1888

The priest lay on the stone floor, his blood staining his white robes in shades of crimson and claret that matched the colors of the setting sun outside the temple.

"Why?" he asked, the word barely reaching the eleven men standing around him.

"Because you couldn't let well enough alone, old chap. Were these" – one of the men held up two canvas sacks – "really worth your life?"

The others in the circle nodded. A few smiled or chuckled as they hefted their own satchels, each bulging with the gold artifacts they'd taken from the lower levels of the ruins. They'd discovered it purely by accident, ducking into the entranceway of what they believed was just another ancient temple near the Valley of the Kings to escape a sudden dust storm.

Instead, they'd found themselves at the beginning of a warren of tunnels that led them deeper into the ground until they reached a pair of towering falcon-headed statues guarding the entrance to a cavernous chamber filled with statues, chalices, and jewelry. They'd stuffed sack after sack with jewelry, gold statuettes, and other artifacts without making a dent in the gleaming treasures lining the shelves and alcoves carved into the sand-colored stone walls.

Celebrating their tremendous discovery – one they knew would make them rich beyond belief – they hadn't noticed the man in the white robes until he spoke.

"Thieves! You dare defile the Temple of Sokar?"

Without saying a word, Simon Gordon drew his revolver and fired, the report more like an explosion as the shot reverberated from wall to wall inside the pyramid-shaped chamber.

Reginald Oliver dropped his sack, the canvas muting the clang of metal on stone.

"Good lord, Simon!" Reginald gestured at the Egyptian, who lay moaning on his back, tiny crimson rivers already filling the spaces between the stone blocks. "What the bloody hell were you thinking?"

"You know what the locals do to grave robbers?" Simon motioned with his gun. "They chop off a hand if you're lucky. Usually it's both, and then you get thrown into prison. I prefer to avoid that type of fate. A corpse makes a bloody terrible witness."

Now they stood around the dying man, their faces etched with worry.

"Let's just go." James Collingsworth motioned toward the exit. "No one knows we're here. With any luck, we'll be halfway to Cairo before anyone finds this bugger."

Everyone muttered agreements and filed out of the room. Except Simon Gordon, who stared down at the man and shook his head.

"Sorry, old boy. I can't take the chance." He pointed his gun at the man's chest. The man moaned and lifted his head.

"A curse upon you for your actions. I will have my revenge."

"I don't think so, sport."

Any reply that followed was drowned out by the roar of Simon's pistol.

The man's body twitched and he went still. His eyes closed and his head lolled to one side.

Hours later, long after the men had returned to their boat, two priests discovered their brother covered in blood and flies.

Only he wasn't dead.

"I will avenge this desecration, in Sokar's name," he whispered, red foam bubbling between his lips. "Bind my Ka so that I may return."

And they did.

PORT SAID, EGYPT,1888

Simon Gordon knew something was amiss even before the two soldiers called out his name. The four Egyptian police officers accompanying him, their dark faces scowling in the late morning sun, portended bad news.

"Yes, I'm Lieutenant Simon Gordon," he responded, emphasizing his military title.

"You're to come with us."

"What is the meaning of this?" He backed up a step. He had a sick feeling he knew the answer. He'd woken to find the others already checked out of their rooms, despite them all agreeing the previous night they'd head to the steamship together.

"The Inspector General requires your presence."

Simon backed up again, only to find his retreat blocked by two more officers. They each took an arm in a bruising grip. Before he could object, one of the officers opened his bag, revealing the top of a golden chalice. An inspection of his steamer trunk revealed it to be filled with artifacts and jewels.

"Looks like your mysterious birdy was right," a soldier said, confirming Simon's fears.

I've been double-crossed.

As the officers dragged him away from his belongings, he looked back at the ship, imagining the others watching from the railings and laughing.

You'll pay for this. All of you. I will have my revenge.

NEW YORK CITY, ONE YEAR AGO

Silence filled the Egyptian Cultural Museum, from the shadowed alcoves of the exhibit halls to the empty corridors and offices, where only scattered safety lights pushed back against the darkness.

Matt Schwartz loved the air of mystery the museum held late at night, the way the questions of the ages seemed to come alive and gain weight, each enigmatic treasure adding to the overall atmosphere. The museum wasn't the largest in the city; the Museum of Natural History and even the Guggenheim dwarfed it. But in many ways its smaller size added to the experience, made a person feel as if they were really in an ancient burial chamber.

He followed his regular route from room to room, his flashlight briefly illuminating each exhibit and bringing them to life for a moment.

As always, he saved the best room for last. The Mummy Room, he called it, although that wasn't the official name. The sign on the wall read:

New Kingdom

c. 1570 BCE - c. 1069 BCE

Age of the Pharaohs

To Matt, though – and the hundreds of visitors that came to see it each week – it would always be the Mummy Room, as it had been since the moment the main attraction arrived.

The mummy had no name, but that didn't detract from its fascination. Just off the wide main hall, it lay in eternal repose in its unadorned black sarcophagus, a roughly human-shaped form wrapped in grayish-yellow cloth, a little less than six feet in length, indicating a person of medium height within the bindings.

Matt strolled over to the placard next to the sarcophagus. He'd read it so many times over the past year that he had every word memorized.

The salient points returned to him as he stared at the unknown person in their casket.

The sarcophagus of mud, dyed black instead of the usual gray or brown. The lack of a name on the coffin. The lack of a false door at the foot or head, which was typically placed there so that the person's Ka, sort of the Egyptian version of the soul, could leave the Earth for the land of the afterlife, the Duat. The strange inscription on the coffin's lid.

All very cryptic, and when the exhibit first opened, historians and Egyptologists had flocked to the tiny museum on the East Side to study it.

Who are you? Matt leaned closer. The dusty odor of the mummy tickled his nose. The desire to lay his hand on it rose up, as it always did when he stood near. But that was forbidden. The wrappings were incredibly fragile, ready to fall apart at the slightest disturbance. Even if nothing happened, the security cameras would show….

Wait.

The cameras weren't on. There'd been a note about that, the video system being offline until the morning because the servers were getting upgraded.

This could be my only chance to touch history.

Matt stared a moment longer. Finally, desire trumped guilt and he leaned over the railing to place his hand on the mummy's chest, where the heart would be. The wrappings were rougher than he expected, almost brittle. The coarse fibers warmed quickly under his palm, and up close he swore he smelled hints of pine sap and hot tar.

As he held his hand against the mummy, he wondered what the man's life had been like. Had he been an ordinary citizen, maybe a security guard much like Matt himself? Or perhaps the bastard son of a royal, buried in secret so as not to ruin the family name? The inscription on the sarcophagus gave no clue.

"When the time arrives, the sleeper will awaken so that he may complete the vow." Matt whispered the translation, which some authorities believed indicated the mummy had been a soldier or guard of some kind, charged with watching over someone in the afterlife.

After a few more moments, Matt reluctantly stepped away. He had rounds to continue. He tapped his ID card against the sensor by the door to register that he'd checked the room at the appropriate time, and headed for the next exhibit. Two hours later, he'd completed his route through the museum and entered the New Kingdom Hall again. One more chance to touch history and then he was through for the night. His light flashed over the coffin and—

Ragged strips of cloth were scattered across the floor and draped over the railing in front of the empty sarcophagus.

Vandals! Matt's heart raced as he crossed the room. Someone had broken into the museum. He pulled out his phone. He had to call nine-one-one and….

Why hadn't the alarm gone off?

Phone in hand, he turned in a slow circle, aiming his light around the room. All the doors and windows were alarmed. Which meant whoever had removed the priceless mummy had been in the museum before it was locked up for the night.

And those same trespassers might still be around.

His hand shook as he searched the room again. Nothing else seemed out of place. No one was hiding in between the cases. He tucked the light under one arm and swiped his phone screen open. He'd report the break-in and then head for the Security Office.

A sudden stench filled the air, rotten meat and something else. He turned.

Dry, bony fingers grabbed his face. The stink of decomposing flesh enveloped him, drenching his nose and mouth with foulness. The fingers tightened, digging into skin with bruising force. A second hand gripped his throat, choking off his scream.

An image appeared in Matt's head, desert sands of blood-red, a black sun in a white sky, an ebony river filled with bodies. On the bank stood a green-skinned giant of a man, dressed in white robes and wearing a conical hat trimmed in gold. His eyes shone like golden coins.

Then everything went black and Matt's sense of self faded, the memories of his life dissolving until nothing remained.

★ ★ ★

Ahmes the Second, High Priest of Sokar, let the dead man fall. All that remained was a wizened husk inside the clothing, its skin stretched so tight the bones appeared ready to burst through. Ahmes, his own body fully restored, bowed and whispered a quick prayer of thanks for his resurrection.

"Gratitude, Sokar, for delivering me to the land of the living and granting me the opportunity to right grievous wrongs. In the name of Osiris, I will not fail you."

Ahmes stripped off the remains of the linens his fellow priests had wrapped him in before he died, wrappings stolen from bodies of ancient kings and priests because there'd been no time for a proper burial ceremony. In order to enable his resurrection, he'd needed to be bound and entombed while still alive. The suffering had been immense.

But worth the pain in order to enact his revenge.

Strange words and wonderous images filled Ahmes's brain as the dead man's memories melded with his own. Truly, the world had changed during his time in the land of the dead. More years had passed than he'd anticipated, but his priests had done their job well. Instead of traveling the Duat to the Temple of Osiris for judgment, his Ka had remained with his Sek, his physical body, while his Ba, his essence, remained in limbo, hidden from all but Sokar. Once the proper touch activated the spell cast by his fellow priests, his full being had recombined.

Now, armed with all of Matt Schwartz's knowledge, as well as his life force, Ahmes dressed himself in the guard's clothing and made his way to the exit.

It was time to carry out his blood oath.

CHAPTER ONE

New York City, present day

"Help!"

Tom Reardon stopped as the cry echoed off the darkened buildings. It had come from across the street, most likely the small alley between the Starbucks and the used clothing store.

At a little after two a.m., Sixty-Fifth Street was as close to empty as it ever got. The only businesses open were laundromats and bars, including McWill's, the pub Tom had just left. The perfect time and place for a mugger to ply their trade.

When the shout wasn't repeated, he shook his head and continued walking toward the corner. Probably just some drunks on their way home. Or a couple arguing. He checked his phone. His Uber was still five minutes away. He should have been in bed hours ago instead of spending too much of his paycheck. But these days home was just an empty, cold place that did nothing but remind him of everything he'd lost. At least with several shots of whiskey inside him he could fall asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

Another shout from the alley. Despite knowing better, old habits forced him to trot across the street and peer into the near pitch blackness. Sure enough, two murky shapes struggled, one of them pinning the other against the alley wall.

Don't interfere. You're not a cop anymore.

Getting involved would just create all sorts of problems. Getting questioned. Maybe appearing in court. And possibly ending up with a bullet or knife in the gut.

Except that wasn't how his gram had raised him. You never turned

your back on someone who needed help. He'd never forgive himself if somebody died when he could have prevented it. Cursing his southern-bred sense of honor, he entered the alley.

"Hey! What's going on?"

The two shapes separated and one fell. As Tom's eyes adjusted to the darkness, details appeared. The person standing was a male, not very tall, dressed in white pants and shirt under a gray coat. The woman on the ground was curled into a ball. Based on the layers of mismatched clothing, most likely a street person. A toppled shopping cart nearby added credence to his assessment.

A sharp, musky odor surrounded them, like cheap incense. The woman moaned and Tom moved a little closer.

"Ma'am, are you all right?"

The woman's head lolled back, revealing a shriveled death mask of a face. Her skin had pulled tight over the bones, drawing her lips back so that her teeth jutted out. Nothing remained of the nose except two holes. Opaque eyes stared up at him. A foul smell emanated from her mouth, stronger than the perfume in the air.

Something slammed into him and his head struck the brick wall. Stars filled his vision and he cursed his stupidity for getting distracted. Hands grabbed him and a burning sensation engulfed him, as if his skin was on fire. He cried out. The gritty taste of sand filled his mouth and he sucked in the muddy scent of river water, much like the Mississippi where he'd spent his childhood. With one hand he tried to push his attacker away and with the other he drew his gun from its ankle holster. He pulled the trigger without aiming. The report was deafening in the small space. The stranger let him go and Tom toppled onto his side. Through tears of pain, he watched the man bolt from the alley.

Then the darkness claimed him.



Detective Daniel Reese knelt next to the corpse and couldn't help the stray thought that popped into his head.

Jesus, Tom Reardon would've gone crazy for a case like this.

Thinking about his ex-partner still turned his stomach, but they'd shared a car and a desk for more than five years, so as much as it pissed him off, it didn't surprise him there were times when the man popped into his thoughts.

Especially when it came to the grotesque mutilation of a prominent international businessman in an apparently locked room.

Reardon always had a yen for the sensational and mysterious. Loved reading everything from whodunnits to unsolved true-crime books to the gossip pages. He got a thrill out of seeing someone famous at a bar or restaurant, even in Manhattan, where celebrities were as common as city rats – and often just as pleasant to deal with. It was something Dan never understood. He could give two shits if someone famous asked to share a cab with him. With the exception of a couple of sports figures and actresses, of course.

Given his choice, Dan would never ask for a high-profile murder case. Especially one this brutal. Nine times out of ten they just meant trouble. As in too much pressure from the brass to get things solved yesterday and the press constantly wasting his time with questions he couldn't answer. And more often than not, they never got solved. And yet here he was, saddled with a whopper. When the story inevitably got plastered all over the news, Tom would probably have a good laugh over the irony of it all.

Fuck it. Gotta treat it like an ordinary case. Do things by the book. No mistakes, no leaks in the press.

Right. Not so easy when you had dozens of reporters already camped out on the other side of the yellow tape outside the building, braving the early morning drizzle. Nothing travels faster than gossip, especially when it involved the murder of a socialite. And this was so much more than an ordinary robbery or domestic situation that got out of control.

Whoever killed Roger Collingsworth, CEO and dictator supreme of the Collingsworth empire, was a grade-A sicko. The old man's head lay on its side a good two feet away from the body, and based on the extensive blood splatter, the decapitation happened while he was alive.

A pretty nasty way to go. Dan assumed his neck had been cut at least partway through before the decapitation. A knife, a garrote, maybe some kind of mechanical device, although no weapon had been found. Not like someone, or even a couple of someones, could do that with their bare hands. And based on the footprints in the blood, there'd only been one attacker.

The insanity didn't stop there.

In addition to being decapitated, the arms and legs had been severed and scattered around the room. And the body showed signs of torture. At some point during the savage attack, the killer burned a symbol into the victim's midsection, right between the ribcage and stomach. The crusted blood and purpled flesh made it hard to make out, but to Reese it looked vaguely like a circle with an X through it.

Which made about as much sense as the rest of the crime scene.

This is not good. Who the hell branded their victims? Something premeditated like that typically meant either a serial killer or an organized crime hit.

And wouldn't Tom have loved that?

Dan gritted his teeth. He had to stop thinking about Reardon, otherwise he'd go home in a rotten mood and take it out on Joanna. Again. Which he didn't want to do, considering they were finally making headway in working past the events of last year. There'd been some tough months, but he was beginning to believe that much like the imminent flowers of early spring, their relationship would blossom again.

Christ, I sound like a freakin' poet. Dr. Fleck will be so proud.

"This one's gonna be a sonofabitch," a voice said behind him. Dan turned and saw Imelda Salonga, the short, stocky ME, standing there, a clipboard in her hands and her ever-present pen cap in her mouth. She chewed on them constantly. No one, not even her staff, knew where all the pens resided, other than the one tucked into the gray hair above her ear. Dan had often pictured a Bic graveyard somewhere in Salonga's office, a drawer filled with capless pens that would one day overflow onto the floor.

"Yeah, don't I know it." Dan shook his head. "What can you tell me?"

"Besides the obvious?" Salonga indicated the body parts strewn everywhere. "Judging from the splatter, decapitation occurred pre-mortem. Possibly some or all of the dismemberment as well, depending on how fast it occurred. I have no idea of the murder weapon, or weapons, but I can tell you it wasn't a knife or electric saw or anything normal. The wounds are too jagged."

"Great." Dan stood up. "Your guys ready to take him?"

"Yep. And don't bother telling me to make him a priority. He'll go right to the top of the list. VIPs always do. Call the office later and either Liz or I should have some preliminary info."

"Thanks." Dan's stomach gurgled. He'd gotten the call just after two in the morning. Now his stomach was going to be off schedule all damn day. He glanced around the crime scene and spotted his partner, Chad Driscoll, interviewing Collingsworth's wife.

I better get over there. God knows he'll probably forget to ask something important. Or even worse, get the information wrong.

Driscoll was what most detectives referred to as a Hanger. A year away from retirement and no longer giving a shit. For Hangers, the job became nothing more than a paycheck to be collected and overtime hours to bank so you could max out your retirement credits. Keep your nose clean, stay under the radar and away from anything that hinted of controversy, take on as much extra paperwork as you could so you do your OT without having to go out in the field. His thoughts would be more on the condo he'd bought in Boca than any clues or evidence in the room. On a case like this, he'd be more hindrance than help. Probably push for either the feds or Organized Crime to take over.

Jesus, I hope I never get like that, Dan thought, joining the baggy-eyed, gray-haired detective just in time to see him close his notebook despite the wife still talking.

Smooth as he could – although not smooth enough to avoid a dirty look from Driscoll – Dan eased himself into the conversation.

"It's pretty early in the morning and I know you have a lot to take care of," he said to Adele Collingsworth. She was easily twenty years

younger than her husband and still dressed for the gala she'd attended before coming home to find her bedroom turned into an abattoir. Tears and eyeliner created black rivers on her cheeks and she held a tissue to her nose. "Why don't you come down to the station later today. We can get the rest of your information then."

The woman gave him a grateful smile and nodded.

Before Driscoll could object, Dan motioned two officers over and had them set up a canvas of the neighborhood.

"And I want the tapes from the outside security cameras of all the nearby buildings," he added.

He waited until the ME's men bagged the body and the Crime Scene Unit finished their photos. Then he and Driscoll headed back to the precinct to get started on the paperwork. Driscoll said nothing during the ride, just stared out the window and glowered as the imminent sunrise added a thin stripe of pink to the night sky.

For Dan, it was one of their best rides together ever.



Tom Reardon watched the tired-eyed officer tap-tapping away with his index fingers and had to fight the urge to just take the keyboard and fill out the report himself.

As much as he understood his frustration had everything to do with being on the other side of the desk for the first time in his life and not sleeping in almost twenty-four hours, rather than the typing prowess of Officer Chase, it took all his will power to remain seated.

Being back in his old precinct for the first time since quitting the force didn't help. He kept glancing around the room, half afraid he'd see someone he knew, half disappointed when he didn't.

Finally, Chase slid his chair back.

"Okay, Mr. Reardon, we're done. We'll be in touch if we need to speak to you again. Thank you for your help. Are you sure you don't want a ride to the hospital or something?"

Tom touched the tender spot on the back of his head. It ached, but

he'd been hit harder. All he wanted was to crash for a few hours and forget the night had ever happened.

That's what you get for trying to be a good Samaritan.

"Nah, I'm good. Thanks anyhow."

Outside, the chilly mist and rain of the past few days had finally moved out and dawn promised a sunny, pleasant day, enough of a rarity in early April for Tom to pause and savor the sensation of sun on his face. A reddish, hand-shaped mark on his arm stung like a sunburn, and his head still throbbed. That, combined with his imminent hangover, told him he'd be spending most of the day in bed. On top of that, he stunk of booze and alley refuse, but at least he was alive. Next time he wouldn't be so quick to—

"What the hell are you doing here?"

He recognized the voice instantly. Daniel Reese.

"'Morning to you, too, Dan," he said. Reese still looked exactly the same. A little on the thin side, his sandy-colored hair mussed from his habit of running his hand through it when he was thinking. Dark circles under his gray eyes and a fatigued edge to his voice told Tom his old partner had worked a case all night. Probably a bad one. In the old days, the two of them would grab breakfast and decompress before heading home.

"Well, look at that." Chad Driscoll joined them. "You tryin' to get your old job back, Tommy-boy? Or did you get busted for drunk and disorderly?"

The older detective gave an exaggerated sniff in Tom's direction and laughed before continuing past them.

Tom shot him the finger and then glanced at Dan.

"They put you with Driscoll? For fuck's sake, who did you piss off?"

Dan shook his head.

"His partner retired. Captain Green said there wasn't anyone else."

"That sucks. Y'all just pull a big case or something?" The question came automatically to Tom, as did Reese's answer.

"Homicide. Dismembered body in a locked house. You'd love it. What's your story?"

The way Dan asked it, Tom understood he'd smelled the booze, seen the dirt and scrapes. Even exhausted he wouldn't miss those things. Of course, Driscoll had noticed, too, which meant they were obvious enough for a third-grader.

"Bad luck. Stumbled onto a murder in progress and tried to stop it. Fired a round and the guy ran off, but not before he nearly broke my skull."

"Where—?"

"Hey, Pieces! You coming or what? Or are you and lover boy having a moment?" Driscoll's words caused several officers standing outside to look over at Dan and Tom. Dan's face went hard. Tom knew he hated the nickname Pieces – as in Reese's Pieces – that Driscoll and some others had teased him with back in his first days as a detective. Apparently, Driscoll had no problems resurrecting it.

Or bringing up the reason Tom and Dan weren't partners anymore.

"Yeah." Dan looked at Tom and it was obvious any thawing of the enmity between them had been lost. "You better get going, too. I'm sure there's a bottle and a whore waiting for you."

Dan's words hit Tom harder than the blow to his head. His reply came out before he could stop it.

"Tell Joanna I said hi."

"Fuck you." Dan's face twisted in anger and his cheeks turned red. Tom immediately regretted his dig, but frustration and guilt prevented him from taking it back. Instead, he headed down the steps, his old friend's gaze stabbing him in the back the whole way. He kept walking and didn't stop until he turned the corner.

Only then did he allow himself to cry for everything he'd lost, and the part he'd played in it.

He'd screwed up royally. Totally misread things. He understood Dan's antipathy, and he'd taken responsibility for his actions, something Dan couldn't do. Instead, Dan had gone beyond mad. Blamed everything on Tom instead of admitting they'd all been at fault. Hell, the strip poker game had been Dan's idea to begin with.

And then the next day, Dan asked to be reassigned, effective

immediately. When Tom tried to talk to him about it, Dan told him to go fuck himself and never come near him or Joanna again.

Tom stuck it out for a few weeks, thinking Dan would calm down. But the silent treatment didn't end, not just from Dan but the whole station; he'd taken early retirement and left the NYPD. Better to lose a chunk of his pension than deal with the ghost in his life. Sure, he could have transferred to a different precinct, but it wouldn't make much difference. The rumors would follow. And when it came right down to it, he didn't want to partner with anyone else. Dan Reese had been his best friend in the world and every time he saw a police uniform it reminded him of what he'd lost.

Instead, he'd found work as a security guard. Not nearly as rewarding as being a detective, but it was easy work and it paid the bills.

With a sigh, he wiped his tears away and flagged down a cab.

Dan was right about one thing.

He needed a drink.

CHAPTER TWO

In a darkened room on the East Side, a naked man knelt on the floor. Five scented candles provided just enough light to read the spell.

"Hear me now, Ushabti Akil Ahmose

Hear me from the depths of the Underworld

The time has come for you to leave your chains behind and rise again

Hear me, Ushabti Akil Ahmose

I have need of your service

Hear me, Ushabti Akil Ahmose

I call you to do my bidding

And rid the world of one who stands in my way, he who is named Shaun Prescott.

Send him to the Duat and reap the favor Sokar will bestow on you for your gracious offering of this unworthy Ka."

After intoning the final words, he placed the paper over the nearest candle and let it burn until the flames licked at his fingers. Then he dropped it into the glass bowl where he'd previously placed three drops of his blood. Once it burned away, he blew out the candles from right to left, the opposite order he'd lit them.

He leaned back and contemplated what was about to happen.

He'd been nervous the first time he used the spell. Would it work? Had he sacrificed everything for a lie? Only when he saw the morning news did he know for sure the magic was real. Collingsworth had been a warning to the others, and now Prescott would prove he meant business. No doubt that would motivate the rest to accede.

Finally, he would have everything he'd ever dreamed of.

And more than that, there would finally be justice.



When he first felt the gentle breeze against his skin, Shaun Prescott paid no mind to it, his attention totally occupied by the evening's Asian stock exchange numbers on his computer screen.

Then he remembered the windows in his office didn't open.

Glancing up, he saw the most curious sight. A miniature tornado had formed in the center of the room, comprised of what looked like grayish-brown rags, all whirling and spinning.

And growing larger.

"What the hell…?" Prescott heaved himself from his chair, his ample belly pushing against his desk as he stood. The breeze built to a heavy wind that was hot against his skin, and then the tornado disappeared with a sharp *pop!* that reminded him of a boy shooting a cap gun.

In its place stood a mummy.

Easily seven feet tall, with shoulders so wide it looked like it wore a football player's shoulder pads beneath its wrappings.

This can't be real.

Creatures from mythology didn't exist.

And yet there it was, strips of filthy gauze dangling from the wrappings covering its herculean body. Black holes occupied the places where its eyes should have been, and its mouth was a toothless cavern. Staring into those empty spaces made Prescott dizzy, like looking down from a tall building. The emptiness sucked him in like an ebony whirlpool. A hot, arid heat surrounded him, redolent with the sulfurous odor of rotting vegetation and swamp water.

When it spoke, its voice was dry as the desert and yet deep and resonant at the same time, as if the bindings covered an empty shell and the words echoed from inside it.

"Shaun Prescott."

Hearing his own name brought Prescott back to his senses. He removed his snub-nosed revolver from the top drawer. Like his father before him, he always kept it with him. A rich man could never be too careful.

"That's right. Now go to Hell, whatever you are."

Prescott took careful aim and pulled the trigger six times in rapid succession. His hours of practice at the range hadn't gone to waste. Each bullet struck the center of the wide chest, raising small clouds of dust.

None of them had any effect.

The creature charged with surprising speed and tossed the heavy desk aside as if it were cardboard. It gripped Prescott's neck with fingers strong as iron. Prescott let out a choking gasp while the creature's other hand tore through his jacket and shirt and pressed against his chest.

The barbeque pork smell of burning flesh reached Prescott's nose at the same time a horrible burning sensation erupted beneath his ribs. The fire spread through his torso, trapping his screams in his lungs and paralyzing his limbs. The creature threw him to the floor. Bones shattered but the pain barely registered, seared away by the inferno torching his nerves. Hands of iron twisted his body and something dropped into his lap.

His own arm.

Blood sprayed across the rows of first edition books on the shelves and rained down on a priceless Oriental rug that had been in the Prescott family for six generations. In rapid succession, the creature ripped away Prescott's other arm and his legs. The last thing he saw before blackness claimed him were gore-soaked hands reaching for his face. There was a sensation of falling down a bottomless shaft and his cries echoed in a vast emptiness. Then his body returned, and with it his senses.

In that moment, Shaun Prescott discovered there were things far worse than death.

★ ★ ★

The creature disappeared with another cap-gun pop. In its absence, the only sound came from a single fly buzzing back and forth with delight for the unexpected banquet.

Until the morning, when Prescott's secretary discovered his body.



"Jesus Christ. This is worse than the last one. What the fuck is going on?"

Dan Reese stood in the middle of Shaun Prescott's midtown office, his voice muffled by the paper mask he wore. The stench of blood and shit was so strong even the giant dab of menthol jelly under his nose couldn't entirely block it out. Two patrolmen had already lost their breakfasts in the bathroom; he had no intention of joining them.

But it sure was getting hard not to.

"My guess is voodoo," Driscoll said, holding a handkerchief to his nose. His face had a decidedly green tinge. Seeing the older detective fighting the urge to puke made Dan feel a little better.

"Voodoo? Because of the symbol?"

They'd found the same crazy design seared into Prescott's flabby chest, right above his stomach. This time it was a little clearer and the crime scene guys had gotten some good pictures. A definite circle, with a crude star drawn inside.

"Damn straight, Pieces. That's the mark of the devil. The last couple years, the goddamned Haitians been trying to make a name for themselves in Manhattan. I'll bet right now a bunch of them are sacrificing a chicken or goat, dancing like savages and burning their mojo shit as part of some ceremony. I say we turn the whole thing over to Organized Crime."

Dan bit back an angry reply. Not because he was afraid of calling Driscoll out on his blatant racism – he'd done it before – but because he had a sinking feeling the man might be correct in his assumption. Caribbean gangs, including the Haitians, were on the rise in the city, and who knew if some of them used ritualistic killings to spark superstitious fears?

Except….

"Wait a minute." Dan put his hand out to stop Driscoll from walking away. "Why would a couple of corporate giants like Collingsworth and Prescott be involved with Haitian gangs? Or any gangs. What, they suddenly decided to start smuggling ganja?"

"That's for someone else to figure out." Driscoll pointed at the pieces of the body, one at a time. "You see that shit? I don't want whoever did that coming after me. Not when I'm so close to retirement I can fucking taste it. You should be thinking the same thing. That could be you lying there the next time if you step on the wrong toes."

Driscoll stepped past him and headed for the door, pausing just long enough to strip off his blue latex gloves and drop them in a crime scene basket.

Dan stared at the retreating form and wondered how the hell a cop like Driscoll ever made it to detective.

Fucking coward. Fucking piece-of-shit lazy-ass coward. Let him turn in his report. A real cop doesn't give up a case unless he solves it or gets forced to give it up.

"That could be you lying there the next time."

Dan took another look around the room and hated himself for wondering if maybe Driscoll had the right idea after all.

CHAPTER THREE

"Mrs. Prescott, I'm terribly sorry to hear about your husband's death."

Tom Reardon considered saying something else, but nothing came to mind. He'd never met the man in person, despite working at one of his buildings for the past six months.

"Yes." The tall, thin woman sitting across from him in the study – a room larger than Tom's entire apartment and decorated in a style best described as antique tycoon – nodded and sipped a cup of tea. Despite her snow-white curls, hardened to an immobile shell by layers of hairspray, he knew she was only in her sixties, a decade younger than her now-deceased husband.

After several seconds of awkward silence, she spoke again.

"I'm sure you're wondering why I asked to see you. It has come to my attention," she continued, before he could answer, "that you previously worked for the police department. As a detective."

"Yes, for several years. I took an early retirement for…personal reasons." He wasn't sure how much to say. The cause of his leaving had never been made public, but someone with Leslie Prescott's connections could have his whole history on her desk in five minutes.

"Don't worry," Mrs. Prescott said, her rheumy eyes showing a glint of something that might have been humor or challenge. She spoke with a pronounced Boston accent. "I know it didn't involve anything illegal. Your background check would have shown that. I find myself in need of someone with investigative experience, as opposed to security and protection."

"I'll help any way I can," Tom replied, wondering where the conversation was leading. It couldn't be anything to do with her husband's murder; the police would be handling that. Something

investigative? That usually meant corporate espionage. Or perhaps she thought someone was stealing from the company? But she had all the resources of Citadel Protection at her beck and call. Why turn to a shift supervisor from a warehouse?

"Mmm hmmm." She stared at him with the sharp eyes of a bird.

"Why don't you tell me what the problem is," he said, hoping to steer the conversation away from his employment history.

"What do you know about my husband's death?"

"Just what's been in the press. They're withholding most of the details, but I gather it was, um, gruesome." Tom didn't add that it was all every security guard at Prescott Industries had been talking about for the past two days. Considering it happened right under the night shift's noses.

She nodded and went on. "I am afraid that whoever…took his life may very well be coming after me next. Which is why I want you to find whoever killed him."

"That's the police department's job."

"The police will do their best, I'm sure," Mrs. Prescott said, "and my connections with the mayor's office have assured me Shaun's death will be given top priority. However, it's no secret their resources are spread too thin. And while I have the utmost faith in my own staff to protect me…well, my husband was guarded by those same employees, and look what happened. It begs the question of how, unless there was assistance from within. Who better to ascertain that than someone on the inside, so to speak?"

Tom considered her request. There really wouldn't be much he could do without stepping on the police's toes. But if he said no, she might fire him on the spot.

"I'll triple your hourly rate . And a retainer up front."

It took a supreme effort to not show his surprise, but Tom managed it. Triple? That would be huge; money had been tight since he left the force. And knowing how long murder cases could take to solve, he might be looking at weeks. Even months.

"Mrs. Prescott, I believe we have a deal."

★ ★ ★

Dan Reese had just parked the car when he saw a familiar face exiting Shaun Prescott's apartment building. Putting his hand on Driscoll's arm, he said, "Wait a minute."

"What? Why…hey, twice in one week. What's he doing here?" Driscoll squinted against the bright sunshine and watched Tom Reardon make his way through the usual crowd of morning pedestrians on the sidewalk.

"He's on the list of employees. A security guard at one of Prescott's warehouses. You didn't see that in the case file?"

Driscoll shrugged, meaning he hadn't done more than skim through the notes.

"Ain't that a helluva coinky-dink. Think we should bring him in for questioning?"

"No." Dan shook his head as Reardon flagged down a cab. "Let's just talk to the widow again, like we planned."

Still, Dan found himself wondering about Reardon's presence. The Upper East Side wasn't his usual environment. Sure, maybe he knew someone who lived in the fancy chrome and glass tower, but that really would be some hell of a coincidence, especially only two days after Shaun Prescott's murder.

Inside, a security guard led them to a private elevator, which took them to the penthouse. Two heavily muscled, armed security guards escorted them into a finely appointed study, where the thin but healthy-looking elderly woman waited for them. They'd already taken her statement the morning of the murder, but phone records had shown Prescott and Roger Collingsworth had spoken the day before Collingsworth's murder, which even Driscoll couldn't accept was random.

"Mrs. Prescott. Once again, our condolences for your loss."

"Yes, yes. Thank you. You have more questions? I assume that's why you're here." Her Bostonian accent changed here to 'he-ah'.

"A few. How well was your husband acquainted with Roger Collingsworth?"

"Very. They were lifelong friends. Attended the same schools, their families traveled in the same circles."

"Did they have any enemies in common?" Driscoll asked.

"Quite likely dozens of them."

"What?" Dan looked up from his notebook.

"They ran multinational corporations. You don't achieve that kind of success without having your share of enemies."

"Anyone who'd actually want them dead?" Driscoll scratched at his thinning hair, not even bothering to take notes.

"Well, it would appear at least one person did. It's your job to find out who. Yours, and my new Chief Investigator, Thomas Reardon."

"You hired Tom Reardon to find out who killed your husband?" Dan couldn't believe his ears.

"Yes. I've already spoken with the people at Citadel about his special assignment working directly for me. I expect that you and he will share all your information. I told him the same thing."

"Ma'am, we're the police. We don't share information with hacks." Driscoll gave her a sour look.

"Well, if you won't, I will. You do have to share your information with me, I presume?"

"Um, technically, no, we don't." Dan tried his best to sound apologetic, when all he wanted to do was tell her how foolish she was being.

Leslie Prescott frowned. "We'll see what the mayor has to say about that. I imagine by this time tomorrow you and Mr. Reardon will practically be partners."

Dan bit off a potentially career-destroying retort and considered his words before speaking.

"I'll be happy to share whatever information my commanding officer indicates Mr. Reardon should have. You understand I can't break policy without orders."

"Of course. Now, please get on with your questions." She gave an imperious wave of the hand. "I have a business to run."

★ ★ ★

Three hours later, Dan sipped a cup of bitter station house coffee while staring at a desk covered in crime scene photos, reports, and his own notes. Outside, the sun baked the day into something more appropriate for June than April, but you wouldn't know it in the station, where windows coated in decades of grime created a perpetual dusk that always made Dan feel as if he hadn't gotten enough sleep.

A few feet away, Driscoll lackadaisically worked his way through the statements of the guards who'd been on duty the night of Prescott's murder.

The phone rang and Dan stared at it a moment before answering. Either the captain or the lab, and he had a rotten feeling he knew which one. His guess was confirmed a moment later when Captain Green informed him in no uncertain terms that Tom Reardon was to be treated as a member of the investigation, with one-hundred-percent access to any information he asked for.

"He's now a senior member of Leslie Prescott's security team," Dan told Driscoll, after hanging up the phone. "Serving as our liaison to her."

"Ain't that some shit." Driscoll stood up. "All right, I'm calling it a day. I gotta pick up a bunch of crap at the store before I head home."

"What? It's not even two o'clock yet."

Driscoll shrugged. "Wife's got some kind of shindig planned for tonight."

"Jesus, Chad. We're kind of in the middle of something here."

"Sorry. The time off was approved before all this went down. If you need help, call lover boy." He waved and left.

"Sonofabitch." Dan watched his so-called partner exit the detectives' bullpen. *Maybe I should ask for a new partner. I don't think I can wait until that asshole puts in his papers. Now I'll be here twice as late—*

The electronic buzz of his phone interrupted his thoughts.

"Detective Reese? It's Liz Cho." Cho was one of the Medical Examiner's assistants, a portly doctor who, as far as Dan could tell, worked

around the clock. "Doc Salonga is in autopsy but she left word to call you as soon as we got any results in. Said it was top priority."

Dan pulled his notebook over. "She was right. What've you got?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. Cause of death in both instances was massive trauma, most likely violent decapitation, although she won't rule out one of the other injuries. They happened so close together in terms of time that I doubt we'll be able to say which one came first. We haven't determined what type of weapon the assailant used, either."

"The assailant?" Dan asked.

"Yeah. Evidence indicates a single person in both cases. Someone very large, based on ecchymosis."

When Cho didn't say anything else, Dan slapped his notebook closed in frustration. There'd been only one set of unidentified footprints at the scenes, which jibed with the single killer theory. But it seemed impossible that one person could carry out such violence.

"That's it? Dismemberment and bruises? I saw that with my own eyes. Can you at least pull fingerprints from those bruises?"

"No. We think the killer wore gloves. Something rough and heavy enough to leave abrasions. I'm about to do a microscopic examination of the wounds for tool marks and trace, and we're waiting for the results from Prescott's fingernail scrapings."

"Great. Thanks." Dan hung up and then jumped when it rang again before he even took his hand off it. He was startled a second time when he heard his wife's voice on the other end, calling from the Crime Scene lab, where she worked in the Hair and Fiber department.

"Joanna? What's wrong?" She never called him on his work phone.

"Nothing. I just wanted to update you. The team recovered some cloth fibers that appear to match the ones found in Collingsworth's bedroom. I'm running analyses on them now. Also, I saw the ballistics report and figured I'd give you a heads-up. The six casings from Prescott's office all matched his gun. One had a partial print, which turned out to be his."

"Six casings and not one slug. Tell me how that happens."

"The only way is if they stayed inside the target."

"Yeah, and apparently it's a big one." He told her about the call from Cho.

"That would explain the lack of fingerprints at the scenes. But someone that big should stand out."

"You'd think. Security cam footage doesn't show anyone going up to Prescott's floor around the time of the murder. We'll have to review it again, and question the security guards again as well. Looks like I'll be working late."

"Pick me up whenever you're done and we'll grab takeout. Love you."

"Love you, too," he said, and hung up.

Christ. Thanks again for bailing, Driscoll.

He picked up a pen and threw it at his partner's desk, knowing damn well half his anger came not from being saddled with a shit case and having to do all the grunt work on his own, but because a piece of him still wondered if Joanna really did love him.

Or, rather, if she still loved him enough.

CHAPTER FOUR

Henry Gordon's stomach churned and his nerves buzzed with nervous energy as he stripped off his clothes and knelt in the circle of candles. Like the rest of the apartment, his office was dark and quiet. All the staff had been sent home for the night, with the exception of the two security guards downstairs.

A mix of emotions warred within him, as they had every day for the past week. Anticipation, guilt, and more than a little fear.

I'm actually doing this.

He still had trouble believing his incredible luck. A year ago, he'd been moments from a fate worse than death at the hands of a century-old Egyptian priest, Ahmes the Second, an actual mummy returned to life. Henry still had nightmares about the priest approaching him in the parking garage that night. His arm being grabbed, the pain shooting through his limbs to his chest, the soul-wrenching agony of his very essence draining away.

And then he'd seen inside the priest's mind, witnessed his death, felt his eternal yearning for revenge against those who'd wronged him and his temple.

Including Henry's own great-grandfather.

But more importantly, those who'd been with him. The very same ones who'd ruined the Gordon name, forced the family to emigrate to America in shame and start over. Who even today remained entwined with his family due to distant relations and joint business holdings.

Henry had no idea if he'd shouted the words out loud or just in his mind, but he'd heard them clear as day, and so had the priest.

"Don't kill me! I can help you."

The agony had lessened, the priest curious to hear what Henry had to say. Or perhaps he'd seen Henry's thoughts as they appeared.

"I can give you the others, if you'll spare me," Henry thought/spoke. *"You can regain what was stolen and we can both have the revenge we seek. I've been a victim, just as you have."*

The priest let go of Henry's arm. Henry's life force had rushed back into his body and he'd collapsed to the ground, chest heaving, legs too weak to support him. Visions of hot sands and a murky river inhabited by unseen demons faded away, leaving the dim gray of the garage in their place.

The priest leaned over him and spoke in a voice filled with menace.

"Tell me more."

Henry had. And now he was about to move one step closer to their final goal. A goal that would see his net worth double, or perhaps triple. It wouldn't make up for everything his family had been put through, but he'd never have to work another day in his life. And that was something.

The spell had already proven to be worth every considerable penny he'd spent – including mortgaging his business – to acquire the artifacts on the priest's list, plus the money he continued to provide for the priest's lodging and food. His stock trades ahead of the Collingsworth and Prescott deaths had recouped a small portion of it, just as he'd anticipated, and he figured that sooner or later the rest of the ten would give in to his demands and pay him the reparations he was owed. And if they didn't, another head would roll. And then another. Literally.

Their violent demises were the icing on the cake.

I hope the priest is right and they spend eternity roasting in the fires of Hell.

He checked his emails. No response to his messages. He'd given them two days.

Time for another lesson.

He pulled out the third copy of the spell. According to the priest's instructions, each casting should only feature one name. So he'd printed ten copies, one for each intended victim. Tonight, that would be Charles Oliver.

Thankfully, the spell was in English. When he'd asked about that, the priest told him it didn't matter, the power lay in the meaning of the words, not the language spoken. Although he had the spell memorized, he still read it from the paper, wary of making even the slightest error in the words. He had no idea how precise he needed to be, but better not to take chances when dealing with ancient demons.

After he finished, he dressed, cleaned everything up, and stored it all in the bottom drawer of his desk. The spell sheets went on top of them, in a folder marked Private.

"Have a nice night, Charlie. It's going to be your last. You should have accepted my offer when you had the chance. Say hello to Roger and Shaun when you get to Hell."

Now it was time to call his brokerage firm. Once the ushabti completed its task, there'd be some big changes in the stock market, changes he intended to take advantage of.

When he finished, he retired to his apartment, smiling at the thought of tomorrow's headlines.

He never noticed the shadowy figure peering out from the room across the hall.



Leslie Prescott was nothing if not sensible. Tom Reardon had given her a list of safety precautions to follow, including keeping security personnel around at all times and never being alone in a place without two exits. Rather than pooh-pooh them off as many of her friends would have, she'd followed them to the word.

Now it was paying big dividends.

A shaken Charles Oliver had shown up shortly after eight for their meeting. When he'd told her about the messages from Henry Gordon, she'd immediately looked through Shaun's private email accounts and found identical threats, threats that seemed far more menacing given what had happened to him and Roger. After a brief discussion, during which Charles told her he'd insisted to Shaun and the others that they

take Gordon seriously and report everything to the police, she'd agreed they'd been foolish not to listen to him, her own husband included.

"We'll speak to the others first thing in the morning. It will be better if we can present a united front when we take this information to the police, but even if they choose not to join us, we will still go."

Then they'd moved on to the business at hand, the real estate joint venture they'd been negotiating before Shaun's death. They were still ironing out the last few details when the gigantic man appeared in her study.

How he'd gotten past the guards downstairs without triggering any alarms, she had no idea. But the moment she saw him, his hulking form wrapped head to toe in gray, filthy strips of cloth, she knew it had to be the man who'd murdered Shaun. Never one for hysterics or hesitation, she hit the alarm button under her desk and ran for the walk-in closet she'd long ago modified into a panic room, shouting for Charles to follow if he wanted to live. The steel-reinforced door closed tight before their attacker made it halfway across the room. She didn't bother contacting the police – the alarm did that automatically – but she did place a call to Tom Reardon, telling him she was in trouble and to hurry his ass over because if she died he'd be back guarding a warehouse by the river.

On the other side of the wall, a deep, raspy voice intoned two words: *"Charles Oliver."*

"Bloody hell! He knows who I am." Charles stood in the center of the room, his hands shaking and lower lip quivering like an infant's.

"Shut up, Charles. It can't get in here." Not for the first time, she wondered how such a spineless man managed to run a multinational empire.

"You don't think that's the same—"

"I damn well do." Leslie pointed at the screen. "That's the man who killed Roger and my Shaun. Henry Gordon sent him after us."

"Then let's call him and give him what he wants." Oliver took out his phone but Leslie placed her hand on his.

"Over my dead body. You really think he'd let us live even if we pay? We'll just stay here until the police arrive. He'll never get a red cent from me now, and he can spend the rest of his life in jail thinking about that."

On the video monitor, the security team burst in and opened fire.

"Good lord," Oliver said, backing away from the screen.

The intruder, unfazed by the barrage of bullets, attacked the three guards like a crazed bear, using its hands to rip limbs and smash bones. Body parts and blood flew in all directions, the carnage no less revolting in grainy black and white. Mercifully, the screen went dark when a random bullet hit the ceiling camera.

Which was why they never saw the intruder collapse into a pile of rags that fluttered like dead leaves before falling to the floor. Or the pieces of woven fabric that slid in tapeworm fashion under the door.

Until the first cloth tendril touched Leslie's leg.

She let out a scream that was highly out of character, then kicked at the undulating strip before dancing away.

"Don't just stand there!" she shouted at Charles, as more pieces of fabric appeared. "Do something!"

"What?" Oliver stared down at the grayish-yellow lengths of heavy gauze that wove and twisted like a living thing. One lunged at him like a viper and he scurried to the far end of the room with a shriek.

Mrs. Prescott feared her time had come to join her husband. Whatever Gordon had sent after them wouldn't be denied. But she refused to go without a fight. In a drawer under the monitor was a small pistol. She grabbed it and fired at the creature as it coalesced into human form. It turned toward her, its empty eye sockets emanating malevolent intelligence. Enormous hands gripped her arm and tore it from her body. It dropped the spurting limb, lifted her up, and threw her across the small room. Brittle bones shattered and there was a moment of excruciating pain before her entire body went numb. She sank to the floor, paralyzed from the waist down, while the creature headed for Oliver.

"Charles Oliver," it intoned.

Oliver cowered in the corner, whimpering like a frightened child. The creature placed its hand against his chest and he screamed, his cries deafening in the confined space.

Blood ran in a river from the gaping hole in Mrs. Prescott's shoulder and she knew she only had moments to live. But she'd be damned if

her murder went unsolved. While the monster methodically tore Oliver apart limb by limb, she reached out with her remaining hand and dipped a finger in her own blood, praying there'd be enough time to complete her task.

Moments later, she drew her last breath and her hand went still.

For Charles Oliver, death brought no end to his agony.



Dan and Joanna arrived at the Prescotts' apartment building less than ten minutes behind the first patrol cars. They'd been on their way to a late dinner when the call came over the radio. As they crossed the street, Joanna had an excited sparkle in her eyes, and Dan knew why. Up until now, her position in the NYPD's Crime Scene Unit involved lab testing and sample cataloguing, and nothing more. She was still waiting for her promotion to the CSU field team. Until then, she remained stuck in the Hair and Fibers lab, except in cases of emergency.

I guess this qualifies.

Praying neither of them would get reprimanded for Joanna's unauthorized presence at a crime scene, Dan flashed his badge at the officer in the lobby, who pointed to the bank of elevators.

"Go on up," the man said. "From what I hear, I hope you haven't had dinner."

Remembering the scene in Prescott's office, Dan wasn't sure he was up to another gore-filled room. He glanced at Joanna, who didn't seem fazed by the warning.

"You sure about this?" he asked, while the elevator carried them smoothly toward the penthouse.

"I've seen dead bodies before," she reminded him. "You just keep your big feet out of my evidence."

The penthouse doors were open when they arrived, two uniforms standing guard in the spacious hallway. Dan flashed his badge again.

"Detective Reese and CSU Reese."

The cops nodded. One of them handed Dan a tube of menthol jelly. He dabbed some under his nose and handed it to Joanna. *A bad sign*. Dan steeled himself. Halfway through the gigantic area that served as a formal living room and dining room, he caught his first whiff of death.

The crime scene was even worse than he'd imagined, the study no longer recognizable as the same place where he'd talked to Mrs. Prescott. Arms and legs were scattered everywhere, turning the once museum-quality room into an abattoir. Pools of blood covered the ancient hardwood floors. Rorschach sprays of red painted the walls and furniture in abstract designs. Dan and Joanna accepted blue shoe booties and latex gloves from an officer near the door and then found themselves hopping from one unsoiled section of floor to another to avoid leaving impressions in the blood. Smudge marks showed places where other officers were either unlucky or just not careful.

"ME's on the way," said Fred Schreiber, the senior uniform officer on the scene. "But I think it's safe to say the cause of death was dismemberment."

Dan looked around. Three torsos, all wearing the same white shirts and blue jackets as the security guards he'd seen during his last visit. He found himself wondering if Tom Reardon was among the dead, and hated himself for not being sure if the idea bothered him or not.

"Where's Mrs. Prescott?"

"Panic room." Schreiber pointed to a wall behind the desk. "Alarm company said that's where it's located. We knocked on the wall and called for her, but there's been no answer. Tried her cell, too. Nothing. But she had to have been alive at some point. She's the one who set off the alarm."

"Where's the video? These things always have a camera. Does she even know we're out here?"

"Up there." Schreiber nudged his glasses up on his nose and indicated a compact camera dangling from the ceiling, an obvious bullet hole in one side. "Looks like it either caught a stray or the perp took it out on purpose. Whoever's in that room can't see anything going on out here. And they probably can't hear us, either."

"Shit. So she could be dead or dying while we stand around holding our dicks."

"Someone from the alarm company is on the way. Said he can open the door. Should be here in ten minutes."

"Great. What about witnesses?"

Schreiber shrugged. "When the alarm went off, the three guards responded. The elevators and stairs were locked electronically from the guard station. No one came in or out until we arrived."

"I'm going to document the crime scene," Joanna said.

"Okay." Dan looked around the room again, frustrated. He hated waiting but it looked like the only thing he could do until the panic room got opened was watch Joanna dance from one body part to the next, snapping pictures with her phone while she waited for the CSU team to arrive.

"Holy fuck."

Dan turned, relieved and then annoyed as he recognized the voice.

Tom Reardon stood at the entrance to the study, slipping on a pair of gloves. Despite the late hour, he looked fresh and alert, his dark brown eyes scanning the room, his Citadel Protection uniform wrinkle-free.

"What are you doing here?" It came out harsher than Dan intended.

"My case, too, remember? I was in the shower and when I got out there was a message on my phone from Leslie Prescott. She sounded scared but not terrified. Said the man who killed her husband had shown up and she knew who sent him. Then she hung up. I tried calling back but it went straight to voicemail."

"That's all? You'd better not be holding anything back, because—"

"That was the whole call. Twenty seconds at best. I saved the message for you. So where is she?"

"Panic room," Schreiber said. Dan shot him a dirty look and the tall, stocky officer quickly found something else to do.

"Behind that wall." Dan jerked his thumb at it. "Their tech's on the way to open it."

"Damn." Reardon moved through the study, picking his way like an acrobat through the gore and splatter on the floor.

He hasn't lost his touch at a crime scene, I'll give him that.

"A lot of gunfire," Reardon said, eyeing the shell casings littering the floor. "At least a dozen shots."

"So where are the bullets?"

Both men looked at Joanna, who knelt next to a man whose head was twisted at an unnatural angle so that it stared at his left arm, which sat several feet away.

Dan glanced around the room, searching for holes in walls or furniture.

"Just like Prescott's office," he said, more to himself than the others. But they still heard.

One of Reardon's eyebrows went up. "You're right. Shots fired and no slugs recovered, only casings."

"This time there's one in the camera." Dan pointed it out to Reardon.

"Still. Whatever Shaun Prescott and these poor bastards shot at, they hit it."

"What kind of person can take a dozen or more hits at close range without going down?"

Reardon frowned. "Jacked on drugs? Wearing a vest?"

Dan shook his head. "I don't care how good a vest you've got, that kind of gunfire's gonna do some damage. And no drug in the world lets you run away with a dozen holes in you."

"Maybe he wore body armor under his clothes?"

"How do you know it's only one?" Dan asked.

"Look at the footprints." Reardon indicated a set of large, smudged tracks leading through the blood toward the wall separating the panic room from the study. "One guy. Pretty large feet. Fights with the guards, kills them, and then heads right for the panic room."

Dan shook his head. He'd seen the same tracks but figured it was because only one assailant had stepped in the blood. He simply couldn't accept that a single person could take out three armed guards, no matter what the evidence said.

No, not take out. Rip apart from limb to limb. While getting shot multiple times.

"He does all this and doesn't leave anything for us to go on?" Schreiber asked.

"He left something," Dan said. "Perps always do. It's just a matter of finding it."

"Well, we can start with this." Reardon knelt down by the panic room and nudged something on the floor with a gloved finger. "Looks like a scrap of cloth. It's stuck between the door and floor."

"Maybe the perp was right at the door when it closed," Dan said.

"Or he got inside."

"Shit." That explained the absence of tracks leading away from the wall. Dan imagined the perp holding a gun or knife to Leslie Prescott, waiting for the door to open. Or worse, her dead and him poised to attack the moment—

"I've got something." Joanna pointed at the floor. "Some kind of powder. Not dirt. Almost like sawdust." She took an envelope off the desk, scraped some of the powder into it, and sealed the flap. Just then three men entered the room. Dan recognized the first one as Lee Thomas, a heavily bearded night shift coroner from the ME's office. The other two wore blue CSU windbreakers and immediately accosted Joanna about breaking protocol.

"I didn't break protocol, I followed it," she said, then explained what she'd done since arriving. Dan smiled at her no-nonsense tone.

Good for you!

"The lady did right," Thomas said, nodding a quick hello to Dan and Reardon before beginning his examination of the first body. The two CSUs frowned but didn't argue. Instead, one of them began placing yellow evidence markers next to the scattered shell casings, while the other took the envelope from Joanna and transferred it to a plastic evidence baggie.

"Oh, my god." A man stood by the door, his face pale as death. Dan was about to tell Schreiber to get him the hell out when he noticed the Metro Alarms & Security label on his jacket.

"You! Over here!" He motioned to the man, whose nametag read 'Carl'. "We need to get this open as fast as possible."

"I'm on it." He went to enter the room but one of the officers stopped him and handed him boots and gloves. The man stared at them a moment before catching on. After donning the protective gear, he did his best to avoid stepping in any blood and made his way to the back wall, where he slid open a panel to expose a keypad. He plugged an electronic device into it and pursed his lips as it began running through code combinations. Dan readied himself for a long wait, but the keypad light turned green in less than a minute. Carl reached for the Enter button, but Dan stopped him.

"Please, back away."

Dan drew his gun and motioned for Officer Schreiber to take the left side while he took the right. He touched the Enter button and then pressed himself against the wall as the reinforced panel slid aside.

A leg fell out onto the floor.

Schreiber yelped and jumped back.

Two bodies lay at the back of the room. Dan recognized Leslie Prescott crumpled in a corner, one arm severed and the other outstretched as if pleading for help. Her flesh had gone as white as her hair, but even in death she still held the same grim look of determination he'd seen on her face when she'd ordered him to work with Tom Reardon. Congealed blood covered the floor and walls. In the opposite corner was the torso of a man, his shirt torn open to reveal the by-now-familiar circle and star symbol burned into his flesh. His limbs were strewn across the room and his head rested next to his body, face contorted into a rictus of terror, mouth open in a silent scream, his eyes bulging from their sockets.

"Son of a—" Dan slammed his hand against the wall in frustration. "How the hell did he kill them and get out?"

"Christ." Reardon peered over Schreiber's shoulder, his normally dusky skin several shades paler. "That's Leslie Prescott."

"Yeah." Dan let his gaze travel the room, looking for anything that would help them. He found it on the floor next to Leslie Prescott's hand. Two words, written in the blood.

RAGS MAN

"Rags and man? What the hell's that mean?"

"Well, the rags part is obvious." Joanna had joined them. "There's another scrap of cloth wrapped around the other victim's disarticulated leg. It looks the same as the one Tom found."

"So, what? She saw a man dressed in rags? He attacked them with rags? It doesn't make sense." Reardon's frustration was evident in his furrowed brow, and mirrored Dan's own.

"None of this makes sense. How could the perp kill the guards, get in here, kill Prescott and this other guy, and get away, all without being seen?"

"And with a shitload of bullets in him," Reardon added.

A sickening thought came to Dan.

"You know what this looks like?" he asked, momentarily forgetting Reardon wasn't his partner or friend anymore. Or even a cop.

Reardon nodded. "Yep. Inside job."

"Exactly."

"Mrs. Prescott was worried about the same thing. That's why she put me on the case."

A new voice interrupted them.

"Well, isn't this cute. The mall cop thinks he's still NYPD."

Dan looked up and saw Chad Driscoll standing next to Dr. Thomas.

"Nice of you to stop by," Dan said.

Before Driscoll could respond, Reardon spoke up.

"Hey, you know how Hangers are. They forget all sorts of shit. Like how to walk through a crime scene." Reardon nodded at Driscoll's feet. The detective stood right on a smeared shoe print, obliterating half of it.

Driscoll scowled and moved his foot.

"Fuck you, Tommy boy. At least I didn't quit the force."

Reardon's face darkened all the way up to the roots of his buzz-cut hair.

"You'd better watch yourself, asshole. I don't have to take your shit."

"That's enough!" Dan pointed at Reardon. "Back off."

Reardon shot him a dirty look but stepped away. Dan knew how much control that took. Driscoll represented everything they both despised in bad cops. And Dan had just defended him.

Driscoll started to say something but Dan interrupted. "Don't. The goddamned captain gave him privileges and I'll be damned if I'm getting my ass chewed out because you piss him off."

"If you boys are through," Joanna broke in, "there's something else here. Unless you're too busy for evidence."

Dan took a deep breath and joined her at the body of the white-haired man. She motioned at his chest.

"He's got the same mark as the other two victims, but Mrs. Prescott doesn't."

"She wasn't the target, he was," Reardon said from behind them.

"So, whoever the killer is, he's after specific people."

"Mrs. Prescott and others were just collateral damage."

"Whatever." Driscoll moved away from the bodies. "You and your boyfriend can share ideas all night long for all I care. After all, you share everything else." He glanced at Joanna, an evil smile twisting his lips. Then he turned and walked out of the room, his laughter a knife stabbing Dan's heart. All of the pain and anger rose up again, wrapped in the memories of Tom's betrayal. Joanna looked away, biting her lip to keep from crying. An expression he'd seen on her face too many times since the night that almost destroyed their lives.

"Um, I best be goin' too. I'll stop by the station tomorrow after the lab results are in." Reardon hurried away, leaving Dan staring at his retreating form and wishing looks really could kill.

"I've got samples to bag," Joanna whispered.

Dan nodded but kept silent, afraid of saying something he'd regret later.

His silence continued long after they left the crime scene and went home.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dan Reese was still in a foul mood when he arrived at the precinct the next morning. Joanna had tried several times the previous night to get him to talk about his feelings, like Dr. Fleck advised, but he was still too upset.

"I'm sick of talking about it," he'd said, opening a bottle of beer. "We've talked it to death. Bad enough with Reardon, then Driscoll running his mouth put the icing on the shit cake."

"So pass the case to someone else. Captain Green will understand that working with Tom is a conflict of interest."

For a second, he'd considered it. Dump everything in somebody else's lap. Driscoll sure as hell wouldn't care. The case had all the signs of being a career killer. Four socialites killed, plus the security guards, and their only clues were some pieces of cloth, a message that made no sense, and a cryptic symbol branded on some – but not all – of the victims.

Unless they caught a real break, the next few weeks would be hell.

Then he thought about how it would look. He'd be no better than Driscoll, taking the easy way out instead of actually solving the damn case. He'd lose all respect in the precinct. Not to mention that if he actually managed to bring in a real serial killer, it pretty much guaranteed a promotion.

What would Reardon do?

As much as he hated even thinking about his back-stabbing ex-partner, he couldn't help it. It was the same question he'd been asking himself in tough situations ever since the first time he and Tom met, more than a decade ago, when they were both young uniform cops. He still had nightmares about that night, his first real brush with death.

He'd responded to a report about gunshots fired. He'd been the first cop on the scene because budget cutbacks had officers riding alone. As he pulled up, two shots rang out inside the graffiti-covered walls of an abandoned apartment building the local druggies and homeless used as a crack house and shelter.

Dan knew what to expect inside. Rooms so dark you couldn't see ten feet. Blankets and bodies on the floor, indistinguishable from each other until one of them decided to grab your leg or pull a weapon on you. The crunch of crack vials underfoot announcing your presence. And somewhere above you, one or more drug-addled zombies ready to put a bullet or knife into the next person they saw.

After a quick call for backup, he'd gone to the black hole where the front door used to be and paused. No one would fault him for waiting until backup arrived. But there could be injured people inside, people who might die because of his indecision.

That was when a second patrol car pulled up. A cop about his own age, cocoa-colored skin, medium build, his hair buzzed to almost nothing on the sides but left curly on top.

"What's the sitch?" the newcomer asked, his smooth voice containing hints of a southern accent. It reminded Dan of the actor Matthew McConaughey. The honeyed tones were serious but relaxed, as if he'd done this a hundred times before.

"Shots fired inside. Upstairs, but I don't know what floor. Backup's on the way."

The newcomer had smiled and nodded. "All right, then. Let's earn our paychecks. You go left and I'll go right."

"What about backup?" Dan had asked.

The other cop slapped Dan's shoulder. "We're it, my friend. Y'all got my back and I got yours. Ready?"

The other officer's laid-back demeanor had done what Dan's training couldn't: put him at ease. He'd nodded, and together they'd gone into the dark maw of the building. And in the end, they'd apprehended both gunmen who'd been inside, although not before one of them slammed into Dan from behind and put a gun to his head.

Still reeling from the blow he'd taken, Dan had closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable.

The report of the pistol echoed off the cement walls.

No pain.

He opened his eyes in time to see the perp stumble away and collapse. And then Officer Tom Reardon appeared, holding out his hand to help Dan up.

From that point on they'd been inseparable, first as best friends who sometimes worked the same shifts, and eventually, a couple of years after they both made detective, as partners.

Until the night Reardon stepped over the line.

But it was the memory of that first meeting Dan always returned to whenever he wondered what action he should take in an uncertain situation.

What would Tom Reardon do?

He'd say fuck you to everyone and get the job done.

"I can't drop it," Dan told Joanna. She'd nodded and gone to bed while Dan sat at the small desk in the guest bedroom that served as their office, poring over the case files until dawn lightened the sky. However, the unanswered questions that kept him awake had nothing to do with the murders. Instead, he kept wondering if his wife was secretly happy to have Reardon involved in their lives again.

And if so, was her happiness for her husband or herself?

Those thoughts still haunted him as he sipped his bitter breakroom coffee and mentally prepared himself for another round of futile examination. The full reports from the ME's office wouldn't be back until later in the morning, so he figured he'd spend a couple of hours looking for any links between Collingsworth, the Prescotts, and the latest victim, one Charles Oliver, other than the fact that they were all filthy rich.

He glanced over at Driscoll's desk and allowed himself a smile. At least that was one problem he wouldn't have to worry about today. Driscoll had called in sick with a stomach bug, but Dan was pretty sure his so-called partner was shirking duty again.

All the better for me. Now, as long as there aren't any other distractions, I can actually get some work—

"Reese! In my office."

Dan held back a groan. Captain Green was never a soft-spoken man on the best of days. When he shouted across the bullpen, though, it meant bad news for someone.

Very bad news.

Bracing himself, Dan entered the captain's office and shut the door. At five-foot-eight, Lester Green barely made the height requirement for the NYPD. A barrel-chested veteran, he was just starting to go gray at the age of sixty. His head was small for his body and his eyes bulged slightly, which always made him look vaguely surprised. The deep frown lines on his forehead added a good five years of age to his face. His claim to fame was being a third cousin to the famous actor, Samuel L. Jackson. They looked nothing alike, but they definitely shared a similar tone of voice, which Joanna had once kindly referred to as 'commanding'.

"Have you seen this?" Green slammed a copy of the *Daily News* onto his desk.

A headline on the front page screamed 'RAGMAN KILLS AGAIN!' Below that in slightly smaller type was 'Locked Room Murders Baffle Police'. A picture of Prescott's apartment building occupied the center of the page, showing two covered stretchers being wheeled out the front doors.

"Ragman." Green fumed. "How the hell did the press find out about that?"

Dan wanted to throw the paper across the office. One of the captain's biggest pet peeves was people leaking information to the press. According to Green, the only people who should be giving statements, on or off the record, were him and the PR reps. For everyone else, it was 'no comment' unless instructed otherwise. A leak like this was enough to put him on the warpath for days.

"I don't know, sir," Dan said, noting the ever-damning line in the paper attributing the information to unnamed sources. "No one spoke to them while I was at the scene."

He tried to think who it could have been. Not him or Joanna. Reardon? He might not be a cop anymore but he'd never divulge anything to the press. Dr. Thomas was too experienced to make that kind of mistake. Schreiber, too.

Who else did that leave? The CSUs, one of the other uniforms, the guys from the ME's office, and the alarm tech. All potential sources, especially if a reporter offered some cash.

Finally, there was Driscoll.

Couldn't be. Even a half-assed detective like him wouldn't be that stupid.

Unless he did it on purpose, just to make my life miserable. An image came to Dan: a pissed-off Driscoll storming out of the crime scene.

And then calling in sick the same morning this hits the papers. I'll kill him if he did it.

"Well, find out. I want that person's name so I can personally transfer them to rat patrol at the goddamned Fresh Kills landfill." Green took a deep breath and sat down, his face returning to its normal color. "Please tell me you have some good news. Are the lab results back?"

Dan shook his head. "Not for another hour or two. I'm looking into any ties between the victims, other than social status. Leslie Prescott left a message for Reardon that she might know who the killer was, which means perhaps they all did. Their families were well acquainted. Maybe they had a business rival in common. Or a blackmailer."

"Social status." Green shook his head. "Don't remind me. The mayor is all over this one."

The phone rang and Green gritted his teeth.

"Speak of the devil. Get out."

Dan left the office and nearly ran into Tom Reardon, who had his hand raised to knock.

"Not now," Dan advised, shutting the door behind him. The thin glass did nothing to block the sound of Green's voice assuring the mayor the leak didn't come from his detectives.

"He saw the paper." Reardon's words weren't a question.

"You just better hope it wasn't you who—"

"Hey, I'm innocent." Reardon held up his hands in mock

surrender as they went back to Dan's desk. "I came here to negotiate a truce."

"A what?" Dan sat down. All he wanted to do was close his eyes and have the morning start over again, only this time he'd be the one with the day off, not Driscoll.

"A truce." Reardon pulled Driscoll's old wooden chair over. "I know I'm the last person you want hangin' around. Trust me, coming back here ain't no picnic for me, either. But we have to work together, so we might as well be civil. Sooner we close this case, sooner I can go back to guarding buildings."

"Your employer's dead. This isn't your case anymore."

Reardon shook his head.

"You'd think. But the security company hasn't reassigned me, and Captain Green hasn't revoked my liaison status. Besides," Reardon leaned forward, his expression earnest. "I need to do this. That shit happened on my watch, sort of."

Dan chewed his lip. Reardon had been a damn fine cop before he quit the force. One of the best.

"All right. God knows I can use the help." He pointed at Driscoll's desk, which at one time had been Reardon's own. "Make yourself at home. At least there'll be someone sitting there who knows how to do this job."

As Reardon slid over and opened his own copy of the case file, Dan informed him about the ID on Charles Oliver.

"See what you can find out about him. Why was he at the Prescotts' last night? There must be some kind of tie-in between the murders."

"What about what Mrs. Prescott said in her message? About knowing who the killer was. Was there anything in her email or on her phone?"

"CSU has all the papers from her desk. I'm waiting to get them back, along with her phone and email dumps."

Dan's desk phone jangled.

"Hello? Hi. Hold on, I'm putting you on speaker. It's Joanna," he said to Reardon. "She's got something. Go ahead."

"I hope you're sitting down." The excitement in her voice came through clear. "This is really weird stuff."

"Weird how?" Reardon asked.

"Oh, hello, Tom." Dan took a bit of pleasure in hearing Joanna's tone take on a definite frosty note. "Weird as in you might not believe it. I'm sure having trouble."

"Try me," Dan said.

"We identified the composition of the cloth pieces and the powder from the crime scenes. It was the same material, actually, a type of linen called ramie."

"Ramie?" Reardon frowned. "Never heard of it."

"Neither did we. Had to look it up. Apparently, it's been around for thousands of years but it's not common in the U.S. It's still found in parts of Asia, but its big claim to fame is that it was originally used in Egypt to make mummy cloth."

"Mummy cloth? You mean, the stuff they wrap actual mummies in?" Dan grabbed a notepad and pen, even though he'd be getting a full report from the lab via email. He found writing things down helped him not only remember them but find connections between seemingly unrelated facts.

"Yes," Joanna said. "And that's not the strangest part. The cloth fragments had traces of dehydroabietic acid and bitumen on them."

"Well, that's some shit." Reardon's eyebrows rose.

"What?" Dan looked at Reardon. "Am I missing something? What's that stuff?"

"Bitumen is a type of tar," Reardon said. "And let me guess. The other chemical comes from pine trees."

"Probably." Joanna's voice carried an approving smile. "A conifer, for sure. It's too degraded for us to tell more than that. Could be pine, fir, or even cedar."

"Will someone explain what this means?"

"The ancient Egyptians used tree sap and tar to preserve bodies as part of the mummification process," Reardon said.

"How the hell do you know that?"

"History Channel. I can also tell you how aliens built the pyramids."

"He's right." Joanna's voice filled the air between them like a ghost. "Bitumen is basically asphalt. It's been used for thousands of years not only to waterproof buildings and build roads, but also for mummification."

"I can't believe this." Dan shook his head. "You two sound as bad as Driscoll with his voodoo talk."

"Hey, I just report the facts," Joanna said. "It's up to you guys to piece them together. But I have one more, and this is the big one."

"I'm afraid to ask."

"The cloth is old. Real old. Older than our equipment can determine. We sent a sample to a special lab upstate that does radiocarbon dating but it will take a few days for the results to come back. We have to handle it really carefully or else it crumbles into dust."

"Dust like the powder we found?" Dan asked.

"Identical. It also matches the traces found in Collingsworth's bedroom and Prescott's office."

"So, the dust is powdered cloth. Like someone ground it up."

"Or a bullet went through it?" Reardon raised an eyebrow.

"That's definitely possible," Joanna said.

"Stop it!" Dan tossed his pen onto the desk. "There's no such thing as mummies."

"I gotta go. Talk to you later." Joanna's connection went dead. Dan had a feeling she wanted to stay out of their argument.

"We both know that ain't true," Reardon said. "Mummies exist. There are thousands of them all over the world."

"Fine. There's no such thing as a mummy that can walk around and kill people."

"Maybe somebody stole one and used the old wrappings to make a wacked-out disguise. Remember what Leslie Prescott wrote: Rags Man."

Dan shook his head. "It doesn't make sense. Why such an elaborate MO?"

The phone interrupted them again. This time it was the Video Lab. Dan listened for a moment and then said they'd be right down.

"They've got the video from Prescott's apartment."

Reardon stood up.

"What are we waiting for?"



Joanna Reese stared at the phone for a long moment after she hung up.

Dan and Tom working together again.

She didn't know how to feel. On the one hand they were an amazing team, even if they didn't want to admit it. Two pieces of a machine that didn't operate properly when separated, but when joined together, they created a powerful force.

On the other hand, having Tom around was going to cause problems for all three of them. Especially Dan.

It hadn't always been that way. She'd met Tom at a bar while out with some of her friends, and although there was a definite physical attraction, she could tell after a few minutes he wasn't her type, that all he wanted was a one-night stand. Or a weekend at best. She'd told him she wasn't interested, she wanted a man with substance, and he shrugged and walked off. Ten minutes later, he showed up with Dan Reese at his side.

"I think you two might be perfect for each other."

He was right. They'd hit it off instantly. Dan was everything she wanted in a boyfriend. Intelligent, funny, yet with a serious side. And unlike Tom, he preferred real relationships to random hookups. Within a year, they were engaged.

Tom was happy as hell for both of them. He'd become family, the brother neither of them ever had. She drove him and Dan home when they got drunk. They had him, and many of his dates, over for dinners more times than she could count. He'd been Dan's best man at their wedding and over the years they'd laughed at his constant woman troubles. Especially his knack for finding the ones who started talking marriage after three dates.

They'd been there for Tom when he'd needed an emergency appendectomy, and he'd been there for them when Joanna's father died of cancer.

It was Tom who convinced Dan to take the detective's exam and her to follow her dream of getting out of medical technology lab work and joining the CSU.

And then a year ago, everything got ruined in one stupid, drunken night.

They'd been celebrating Joanna's promotion to the Hair and Fibers department. Nothing crazy, just the three of them and Stacy, Tom's first really serious girlfriend, at the apartment with some champagne and beer. Dan decided they should do tequila shots and somehow after that they'd gotten the idea to play strip poker. They'd all ended up in their underwear, and when Joanna lost another hand and had to take off her bra, she'd hesitated. Stacy offered to take hers off as a gesture of solidarity. The men cheered them on, but afterward, Joanna decided that if she was buzzed enough to show her tits to Tom and Stacy, it was time to call it a night.

Except that wasn't the only reason she'd stopped playing.

Although she'd never admitted it to anyone, not even their marriage counselor, it had excited her to be seen that way, and with tequila fueling her courage, she'd spontaneously given everyone a big, open-mouthed kiss good night. Tongue and everything. Even Stacy.

Dan and Tom had laughed and said maybe she shouldn't leave, the party was just getting good. But even drunk and horny she knew better, so she went to bed, figuring she'd find everyone passed out on the couches in the morning. It wouldn't be the first time.

She'd barely shut her eyes when she heard the bedroom door open. She rolled over, expecting to see Dan. Instead, Tom stood there. He told her that he and Stacy had taken their hint and decided to go for it.

The next thing she knew they were making out like two teenagers. That's when Dan walked in on them, after spurning Stacy's advances.

Furious, he'd told Tom to get the hell out and never come near either of them again. Tom attempted to explain that they'd thought Dan and Joanna wanted to try something different, that it was just a big misunderstanding.

Dan refused to listen.

Joanna tried to calm everyone down, said Tom hadn't taken advantage of her, they were just all drunk, but Dan wouldn't accept that. He'd disowned his friend completely, cut him out of his life like a tumor. Months of counseling had enabled her and Dan to patch the gaping wound in their relationship, but the scab still remained, at least for Dan.

Now, hardly a year later, Tom was back. Would his presence scrape that wound open again, or would this case be the thing that finally healed it?

More importantly, which conclusion did she want?

Because there were still nights she lay in bed, remembering Tom's hands on her body.



Ahmes the Second struggled to hold back a howl of joy as he read the headline of the *Daily News* a second time. Things were moving along perfectly. Soon his revenge would be complete and Sokar appeased.

RAGMAN KILLS AGAIN!

Police baffled by recent string of murders among prominent members of high society.

Ah, if only they knew the truth! But they wouldn't. Not unless Gordon made a grievous error. Unlikely, given the detailed instructions he'd provided the man. Still, one could never be too sure.

How much easier it would have been if I could cast the spells myself. But Sokar wouldn't allow it. There was always the chance Osiris would discover the calling of the ushabti and seek to discover the reason for it. Sokar would have no choice but to reveal his part in allowing one of his priests to return to Earth for the purposes of revenge, an admission that would lead to painful consequences. In turn, Sokar's wrath would be immeasurable and his punishment swift and merciless. An eternity of the worst tortures possible, and no escape from the Duat for the Ka of a priest who dared defy the

rules of the gods, even if for good reason. It had taken more than one hundred and thirty years for his spell to be activated so that he could escape the Land of the Dead. He couldn't take the chance of being sent back until he completed his revenge.

Although he hadn't realized it at first, Fate had smiled on him when he'd woken in the modern world. He'd been denied the chance to take the lives of those who'd defiled his temple, but in return gained a greater opportunity. Not only had he woken in the exact same city as the eldest living descendent of Simon Gordon, he now had the opportunity to regain all the artifacts stolen from the temple and take the life of the eldest male from every family involved in the desecration, cursed be their names forever. All thanks to the money and connections of Henry Gordon.

The greed of Gordon's forefathers ran strong in Henry's blood, and he'd instantly offered the lives of the other nine in return for his own. Despite his desire for revenge, Ahmes knew delivering ten souls instead of one would return him to the Duat a hero in Sokar's eyes, worthy of a place of honor in Maat, his Ankh living forever in paradise.

Of course, if for some reason he didn't fulfill his end, or Osiris discovered their plot, the agony of Sekhmet's fiery braziers awaited him.

Such are the bargains made with the gods of the Underworld.

But for now, at least, I can savor victory in the spilled blood of the guilty, and the knowledge that their Kas will endure everlasting torture. Ahmes lifted his espresso and toasted Henry Gordon.

"A pity you won't live to enjoy your wealth."

CHAPTER SIX

The Crime Lab's video room was a small space crammed with six networked computers on a large table. Each had their own monitor, but they were also all connected to a large flat screen hanging on one institutional-gray wall. Dan stood behind the senior video tech, Eileen Murphy, a middle-aged woman with glasses whose fingers moved in a blur over the keyboard. Reardon leaned against the back wall, his eyes glued to the main screen.

"There was some damage to the system when the camera got shot," Murphy said. She kept licking her lips, and Dan wondered if it was a personal tic or a nervous reaction to the video. He'd already noted the haunted look in her eyes when she'd told them it was the weirdest thing she'd ever seen.

"How bad?" Dan asked.

"A lot of static. The system's digital, but not state of the art. No cloud backup or internet connection. Just a memory chip inside the camera."

"With her money? That doesn't make sense."

"Actually, it does," Tom countered. "It's common when people don't want anyone else seeing what's been recorded. A lot of CXOs do it."

"Great. Okay, start it," Dan said. All of a sudden, he had to pee.

Judging by the way Reardon kept tapping his fingers against his leg, he was just as anxious.

Murphy hit a button and the screens came to life. Mrs. Prescott's study, rendered in black and white. Static lines scrolled up the screen in random waves, making it look like the video had been shot through a window in bad weather. From the vantage point of the ceiling, Dan saw

the two vics, Mrs. Prescott and Oliver, bent over a stack of papers on the desk. Mrs. Prescott's back was to the camera. She looked up sharply and touched something under the desk. A second later she jumped from her chair and ran out of the picture. Oliver glanced in the direction of the door, which lay beyond the camera's coverage area, and then took off after her, a terrified expression on his face. For the next few seconds, there was only an empty office.

Then Dan found himself leaning forward as something else moved into view, a grayish, vaguely man-shaped blur that seemed more like cloud or mist than solid object.

"What the hell is that?"

The shape moved rapidly from right to left across the screen and disappeared.

"We don't know," Murphy said. "We've tried slowing the video down, and we still can't get a clear picture. At first we thought it was an artifact from chip damage."

"So they were alive when—"

"Look!" Dan interrupted.

Three guards entered the picture from the right side, presumably through the door. Dan cursed the lack of sound when they drew their guns and shouted at something.

The foggy shape reentered the picture and charged the guards, who fired at it with no visible effect. When it reached the first guard, a pseudopod of mist wrapped around the man's neck and a second later his head separated from his body. Blood sprayed from the ragged wound. The ghostly thing pulled the dead guard's left arm off and smashed it into another guard's chest like a baseball player swinging for a home run. The apparition knocked the third man to the ground and tore one of his legs away. As it did so, it turned, and for a fleeting second the camera captured its face.

Black holes occupied the places where the eyes and mouth should have been.

The screen went blank.

"Mother of God," Dan whispered.

"What the…?" Reardon turned toward Murphy. "Where's the rest?"

"Sorry. That's where the bullet hit the camera and knocked it out."

"Play it again," Dan ordered.

It was no less gruesome the second time. Or the third. The opaque form, larger than any of the guards. The way it moved like a solid thing, yet all they could see was a grayish blur. The empty spaces on the face, like openings into another dimension.

"Captain Green is going to freak," Reardon said.

Dan agreed. Everything about the video screamed 'hoax'. Ghosts didn't exist and there was no way any man, no matter how strong, could tear someone's body apart like that.

But we saw it happen. The fucking thing ripped those guards to shreds like they were made of clay. Just thinking about it made him want to puke. He couldn't imagine a more horrible way to die, except maybe getting burned alive.

He'd hoped for answers and instead ended up with more questions. It took an effort but Dan forced his mind to think logically. This was no time to let fear get the best of him.

A logical explanation….

Not possible.

"It's not real." He said the words just as they came to him.

One of Reardon's eyebrows arched.

"An inside job, like we thought?"

"More than that. The whole thing is an elaborate setup. We're being played."

"But…but we saw the video." Murphy looked from Dan to Reardon and back again. "And the crime scene. You were there. The bodies…." Her voice trailed off, and Dan figured she'd gotten a look at the crime scene photos. Probably half the precinct had seen them. Nothing stayed secret for very long.

"Yeah, they match," he said. "But that doesn't mean a thing. You're the tech. How hard would it be to replace the chip in that camera with a different video on it? We know Leslie Prescott had the video running before Oliver arrived. So that part has to be real."

"Maybe it doesn't."

Murphy rubbed her chin as she continued speaking, her expression changing from confused to thoughtful.

"Digital manipulation. With the right equipment, it's pretty easy. You just need pictures of everyone's faces. Then you film the murder scene against a green screen with people wearing the victims' clothes and the guards' uniforms, and edit in their faces after. The rest is done with special effects. It's all recorded ahead of time."

"All right, let's say they did that." Dan chewed at his lip. "They'd still have no way of knowing Oliver would be there at that time."

Reardon snapped his fingers.

"Except they did. Oliver was the intended victim, remember? If they had Oliver's phones and email hacked, they'd know about the meeting ahead of time."

"They'd still have to stage the crime scene to match the video," Murphy said. "Which means knowing what Prescott and Oliver would be wearing. And which guards would show up."

"All possible if it's really an inside job. Especially if someone on the security team is in on it." Tom looked at Murphy. "The guards all wear the same uniforms. If that part of the video was shot ahead of time, how quickly could someone take the real video and edit clips from it into the fake one?"

Murphy thought for a minute before answering.

"Not long, if they knew what they were doing."

"So, someone's doing that while another perp is getting into the panic room because he has the code—"

"Or maybe he's already in there," Dan interjected.

"—and then the two people are killed and door shut again."

"There's still one problem," Dan said. "How did the perps get in and out without being seen? Not just this time, but for Collingsworth and Prescott?"

Tom smiled.

"It all goes back to security. Inside men on every team. Maybe weeks or months ahead of time. They'd know the security systems and layouts better than anyone. That could be what ties all the cases together."

"Why, though?" asked Murphy. "Why go through all that? Why not just kill Oliver somewhere else, like his own house? Or on the street?"

Tom went to answer but Dan spoke first.

"Chaos."

"What?"

"He's right." Reardon nodded toward the screen, which was mercifully blank again. "This will make everyone jumpier than grasshoppers. The press is gonna go nuts with stories of a mysterious serial killer on the loose. The police have no description to go on. We're talking mass hysteria, especially if this video gets out. And the real criminals are safely hidden behind a wall of fake evidence while we're chasing our tails."

Dan stood up and took two copies of the video Murphy had put on flash drives. One for him and one for Captain Bellows. The original would go into evidence.

"This sucks." Dan frowned as he stuck the drives in his pocket.

"Tell me about it. I work for the damn security company. I might actually know some of the people involved in this."

Left unsaid was the fact that Reardon's job put him back on the list of potential persons of interest. Dan saw in his old partner's eyes that he understood the ramifications.

"I'll tell you what's worse," Dan said. "Fucking Driscoll might be right with his voodoo theory. That's how the Caribbean gangs operate, through psychological fear. But why? Are we talking drugs? Smuggling?"

Before Tom could answer, Dan's phone pinged with an incoming email.

"It's Trace. They're done with documents that were on Mrs. Prescott's desk. And check this out." Dan's voice rose with excitement. He handed the phone to Reardon, whose eyebrows rose as he read the screen.

"Well, I'll be damned. I think we have our connection."



Although he'd been in the old man's office a hundred times, if not more, it felt different now. The room seemed darker, the air heavier. Maybe

because he wasn't supposed to be in there. Which was why he'd waited until the apartment was empty, and even then he'd worn a hoodie to hide his face from any cameras or neighbors.

He noticed right away that the folder wasn't on the desk anymore, but a quick search turned it up in a drawer, sitting atop some candles, a lighter, and a ceramic bowl. After shutting the office door, the hooded figure opened the folder and took out the papers. His first thought when he started reading them was it had to be some kind of joke.

Until he remembered the morning headlines.

Seven identical sheets, with some kind of spell or incantation printed on them in large, easy-to-read lettering. From what he could recall, it was the same spell he'd heard the old bastard reciting. The last two sheets contained a set of instructions for how to cast the spell and a list of names. Three of the names had been crossed out.

Collingsworth. Prescott. Oliver.

The same names as the dead people in the news.

One could be coincidence. Three?

Something weird was going on.

He looked at the instructions. Everything seemed pretty straightforward. Light some candles anointed with certain oils. Poke your finger. Fill in the name of the person. Read the spell, but only after dark. Blah blah blah.

Three people dead. Seven blank spells. Seven more names on the list. He's planning on killing ten people altogether.

Why them?

It didn't make sense. This Ushabti Akil Ahmose had to be some kind of major badass demon or something. According to the news, it got into locked rooms and pulled peoples' heads off and shit. Bullets didn't stop it.

So why only ten? The old man had to have more enemies than that. And competitors.

Man, if I controlled that thing, it'd be like my personal bodyguard. No one could touch me. I'd be, like, the motherfucking king of the world.

Thin lips turned up in a smile. He'd originally planned to confront the old man and threaten to turn him in to the police unless he forked over

some major cash and agreed to certain terms. Not that anyone would believe in magic, but it would make him a suspect and that wouldn't be good for business. And business always came first, so he'd probably do anything demanded of him.

Now, though…if this was real?

It's the chance of a lifetime.

He took out his phone and snapped a copy of the instruction sheet and a spell sheet. Then he put everything back the way he'd found it and left, remembering to hide his face again as he exited the building.

What had started out as a shitty week, coming to the apartment to beg for mercy, now looked like the beginning of a wonderful life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dan pulled up to the curb and placed his NYPD placard on the dashboard. He had no worries about someone seeing it and busting a window to steal it. Not in this neighborhood, where the closest thing to a homeless person was a stray cat and the criminals robbed you with computers, not guns.

He and Reardon got out and Dan paused to take in the view of Central Park, visible at the end of the street. Three blocks in the other direction, the Millennium Tower overlooked the park and Broadway like a monarch surveying his kingdom. In between, twenty- and thirty-story steel and glass office towers alternated with turn-of-the-century brick and stone apartment buildings and co-ops. Uniformed doormen, clean sidewalks, and waiting limousines provided not-so-subtle hints of wealth.

"Damn," Reardon said, as if reading Dan's thoughts. "I wonder what it's like to have so much money you don't know what to do with it."

"So much you decide to become a serial killer for thrills?"

It was the same question they'd been hashing out ever since they got the documents back from Trace. Along with a series of real estate contracts, there'd been two identical emails printed out, one addressed to Charles Oliver and one to the late Shaun Prescott.

This is your last chance. Pay me or SUFFER the consequences.

—Henry

A quick search of the sender's address had given them the name Henry Gordon, who owned a small but successful import-export business, and who just happened to live on the Upper East Side, within blocks of all three murders. Calls to his cell had gone straight to voicemail, but

when they tried his business number his secretary told them he was in a meeting with a client.

Chad Driscoll had called in sick again, so Dan and Tom had headed for Gordon's office, located in one of the older buildings on Third Avenue between Sixty-Eighth and Sixty-Ninth streets.

"Gordon Worldwide's offices are on the twenty-third floor," the smiling, perky woman at the desk told them, pointing at a bank of elevators in a large alcove. "I'll let them know you're on the way up."

Set behind a wall of frosted glass, Gordon's office suite took up half the floor. A twenty-something man with a neat haircut and perfect teeth asked them to have a seat in the waiting area, and said that Mr. Gordon would be with them shortly. They'd barely sat down when the desk attendant's phone buzzed. He spoke for a moment and then told Dan and Tom to follow him. He led them down the hall to Gordon's private office, which turned out to be far less ostentatious than Dan expected. A modern black metal desk, two chairs, a computer screen, and a small bar took up the back half of the room, and a conference table with six seats the other half. In between, large windows looked down on Sixty-Eighth Street.

Behind the desk sat a tall, gaunt man in his late sixties. He was studying something on the computer screen and didn't look up when they entered.

Dan cleared his throat as they drew near.

"Excuse me. Henry Gordon? I'm Detective Dan Reese and this is Tom Reardon, from Citadel Protection. We need to ask you a few questions."

Gordon glanced at them for a moment, his expression blank, as if he didn't understand English. Then he motioned for them to take a seat.

"How may I help you, officers?" he asked, sliding his keyboard away.

"We're here about the murders of Roger Collingsworth, Shaun Prescott, and Charles Oliver."

"Did you know the victims?" Reardon asked.

"In a manner of speaking. We travel in the same social circles, have some business dealings in common. But I'm sure you're aware of that."

"Yes, we are." Dan gave him a neutral smile. "Just standard questions. Some of them will seem obvious. But we have to do our jobs, right?"

Before Gordon could answer, Tom jumped in with another question.

"Where were you on the nights of the murders?"

Gordon made a show of thinking about the question, scratching his chin, scrunching his brow, and glancing down at his lap before meeting their eyes again.

"Where I am most nights. In my apartment, tending to business in some way. I often work late at home. I'm a widower, and there's not much else for me to do except watch movies or sleep. I can't be more specific than that, I'm afraid. I'm not aware of their exact times of death."

"Can you provide witnesses who would back that up?"

Gordon's pallid face went a shade paler and his eyes darted from Dan to Reardon and back again.

"Am I a suspect? Should I contact my attorneys?"

"A suspect? No. But once we can rule you out, we won't need to bother you with questions again later."

"I see. Well, please feel free to check with the security guards at my apartment building. Their logs will show when I leave and return each day."

"Would you say Collingsworth or the others had any enemies?"

Gordon twitched and took a deep breath before answering.

"I have no idea, but it wouldn't surprise me."

"How so?" Reardon's eyebrows shot up and Dan leaned forward.

"How could they not?" Gordon relaxed back in his seat, visibly calmer. "When you're very wealthy like they are, er, were, it's all a part of life. Blackmail attempts, disgruntled business associates and employees, hostile takeovers, that sort of thing."

"Can you think of anyone in particular? Someone who might have an axe to grind against all three of the victims?" Dan tapped his pen against the arm of his chair when Gordon seemed to drift off again.

"I'm afraid not, officer. It's hard enough keeping track of my own concerns. Even if one of them were in some sort of trouble, I'd hardly

expect them to come to me about it. We were acquaintances, not friends. I do well for myself, but I don't run in those circles."

"What about business ventures? You mentioned some dealings in common?"

"There've been some in the past. I can't say off the top of my head. But I'll be happy to have my assistant provide that information for you."

"That'd be great." Dan handed over his business card. "My email is on there."

Gordon pocketed the card and stood up, a not-so-subtle hint that he was done speaking to them.

"If that's all, I do have another appointment."

"Actually, I have one more question." Dan took a copy of the letter they'd found on Leslie Prescott's desk from his pocket and held it out to Gordon. "Can you explain this?"

Gordon's already wan complexion turned bone-white and his left eye twitched.

"That's not what it seems."

"I hope not, because it sounds like a death threat to me. How about you, Tom?"

"Death threat and blackmail." Reardon crossed his arms and glared.

"No! It was about an investment opportunity. The Prescotts and some others agreed to provide some capital for a deal I'm working on, and…then they changed their minds. I was just telling them this was their last chance."

"And the consequences?"

Gordon mopped at his forehead with a handkerchief.

"They would be cut out of the deal and any chance to make a big profit. That's all, really. I sent those letters days before Roger's death."

"So you sent threatening letters and then people died. Not exactly a point in your favor," Reardon said.

"I swear, I had nothing to do with any murders."

"You said the Prescotts and some others. Collingsworth? Oliver?"

"Er, yes." Gordon's wide-eyed expression showed he understood how bad that made him look.

"Who else?"

"Arnold Smythe, Lawrence Chatham, Lawrence McCullough, Stephen Dorchester. Um…Elton Banks. Thomas Lyons. Clive Pickwick."

Dan repeated the names back to him from his notes.

"Anyone else?"

"No, that's all."

Dan asked for contact information and Gordon said they could get it from his secretary on the way out.

"We're going to check your story with them, you know," Reardon said. "You better hope they back it up."

Gordon looked like he might throw up. He stayed silent as Dan thanked him for his help and he and Reardon headed down the hallway, stopping just long enough to get what they needed from the man at the desk. When they got to the elevator, Reardon started to say something but Dan shook his head and pointed at the camera in the ceiling. Only when they were outside did Dan speak.

"He was lying about that letter."

"Like a snake in a rug. He's hiding something, that's for sure."

Dan unlocked the driver's door.

"But what? He doesn't strike me as the murdering type."

Reardon shrugged. "I don't know. We're missing something. What if we're looking at this the wrong way? Maybe it's got nothing to do with business, legal or illegal. What if it's personal?"

Dan frowned and pulled up the collar of his jacket as the breeze picked up. Reardon's tendency to think outside the box made him a good detective, but this seemed far-fetched. And it was too chilly to stand around discussing it.

"The note specifically mentioned paying him. And he mentioned a business deal. Maybe he's desperate, needs the money to keep his business afloat."

"Most murders involve money or sex. What if he's threatening to expose affairs or something?"

Hearing the word 'affairs' flicked a switch inside Dan's memories and brought his anger bubbling back up like pond gas.

"Fine. How about you go follow your brilliant ideas and I'll do real police work. Call me if you solve the case, Mister Private Eye." Dan got in the car and pulled away from the curb, leaving Reardon on the sidewalk.

Christ. The day's not even half over and it's already ruined. What else—

His phone vibrated against his leg and he jerked in his seat. The screen showed it was Joanna, calling from her office number. He put it on speaker.

"Hello?"

"Dan, you better get over to the lab right now. We've got a problem."

"What?"

"Those cloth samples from the crime scenes? They're gone."



Tom was a block away from Gordon's office and still cursing himself for mentioning the word 'affair' to Dan when he stopped dead in his tracks as a thought popped into his head. A question they should've asked Gordon. He considered texting Dan to come back and then decided his old partner more than likely needed some time to cool off. Better to just do it himself and fill Dan in later.

He doubled back to the club just in time to catch Gordon getting into a waiting limo.

"Mr. Gordon. Sorry to bother you. I had one more question."

Gordon glanced inside the limo, where Tom caught a glimpse of a dark-featured man in a white shirt and pants. A whiff of heavily scented cologne, sickly sweet and full of exotic spices, escaped the car before Gordon shut the door.

"I really do have to be somewhere."

"This will only take a minute, swear on my momma's grave."

"Very well. What is it?"

Reardon pulled out his phone and opened a picture.

"Does this symbol mean anything to you?"

Gordon's eyes went wide and he jerked back with a gasp from the image of the shape branded into Charles Oliver's chest.

"You recognize it?" Reardon asked.

"N-n-no," the aging tycoon said, averting his gaze. "Please, that… get that away from me. Is that one of the victims? I knew…the papers said they were marked…but I didn't realize…how awful."

"So you haven't seen it before?" Tom held the picture up a moment longer and then pocketed the phone.

"I…I can't help you." Gordon climbed into the limousine and slammed the door. Tom watched the car pull into traffic, replaying the man's words in his head.

"The papers said they were marked…."

As far as he knew, none of the news stories had mentioned the branding of the bodies.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Dan sensed an uncomfortable tension in the air the moment he entered the CSU's Hair and Fiber lab.

The admin at the front desk didn't smile as she buzzed him in. Two techs huddled by a polarized-light microscope glanced up from their computer screen and then down again as he walked past. When he got to Joanna's desk, it was empty. Another tech pointed at the glass-walled office of her immediate superior, Dr. Leonard Gray.

Sure enough, both of them were there, and judging from Gray's expression, their day was going about as well as Dan's.

He knocked on the glass and Gray motioned for him to come in. Joanna looked both relieved and upset to see him.

"I got here as soon as I could. What the hell happened?"

"From what I can tell, they just dissolved. There's nothing left but dust, like the powder traces from the crime scenes."

"All of them?"

"Every last one." With his round glasses and longish hair, the middle-aged department head always reminded Dan of a clean-shaven John Lennon. "Even the samples that were vacuum sealed and frozen."

"I had one under the microscope when it happened," Joanna said. "I literally watched it crumble into dust. I went and checked all the others, and the same thing. I can't explain it."

"Great. So we have no evidence from the crimes except empty bullet casings and a damaged video. What the hell am I supposed to tell the captain?"

"The same thing I'll be telling Dr. Ling, right before he tears me a new one."

Dr. Yu Ling ran the NYPD's Evidence Management operations, which handled the evidence rooms of each precinct and the CSU forensics labs, plus any transfers to outside laboratories. A survivor of three mayoral regimes, he'd built the program into one of the premier organizations in the nation, but he also had a hair-trigger temper and demanded perfection at all levels, from department heads down to janitors.

Dan didn't envy Gray's situation.

Not that mine is much better.

"One bit of good news," Joanna said. "I got some preliminary results back from RadioCarb, the lab we use for radiocarbon dating. Their samples dissolved just like ours, but that won't prevent them from performing the actual dating."

"How old is it?"

"They don't have that yet. But they were able to confirm traces of bitumen, pine resin, and natron, a salt used to preserve corpses in ancient Egypt."

"Corpses as in, mummies again?"

"Mummies?" Gray frowned at Joanna over his glasses. "I didn't see anything about mummies in your report."

"I was waiting on lab confirmation. But now we know for sure. That cloth either came from a real Egyptian mummy, or someone went to a lot of trouble to fake it."

"I don't buy it. People don't wrap themselves in mummy cloth to commit murder. There has to be another explanation. Maybe the samples were contaminated."

"If they were, it didn't happen here. And nothing else we collected showed any trace of those chemicals."

Joanna ran her hands through her hair, and Dan noticed for the first time how frazzled she looked. He immediately felt guilty about doubting her, especially in front of her boss.

"Christ." Dan got up and stared out at the lab, where all the techs studiously avoided looking their way. He wished he could pace; he always thought better if he could move around. "Nothing about this case makes sense."

Gray pushed his glasses up and sighed.

"I'll need a full report by the end of the day. For now, let's operate on the assumption that the material's extensive age caused it to deteriorate when exposed to air. Since the same thing happened at RadioCarb, it won't look like we screwed up." He waved them out of the office.

Dan walked with Joanna to her desk.

"Sorry I came down on you like that. I'm just frustrated."

"I get it. Are we still on for later?"

Dan almost asked what she meant, and then remembered. They had an appointment with Dr. Fleck, their marriage counselor.

"Of course. Five o'clock. I'll be there." He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and hurried out. He had three hours before the appointment.

Just enough time to fill in Captain Green and put the exclamation point on his shitty day.



From his bench near the entrance to the Central Park Zoo, Ahmes the Second watched the people passing in and out of the gates and contemplated his next moves.

The moment Gordon got into the limousine, he'd launched into a frantic account of his meeting with the police.

"They had all sorts of questions about Roger and the others. They think I have something to do with the murders."

"Why would they think that?" Ahmes leaned forward. "You didn't reveal anything, did you?"

"No! I said exactly what we agreed on. But they're suspicious. They found out about the letters I sent."

"I warned you it was a stupid thing to do."

"How else was I supposed to get the money we need to buy all the artifacts?" Gordon looked like a baby pig trapped in a pen and ready to flee. Despite building a successful business from practically nothing, deep down he was a frightened little boy.

Just like his ancestor.

Which was why Ahmes was able to use him so easily.

"What is done is done. I expected this would happen at some point, although not so soon."

"What should we do?"

"Nothing, yet. We will wait and see what happens next."

An hour later, Ahmes still pondered their problem. They couldn't afford to let the police get too close. Nor could they risk killing the officers conducting the investigation. In his time, if the King's men sought you, you didn't stand and fight them, you threw them off the trail. Easy enough when you only had to place suspicion on someone else, but with an ushabti involved….

Perhaps there is a way.

A solution that would buy them the time they needed.

Ahmes stood, already considering the items he'd require, and how to utilize them without calling any attention to himself.

In the meanwhile, he'd have to keep a closer eye on Gordon. That one wasn't to be trusted. He was a coward, and cowards had a tendency to switch sides if it meant saving their own skins. Soon, though, his role would be complete.

And the scales would be balanced once more.



Tom Reardon sipped his coffee and glanced at his phone, which sat next to a half-eaten piece of cheesecake. Almost five o'clock and still no word from Dan. With nothing else to do after Dan drove off, he'd gone through the numbers of the other names on the list Gordon had given them. Only one, Elton Banks, was available, and he'd agreed to see them at five-thirty. Tom had left Dan several messages about the meeting.

Fuck it. Either he'll show or he won't. I'm not going to waste the opportunity.

Since he didn't have his car with him, Tom called an Uber and twenty minutes later arrived at Banks's New York office building, two blocks away from ABC-TV's NYC headquarters and right across the

street from Brusso's Pizza, a place he always tried to stop at whenever he was in the neighborhood.

Banks's offices were on the fifteenth floor. When he stepped off the elevator, Tom had a moment of anxiety that without his police ID he wouldn't be allowed to see Banks. But the woman at the desk looked up his name and passed him a visitor tag to clip on his jacket.

"Mr. Banks is waiting for you in his office," she said, pointing. "End of the hall. You can't miss it."

"Thanks." Tom walked past two conference rooms, both empty, and came to a door with a simple silver plate that read 'Elton Banks'.

"Come in," a voice called out in a distinct British accent, before Tom could even knock. He glanced up and saw a tiny security camera above the door.

Inside, a grand view of the Manhattan skyline greeted him. One whole wall was nothing but windows, overlooking Lincoln Plaza and Central Park. At the far end of the room, an L-shaped desk sat in front of a combination bar and bookcase. To either side of it were abstract paintings, which Tom guessed were worth more than his entire apartment building. A long credenza occupied the wall to his left. It held an espresso machine, a printer, and something that stopped him in his tracks.

A statue of the Egyptian god Anubis, about two feet tall and made of shining gold, with red jewels for eyes.

"Mr. Reardon. Please, have a seat." Elton Banks stood behind his desk. Balding, about five-six, with the red nose and cheeks of someone who enjoyed their booze maybe a bit too much, he still conveyed a sense of power that had more to do with self-confidence than the expensive suit he wore or the trappings of his office. His accent made Tom think of gentlemen sitting in high-backed chairs discussing big game hunting or the latest opera over tea and cake.

"Thank you." Tom shook Banks's hand, which had a distinctly clammy feel to it.

"How might I be of assistance today? Or should we wait for your partner to arrive?"

"No, I don't think he'll be joining us. But I really only have a few questions."

"By all means." Banks sat down and leaned forward.

"That statue." Tom gestured toward the Anubis idol. "Where did you get it?"

"That? It's been in my family for generations. My great-grandfather was quite the collector of antiquities."

"I'll bet. Tell me, how well did you know Roger Collingsworth?"

"Roger? Very well. Charles and Shaun, also. Our families go way back. Comrades and school chums, even some marriages."

"What?" Tom took out his phone and placed it on the desk. "I wasn't aware of that. Do you mind if I record this, so my partner can hear it later?"

Banks's eyes narrowed, giving him a piggish look.

"Is this an interrogation?"

Tom gave him his best smile, one that had been known to put even experienced criminals at ease.

"Not at all. More like we need your help. We're trying to find a common denominator for the murders, and this is the first I'm hearing that the victims might all have known each other on a personal level, rather than just through business."

"Known each other? Oh, I'd say much more than that."

"Go on."

"As I said, our families are close. Have been, for ages. We all grew up together, as did our fathers, and their fathers. Our great-grandfathers served in the military together, but they were friends even before that. They were part of a group of young, affluent socialites. Cream of the crop back when being wealthy actually meant something. It's not the same now as then, of course. The world's changed, people move about. But I daresay we're still closer than most."

"You said some of your ancestors served together."

"Quite so. They were in the same regiment."

"Isn't that unusual?"

"Not for that time. It was quite common for well-to-do families to

send their sons away for military training and service. Make men out of them, don't you know." Banks's voice took on a comically nasal high-society tone, then returned to normal. "Families paid plenty to make sure their sons held an officer's rank. More like diplomatic positions than actual military service. No fighting in the trenches for those blokes, right? More like a private club. Probably spent more time drinking tea and going on safari than actually engaging with the enemy. Got to travel quite a bit, too. See the world. India, Africa, Egypt. Beastly places back then, but young lads are always up for an adventure. Had a few adventures of my own, when I was that age. Although I never served."

"Egypt? Is that where your great-grandfather acquired his antiquities?"

"Some of them, surely. He picked up things from all over the world. Amassed a small fortune doing it, which no doubt helped him expand the family business globally. I'm quite sure he sold more than he kept. And he kept a lot."

"Can you give me the names of those other families? The ones you still have regular communications with?"

"Absolutely." Banks took out a piece of paper and wrote a series of names on it. "Here you go. Is there anything else you need?"

Tom thought for a moment. His mind kept coming back to the statue, Egypt, and mummies. Instinct told him to follow that idea, but it was so far out that if Banks went back to Dan, or Captain Green, he might find himself tossed off the case. He'd have to tread carefully.

"By any chance, have you received any threatening letters lately? Perhaps from a Henry Gordon?"

"Gordon!" Banks's face turned red and he pushed his chair back until it hit the bar behind him. "Bloody hell. I should have listened to Thomas and just paid the bastard. I still might."

Banks poured himself a drink. Downed it, poured another, and drank that. After pouring a third, he regained his composure and returned to his chair. The harsh, medicinal smell of vodka drifted over to Tom.

"Mr. Banks, can you please—"

"Yes, yes, I have it right here." He opened a drawer and fumbled around, mumbling under his breath. "Ah, here we go."

Banks slid over a plain manila envelope with his name printed on the front. There was no return address. It had already been opened, but Tom took no chances. Using his sleeve, he covered his hand while removing the plain white piece of paper inside, so as not to add any other fingerprints.

The note contained one sentence, typed in caps in the middle of the page.

YOU WILL FINALLY PAY FOR THE SINS OF YOUR ANCESTORS

"Wait, this is the letter you received?"

Banks frowned. "Yes. Isn't that what you asked?"

"No. A letter from Henry Gordon. About a last chance or suffering the consequences."

"Oh. Yes, I got that one, too. We all did. But only Thomas and Clive took it seriously. The rest of us decided Henry could go to hell. Now look what's happened. We never thought Gordon would have the stones."

"So you all received two letters?" Tom asked. Gordon replied that they had. Tom placed the letter and envelope on the desk and snapped several pictures of them with his phone. Then he called the CSU lab.

"This is Det— This is Tom Reardon, I'm working the Collingsworth case with Detective Reese. I need a couple of your techs at Thirty-One West Sixty-Fifth, fifteenth floor, the office of Elton Banks. I've got a letter I need bagged and printed. The full works."

Turning back to Gordon, he asked, "When did this one arrive?"

"I believe yesterday morning. By messenger."

"And you didn't think to call the police?"

Banks sipped at his vodka before answering.

"As I said, we didn't believe Gordon's threat. Who bloody cares what someone's forefathers did?"

Tom shook his head.

"I'm confused. So this isn't about investing in some deal Gordon was brokering?"

"It is, and it isn't." Banks finished his drink, seemed to consider

pouring another, and then slid the glass aside. "Gordon claims our great-grandfathers fleeced his family out of millions. Said he had proof, and if we didn't each give him five million dollars, he was going to initiate legal action, plus he would make public certain family secrets, scandalous ones. Bad for business, bad for our personal reputations. Seven of us told him to bugger off, but Clive Pickwick and Thomas Lyons paid him."

"Why would they do that?"

"They were afraid he might be telling the truth. Back in the day, his family was part of the social circle in England. He could very well know some things. Personally, I wasn't worried about what happened in Victorian times. Let him talk. People today won't care."

"You believe his claims?"

"There's always been animosity between the Gordons and the rest of us, going back decades. Who knows what the real reasons are?"

"Animosity for what?"

Banks threw up his hands. "How the bloody hell should I know? I come from a long line of tycoons, which back then also meant thieves, brigands, and even murderers. In my grandsire's day, the wealthy of England enslaved people, raped lands of their natural resources, and took over entire countries. We were no different than any other colonial power, including the good old US of A. All in the name of the Queen, and I'll take my share, thank you. I'm sure my great-grandfather, William, and my grandfather, also a William, were guilty of all sorts of things. Now it's all cybercrimes and intellectual property theft."

"So where does Henry Gordon fit into all of this?" Tom felt like he'd been given a puzzle with only half the pieces. Which made it hard to figure out the right questions to ask.

Banks snorted.

"The man's a pompous fool. A blowhard of the tenth degree with a real chip on his shoulder because of this supposed family feud that goes back generations. His father was the same way. Give it a rest, sport, I've told him more than once, but he's insanely jealous despite having done well for himself. Not like the rest of us, to be sure, but he's not crying poverty."

"So he's not part of your circle?"

"I most certainly wouldn't call him a friend. More like a distant cousin who only comes around at funerals and when they need money."

"Do you think he's capable of murder?"

Banks looked pensive. "I never would have thought so, but now…I don't know. Not with his own hands. But perhaps he's gone off the deep end and hired someone."

A hidden speaker chimed behind Banks's desk.

"Yes?" he said to the air.

"There are two police officers here." Tom recognized the voice of the woman at the main desk.

"Send them in."

Tom moved away from the desk to give the CSUs space. He indicated the letter and envelope.

"I didn't touch it, but Mr. Banks here did, along who knows how many others. See what you can get off it, and have Joanna Reese examine it for traces of the powder that was found at the murder scenes."

One of the techs eyed him, just long enough for Tom to think he might object to taking orders from a civilian, but the other one just nodded and said, "Yes, sir."

While the techs worked, Tom read the list Banks had given him. As he expected, it exactly matched the names Gordon had provided.

"If you think of anything else, call me right away," he said, handing Banks his card. "And if I were you, I'd double up on your security and tell your friends to do the same."

As he left, he heard Banks doing just that.

He remembered the other victims and wondered if it would be enough.

CHAPTER NINE

The Egyptian Cultural Museum was smaller than Tom expected, but just as creepy.

Marble floors amplified every sound yet somehow the place maintained an atmosphere of quiet that encouraged whispering. Statues of weird creatures, half-human and half-animal, stood guard over glass cases filled with jewelry, personal items, and weapons. Tom recognized some of the idols: Anubis the jackal god, Bastet the cat-headed deity. Others he didn't know. Men and women with the heads of bulls, crocodiles, and hawks, a woman with a giant sun over her head, a green-skinned man with a giant hat and an ornate staff.

The dim glow of the after-hours lighting muted the shine of the gold and jewels, almost as if the patina of centuries had covered it again, and the shadows seemed alive with movement. Hints of ancient spices and desert sand lingered in the air.

"Hello, Tom."

He turned at the sound of Stacy Greer's voice. She stood at the entrance to one of the exhibit halls. The guard who'd let Tom in nodded to her and walked off to continue his rounds.

A rush of memories came over Tom. She looked exactly the same as she had more than a year ago. Her straightened hair cut to just above her shoulders, with streaks of purple running through the jet black. Back when they'd been dating, the highlights were red. In the subdued lighting, her normally dusky skin appeared almost milk chocolate, and her upturned eyes were two pieces of cold, emotionless obsidian.

They'd been filled with fire the last time he saw her.

Standing in Dan's living room, clutching her clothes to her chest while Dan shouted at Tom to get the hell out and take his whore with him….

She'd broken up with him not long after that, the second punch of a one-two combination that left him staggering and lost, without his best friend and the woman he'd been falling in love with.

"Hey. You look good." He immediately regretted his words. What if she took them the wrong way? They hadn't spoken since the day she told him to stop calling and lose her number.

"You, too," she said, with a hint of a smile. That eased his worries a bit.

"So, you got the job." She'd been on the waiting list for the assistant curator position back when they'd been together. At the time, she'd been working as a research assistant for the New York Historical Society, but her goal had always been to work at the Museum of Natural History. The Egyptian Cultural Museum was a good stepping-stone.

"Yeah. Right after we…about a year ago." They both pretended not to notice her slip as she led him down a corridor to her office, a small space almost entirely occupied by a desk and a table, both littered with papers and drawings. "They got some major funding, expanded into this new building, and hired several people, including me, to oversee the added exhibits."

"That's great." Tom paused, unsure of what to say next. Luckily, she came to his rescue.

"You said you needed help with something related to a case."

"I do. I'm working on the Ragman murders as a special liaison to the police. Long story short, I got hired by Leslie Prescott to find out who killed her husband, and she pulled some strings."

"Leslie Prescott? But wasn't she one of the victims?"

He nodded. "Yep. Right after I took the job. Now I'm waist deep in it."

"And you're helping the cops?" Stacy's eyebrows shot up. "Wait. I saw Dan interviewed on TV about that case. Are you working with him again?"

"Sort of. It's complicated." The conversation was veering into an area he'd hoped to avoid. Or even think about, considering Dan still hadn't returned any messages.

"Wow. Well, good for you. So, what can I do?"

Glad to be able to change the subject from his old partner, he placed a picture of Shaun Prescott's chest on her desk. To her credit, she didn't flinch.

"This symbol was burned into the chest of three of the victims." He tapped the circle with the five lines in it. "Chad Driscoll thinks it's got something to do with voodoo or gangs. But we've got evidence that there might be some kind of Egyptian connection. I was wondering…."

"If I recognized it from Egyptian mythology."

"Right."

"You know, you could just do a reverse image search."

"I tried. The results were all over the place, from ancient African languages to video game characters to emblems for a university in Egypt that has no connection to our victims. I'm hoping you can narrow it down for me and save me a few dozen hours of work."

"Lucky me." Stacy smiled to take the sting out of her words. "Wait here. I'll go grab a book that might help."

Tom watched as she left the office. She looked damn good in tight jeans and a plain black sweater, just the right amount of curves, and he couldn't help flashing back to the last time he'd seen her undressed.

Joanna and Stacy in their bras and panties, standing next to each other. Light and dark, like two sides of the most beautiful coin in the world….

"Found it."

He shook away the image of that night as she set an enormous book on her worktable. He caught the title before she opened it. *Egyptian Symbology and Theosophical Practices.*

"It does look familiar," she murmured, flipping through the pages. "Something about…yes! It's the symbol of Seba."

Stacy spun the book around so he could see. Dozens of symbols and drawings covered the page, some of them familiar. The cross-shaped ankh, the Eye of Horus, a scarab beetle. Sitting among them was a simple five-lined pattern, like a star, only this one didn't have the circle around it.

"What's it mean?"

"According to this, it represents a star, and it's patterned after the starfish. It can also signify star-gods, or a doorway."

"That's it?"

"Yeah. But if you give me some time, I might be able to find out more."

"Thanks, that'd be great."

She closed the book and an awkward silence followed. There were so many things Tom wanted to say. How sorry he was over what happened. How everything was his fault.

He couldn't do it.

"Okay, so, um, I guess you'll call me when you have something?"

"I will." She seemed relieved that he didn't try to get personal. Neither of them spoke while she walked him back to the main exit, where they had to wait for the guard to unlock the doors.

"Thanks again. It was great seeing you." He leaned forward to hug her, and she stepped back, offering her hand instead. He gave it a quick shake and let go.

"Good night, Tom."

"Yeah. Good night." He left, not looking back, wondering if she was watching or she'd already put his visit out of her mind. His car was parked a block away, and after he got in, he sat behind the wheel for a moment.

First Dan Reese, then Joanna, and now Stacy. I wish I'd never taken this case.

As he pulled away from the curb, he shook his head.

He never could lie to himself.



"…Hear me, Ushabti Akil Ahmose

I call you to do my bidding

And rid the world of the one who stands in my way, he who is named Tom Reardon.

Send him to the Duat and reap the favor Sokar will bestow on you for your gracious offering of this unworthy Ka."

Henry Gordon lit the paper on fire and watched it burn. The priest would no doubt be pissed that he'd used the spell for something other than what they'd agreed on, but Reardon had to go. He was getting too close to the truth, with his questions about the connections between the victims and the letters Henry had sent. It wouldn't take much poking around to discover Gordon's involvement with the Egyptian Cultural Museum and the Osiris exhibit he'd funded.

And from there, a money trail with more than a few holes in it.

He couldn't afford to let that happen. All they needed was a week or two more. Then the deaths would stop, his money would be safe and secure offshore, and there'd be a dead Egyptian to take the fall for everything.

Just a few more days….



His hands shook as he lifted the spell sheet.

What if something goes wrong?

In theory, the idea had seemed simple enough. The instructions for the spell were clear. Take a bath, light a few candles. Stick his finger with a pin. Read the words. Piece of cake. The old man had done it three times; it couldn't be that dangerous.

Except he planned on changing something.

What would that mean for the spell? There were no warnings in the instructions, nothing saying "Do not try this at home!" It just said to fill in the name of the intended target in the blank spot, read the spell, and then burn it. And to always read the spell after night has fallen, never in the daylight.

Definitely simple. Except maybe, too simple? A death spell kind of implied dire consequences just by its very existence. Say the words wrong, what would happen? He'd read the papers, the descriptions of the deaths. Those fuckers had been torn apart by something, the same something he was about to contact. He sure as shit didn't want to end up like that. And the instructions didn't say a thing about what happened after he said the

spell. Did the ushabti thingy appear before him? When you called on a demon, weren't you supposed to stand inside a pentagram, or a circle of salt, for protection? Did he have to give it orders? Or was just saying the person's name all it needed?

Three times. And nothing bad has happened to him.

That had a calming effect. If the old bastard hadn't gotten himself killed, it had to be safe. And the instructions probably said to just use one name because whoever wrote the spell never thought ahead. Save time, save money. Something his Economics teacher liked to say. Why keep repeating a process when you didn't have to? Streamline workflows, maximize efficiency.

"Fuck it."

He took a deep breath and started reading the words he'd spent all afternoon carefully rewriting.

"Hear me now, Ushabti Akil Ahmose

Hear me from the depths of the Underworld

The time has come for you to leave your chains behind and rise again

Hear me, Ushabti Akil Ahmose

I have need of your service

Hear me, Ushabti Akil Ahmose

I call you to do my bidding

And rid the world of any who stand in my way or mean me harm, when I speak their names to you

Send them to the Duat and reap the favor Sokar will bestow on you for your gracious offering of this unworthy Ka."

He dropped the burning spell to the tile floor of the bathroom and watched it burn. When five minutes passed, then ten, and nothing happened, he let out a sigh of relief and headed to the kitchen. Time to grab a beer and test out the spell.

Tonight, someone would die.

And he knew exactly who it would be.

The sonofabitch who'd ratted him out to security.

"Dennis Benton must die."

With a smile, Peter Gordon chugged his beer and prepared to wait.



"Tom Reardon."

Tom instinctively reached for his gun at the sound of his name being spoken in the dusty confines of the parking garage. The guttural whisper held a distinct sense of menace that made the hairs on his neck stand up.

He turned and barely managed to duck away as massive arms reached for him. His attacker stood seven feet tall with a football player's build. Cloth wrappings covered it completely except for the eyes and mouth, which were black holes that somehow burned with an evil, opalescent hue.

A mummy! Tom's heart raced as the empty sockets followed his movements. In that instant, everything about the case became clear. The evidence, the mutilation of the bodies, the impossible video footage. They'd been searching for human criminals while the truth lay in the supernatural realm.

"Tom Reardon." Its voice was gravel and sand, bass notes and whispers. Dread gripped Tom with icy fingers, filled him with a fear worse than anything he'd ever experienced while on the job. The monster came at him again and he tried to dodge but its hand caught him across the shoulder and sent him flying. His gun landed several feet away. He rolled sideways as a heavy foot slammed the cement next to his head. He snatched up his pistol and from his back put three rounds into the barrel-sized chest.

The mummy never slowed.

Iron-hard fingers gripped his arms with bruising force and lifted him up. He shouted for help, imagining the creature tearing his limbs away, like the other victims. He squeezed the trigger twice more and the pressure on his biceps increased. All feeling left his arms and the gun fell from his numb fingers.

The mummy tossed him through the air as if he weighed nothing. He hit the side of a parked car and his head smacked the cement. The shrill yowl of the car's alarm echoed through the garage and exploding

stars filled his vision. When they cleared, the mummy stood over him, one arm reaching down, fingers spread wide. Tom tried to move but his body refused to obey.

Then the mummy paused.

It looked up as if it heard something, and then exploded into a mass of gray ribbons. The cloth strips flew around in a circle before disappearing, leaving only a few scraps that slowly settled to the ground.

Sucking in air, Tom tried to stand but his legs buckled. The garage spun crazily and grew darker. The alternating wail and screech of the alarm faded into the distance.

Just like his attacker, everything disappeared.

CHAPTER TEN

The jangle of a cell phone going off jolted Dan from his first sound sleep in days, thanks to a glass of wine and a Xanax with dinner. He fumbled on the nightstand for his work phone, which showed Chad Driscoll's name.

"Reese. What is it?"

"You might wanna get your lazy butt over to twenty-five seventy-two Steinway Avenue in Astoria. Looks like someone got our guy before we did."

"What?" Dan jumped out of bed. "They caught him?"

"Sort of. Sonofabitch is dead. Wait 'til you see it. You'll love this."

Driscoll hung up. Dan looked at the clock. Two-fifteen. How had Driscoll learned about the murder and gotten there and Dan hadn't even gotten a call?

"Who was that?" Joanna rolled over as Dan grabbed his pants.

"Driscoll. He said they found him. The Ragman. And he's dead."

"Where?"

"Fucking Queens. I swear, if this is his idea of a joke, I'll kill him." Except they both knew Driscoll wasn't the joking type.

Why didn't anyone call me?

That bugged him more than anything.

"I'll call you later," he said, giving her a quick kiss.

"What about Tom?"

He was glad she couldn't see his face in the dark.

"If this closes the case, then he's not part of it anymore and he can go back to whatever rock he's been living under. I just want our lives to go back to normal again."

He was out the door before she could respond.

★ ★ ★

The crime scene turned out to be an apartment over a hookah bar in the section of Astoria known as Little Egypt.

"Neighbors didn't hear a thing," a uniformed officer said when Dan reached the top of the stairs. His name tag read 'Brian Matthews'. "Nine-one-one got an anonymous call for Detective Driscoll saying the Ragman was here. Around the same time, the guy in the apartment under this one noticed a red liquid running down the water pipe and came up to say something. The door was ajar so he walked in. Found the body and called it in. That's him." Matthews pointed to a man sitting on a threadbare couch, his eyes glazed with shock and his face pale underneath a long, thick beard and mustache. His loose-fitting white robe and matching knit hat identified him as Muslim. A uniformed officer was taking his statement.

"Where's the vic?" Dan asked.

Matthews handed him a pair of paper booties.

"Bathroom. It's a doozy."

Dan slipped on the shoe coverings and a pair of latex gloves and made his way to the bathroom, where a CSU was busy taking pictures. He peered over the woman's shoulder.

The body lay on cracked, mildewed tile that looked like it hadn't been cleaned in decades. Dan's first impression was of an elderly man. Gaunt, the skin so tight and thin he could count the bones. Brittle, lifeless hair. A mouth hanging open in a silent scream. Eyes bulging in terror. Both arms were broken at the elbows and bent away from the body, and the legs stuck out sideways at the knees. A huge gash ran across his throat, exposing the blood vessels and esophagus. Just above the navel, someone had carved three crossed lines, creating what looked like a giant asterisk. Blood covered the floor. Between the tub and toilet, an insulated pipe ran up and down through all the levels of the building. Dan assumed that was where the blood had leaked into the other apartment.

"We got an ID on him?" Dan asked.

"Bahaman Ibrahaim," answered one of the techs. "Age thirty-two. Employment status unknown. Lives here alone."

"Nice of you to stop by, Pieces." Driscoll's voice caused an acid surge in Dan's already sour stomach.

"I could've been here a lot sooner if someone had called me. How do we know this is our guy?" Dan knew something was going on from Driscoll's shit-eating grin, but he forced himself to focus on the case for now. Time enough later to find out why he'd been excluded.

"Bedroom. See for yourself."

Driscoll led the way to an adjoining room, where dozens of yellow crime scene markers decorated the floor and furniture. Dan paused in the doorway to take it all in. A single bed, more of a cot really, with rumpled sheets. Packets of heroin and bills of various denominations were scattered on the floor around an overturned snack tray. To Dan's practiced eye, it had all the hallmarks of a deal gone bad. The killer knocked the dealer out in the bedroom, dragged him into the bathroom, and worked him over before killing him.

Except the rest of the scene didn't add up.

On the floor was a portable hibachi, the kind used by sports fans for tailgating. Next to it were two metal rods, one bent at the base to make an L-shape, the other crudely formed into a circle at one end. A cardboard box sat against the wall, overflowing with strips of yellowish-gray cloth. Nearby was a saw with a rectangular blade, the jagged teeth coated in brick-colored flakes Dan knew would come back as blood.

"Looks like I was right," Driscoll said. "Voodoo. Well, Egyptian voodoo. That's your mummy killer."

When Dan just looked at him, he pointed at the box.

"The mummy. Stolen from a museum is my best guess."

"You mean…?"

"Those ain't just rags, them's pieces, Pieces." Driscoll laughed at his own wordplay. "All broken up and shoved in there. The perp must've brought a few strips to each crime scene and left 'em there as a warning. Or 'cause he was nuts. Or both."

"This doesn't make sense." Dan glanced around again. He'd only

taken a quick look at the body, but the dead man didn't seem nearly large enough to take out armed guards and dismember people.

"From what we can tell, some Egyptian gang decided to extort a bunch of billionaires. They sent out threatening letters. That scumbag out there was supposed to scare them with mumbo jumbo, but instead he went all psycho and killed them. Then his buddies offed him because of it. They're probably halfway back to the desert by now."

Dan shook his head.

"We know Henry Gordon sent the letters. Why would he be working with an Egyptian gang? And how did some low-life heroin dealer not only manage to remove the victims' heads and limbs, but sneak in and out of all the crime scenes with a grill?"

Driscoll shrugged. "Who knows? Could be drug smuggling, arms dealing, anything. Doesn't really matter anymore. The guy's dead, case closed except of a shitload of paperwork, which means mucho overtime. We'll look into Gordon, but Queens takes over from here. You can thank your fuck buddy, Reardon. The note he got from Elton Banks matched the one on this guy's computer."

"Elton Banks? A note? When was this?" Dan felt like he'd been tossed into a whirlpool, with bits of information flying past him too fast to grab.

"Yesterday. He reported it to CSU. The other letter. You mean, he left you out of the loop, too?" Driscoll laughed again, this time with an edge of cruelty that told Dan exactly who was responsible for him not getting called to the scene earlier. But Tom? Why would he—

Shit.

Dan pulled out his phone. His personal one. He'd turned it off the previous day after blowing up at Tom because he needed a break. Then he and Joanna had their appointment with Dr. Fleck and after that they'd gone to dinner and he hadn't turned the phone back on because he didn't want them getting interrupted….

Shit. Shit, shit, shit!

Five text messages and two missed calls from Tom Reardon.

Who didn't have his work phone number, which had changed a few months after Tom left the force.

He quickly scrolled through the messages.

Reardon: Hey, I don't know what your problem is but we've still got a case to run. I'm going to grab lunch and then head over to Elton Banks's office.

Reardon: Dude, where are you? I'm at Banks's. I guess I'll just talk to him on my own.

Reardon: All right, you need to answer your texts or listen to your messages. Banks got a letter two weeks before the first murder, threatening his life. Different than the one Gordon told us about. I already had CSU pick it up. Call me!

Reardon: What the hell? Are you being a dick on purpose?

Reardon: I'm going to meet Stacy tonight to see if she can identify that symbol on the victims' chests. I think there might be some kind of Egyptian angle to this. I'll let you know tomorrow what I find out.

Damn. Reardon had been right about the Egyptian connection. And if the letter Banks received really matched the one they found in Ibrahaim's computer, then maybe he was their guy.

And because Ibrahaim's murder occurred in Queens, they'd take over the case.

He should've been happy. No more locked-room murders. No more catching hell from Captain Green for not solving the case fast enough. Most importantly, no more dealing with Tom Reardon.

So why the acid churning in his guts?

Because the whole thing stinks. That's your spider sense tingling, as Tom liked to say. The facts don't add up.

A hand came down on his shoulder. Driscoll, still wearing his smarmy grin.

"I'm heading to the station to start my report. You can stick around if you want, but as far as I'm concerned this is done with. By lunchtime, it'll be all over the papers that we found our killer. Green'll love it and we'll have our ten minutes of fame. And maybe you and your sweetheart can celebrate with a nice bottle of wine and your wife."

Trailing laughter that sent daggers into Dan's brain, Driscoll walked off.

Yet even in his anger, Dan couldn't stop the thought echoing in his head.

Something's wrong and you know it.

Hearing it in Tom's voice only made things worse.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Jesus, what a day."

Dan plopped himself into the booth across from Joanna, gave her a kiss, then leaned back with a sigh. His eyes burned from lack of sleep, and a combination of exhaustion and stress had every muscle aching like an oncoming case of the flu. He still wore the same clothes he'd left the apartment in that morning, which were also the ones he'd worn the day before, and he knew he must reek under his jacket.

After spending some time questioning the witness and examining the body again before the coroner's team bagged it, he'd gone to the precinct, where Driscoll had actually completed his report and left it on Dan's desk. As much as Dan hated to admit it, the report connected enough dots that he had no doubt Captain Green would consider the case basically done and over. Sure enough, when Green came in an hour later, he'd read the report and immediately scheduled a press conference for ten a.m. Then he'd called the chief and given him the good news that soon the mayor would be breathing down someone else's neck.

Keeping to protocol, Green did all the speaking to the media, while Dan and Driscoll stood to one side. Green spared a few words to praise his detectives for their hard work and dedication before moving on to the standard bullshit about the NYPD never resting until criminals were brought to justice, blah, blah, blah. No one had heard from Reardon and the captain didn't mention him. Driscoll spent the whole fifteen minutes grinning like he'd just won the lottery. The OT would probably pay for a new car or maybe a jacuzzi for the Florida house, and it might even mean a promotion for his final year, which would bump up his retirement.

For Dan, it took a supreme effort to keep from grimacing. The nagging doubts about the case hadn't gone away. He'd even gone to see

Green before the conference and recommended postponing any public statements until they could thoroughly investigate what he'd come to believe was a setup. Except he had no proof to back up his hunch and Green loudly informed him he wasn't going to make any decisions based on gut feelings.

"Bring me evidence. That's what Driscoll did. Shit, even Reardon did. The blood on the saw is human, although the DNA was ruined by some kind of cleaning solution. The wording of the two notes is exactly the same. We have the nine-one-one call that specifically mentions the Ragman. Hell, according to Driscoll, it was your idea that the video was faked as part of an inside job. And those mummy parts? We think they came from the Egyptian Cultural Museum. There was a break in and a murder there last year. Everything fits."

After the conference ended, Dan returned to his desk and found a mile-high stack of paperwork waiting for him. In no mood to deal with it, he'd called Joanna and asked her to meet him for lunch. Then he'd showered in the locker room and changed back into his same stinking clothes before heading out to meet her.

"I have a great idea," Joanna said, after Dan ordered a soda, burger, and fries from the waitress. "We've both got time coming. Why don't we get away for a few days? We can go upstate, or maybe Connecticut. Stay in a little bed and breakfast. Forget all this and just relax."

Dan rubbed his eyes. A vacation sounded damn good, even if only for a long weekend.

"I—"

"Oh, look. It's the hero of the day. I hear the case is closed. Too bad I had to find out from the TV."

Tom Reardon stood next to their table, looking angrier than Dan had ever seen him.

"I was going to call you, but it all caught me by surprise, too." The excuse sounded lame to Dan as he said it, and the startled look Joanna gave him added to his guilt. She probably thought Tom was in the loop the whole time. He hadn't told her about them not speaking since the previous day.

Great. Another chance for her to take his side.

"You realize it's all bullshit, right? I'm not surprised that lazy fuck Driscoll can't see it. But you?"

"I told Green there were aspects of the case that didn't add up, but he didn't care. No proof, he said. But you and Driscoll gave him exactly what he needed."

"Me?" Tom reached down to snag a fry off Dan's plate but Dan slid it away.

"Yeah. The letter Banks received. CSU found an identical one in the victim's computer. And he used a stolen mummy to plant traces at the crime scenes. So there's your Egyptian angle."

"You wanna know the real Egyptian angle?" Tom pulled up his sweatshirt, exposing a purple bruise that ran all the way down his arm and across his back. "I spent most of last night in the emergency room because of it."

"What happened?" Joanna came half out of her seat. "Are you okay?"

"As well as can be expected after getting attacked by a mummy." Tom lowered his shirt. "A real one. An honest-to-fucking-God mummy. Right in my parking garage."

"Jesus, are you drunk again?" Dan stood up, frustration and anger and resentment finally boiling over and he didn't care. It felt good to release it. "There's no such thing as living mummies. You got mugged, sorry to hear it. But the case is closed. We don't have to pretend we're partners anymore. You can go back to your pathetic life and maybe get your head checked out while you're at it. 'Cause you sound crazy. Just leave us the hell alone."

Dan sat down, his chest heaving, and focused his eyes on his plate. Joanna's gaze lay heavy on him, and he knew the other diners around them had to be staring as well, because the whole place had gone quiet.

After a moment, Tom spoke, his voice quiet and filled with hurt.

"Maybe you're done, but I'm not. I know what I saw. I wasn't drinking. That mark on the victims' chests? It's an ancient Egyptian symbol."

"Good luck with that. You and your whore can go play with your

magic symbols and have fun with your wild-goose chases while some of us do real police work."

"Does this look like a goose chase?" Tom dropped a clear sandwich bag on the table. Inside it were several pieces of gray cloth. "I managed to grab that before I blacked out. The mummy left it behind. I'll bet your badge it's a match to the other crime scenes. I think you police officers call that evidence, but what do I know?"

Tom turned and headed for the exit, leaving a heavy silence in his wake. Dan watched him walk out the doors and, he prayed, out of their lives forever.

He looked over and found Joanna staring at him. With tears running down her cheeks.

She didn't say a word for the rest of lunch.



Ahmes the Second turned off the television and smiled. Everything had worked out exactly as he'd hoped. Thanks to Gordon getting him a special guest historian position at the museum, he had unlimited access to what he needed, not just to place the blame for the ushabti's murders on a stranger, but to locate all of the items stolen from his temple. Some in private collections, some in museums. But all available at the right price. A price Gordon was more than willing to pay, in return for his life.

Now, with the police focusing all their efforts in the wrong places, he could finish his work in this accursed country. Once the stolen artifacts were back in place, his shame for allowing the violation in the first place, and the subsequent disgrace it had brought to Sokar's name in the Underworld, would be lifted. He would return home as a hero in Sokar's eyes and regain his rightful place as high priest.

Soon Ra would close his eye for another day and darkness would claim the world. Another would die, as planned. And while he felt certain Gordon suspected nothing about his ultimate goal, he knew he must tread carefully. Gordon's ancestor had been a viper, unpredictable and not worthy of trust.

He must be prepared for any possibilities.

But first, he must feed.



"…seventeen-year-old Dennis Benton has been found in Central Park. Benton, a student at Green Mountain Boys School in Vermont home for spring break, has been missing for two days. Park workers discovered the body in the bushes alongside a bridge in the Ramble, near a pond. One of the workers described it as the most horrible thing he'd ever seen. In other news, the body of an unidentified man was discovered near the Henry Hudson Parkway. Police say the corpse displayed advanced putrefaction and may have been there all winter. No—"

Tom Reardon turned the TV off. The world was going to shit in a handbasket, as his gram used to say, and most days it seemed like nothing anyone did could stop it. More and more, he was glad he'd left the force. Cuts in funding, entire neighborhoods turning anti-cop, it was getting tougher every day to be on the streets. He knew officers who'd had entire toaster ovens or coffee pots dropped on them from the tops of buildings. One escaped with bruises, the other ended up going out on permanent disability from her injuries.

Then there'd been the whole uproar about police brutality and bad practices. Were there bad cops? Sure. There were rotten apples in every job, if you took the time to look. Cops who took bribes, who targeted minorities, who had anger issues. People expected other cops to turn them in. All well and good – he hated bad cops as much as anyone – but the infrastructure of the NYPD made it so damn hard. Whistleblowers got the shaft, lost postings and overtime, or even their jobs. And if you tried to do it anonymously, as he and Dan had done more than once, nothing ever came of it. Eventually, you had three choices – give up your career, learn to live with it, or transfer to a different precinct.

In his case, the decision had been taken out of his hands. And while it had been a terrible time in his life, he had to admit his stress level had gone down. A lot. The money wasn't as good, but not having to worry about dying every day made going to bed at night a helluva lot easier.

In fact, the only thing he really missed was having a best friend.

No, not just any friend. Dan Reese.

"Jesus Christ, Reardon," he told himself. "Stop living in the past. Move on. You've got bigger worries."

Like, how in hell could something like a living mummy even exist? More importantly, how did you stop it?

His phone rang and he jumped. Stacy's name showed on the screen.

"Hey."

"Tom, can you come down to the museum? I found something out about the mark of Seba. I think it might be important."

Tom hesitated. Stacy had no idea the mummy existed and that it had attacked him. If he told her, she might think he was crazy, the way Dan did. Or worse, the mummy might go after her next. But if kept silent, and something happened later….

Shit. Why can't life ever be easy?

"I'll be there in half an hour."

"Great." She hung up, and Tom stared at the phone for a moment. Was he doing the right thing? The smart thing?

Only one way to find out.

He grabbed his jacket and keys and headed for the door.

★ ★ ★

The final minutes of dusk provided a purple-and-violet-streaked backdrop to the Manhattan skyline when Tom arrived at the museum. Stacy stood by the doors while a swarthy, Middle Eastern man in a blue guard's uniform unlocked them. The name Mahmoud was stenciled over his breast pocket. After they were inside, he locked the doors behind them. Hints of an exotic, spicy cologne drifted through the air. Tom couldn't tell if it came from the guard or if it was something from one of the exhibits.

"What's with the security escort?" he asked, as they headed for her office.

"You didn't hear?" Her eyes were bloodshot and her hair stuck out in random angles, as if she'd just woken from a nap. "They think the mummy wrappings from your Ragman case came from this museum. A break-in that happened last year. A mummy that was on display got stolen and one of the guards murdered. So they've beefed up security in case of vandals or copycats."

The thought of other mummies in the building had Tom wondering if the one that attacked him had come from there also. He found himself glancing in all directions as they walked, half expecting one of the exhibits to come alive. The museum held a much more sinister air than the last time he'd been there, and the idea of ancient curses coming to life no longer seemed like a silly plot for a Syfy Channel movie.

They sat down on either side of her desk and Stacy set a folder between them. Before she could open it, Tom stopped her.

"I need to tell you something."

She frowned.

"Tom, please don't bring up the past. I agreed to—"

"This isn't about us. It's about the case. But I want you to keep an open mind. What I'm going to say…I don't even know yet if I believe it."

"You're kind of scaring me, but okay."

"I'm scared myself." He paused, trying to decide how to explain without coming across as a complete psycho. "Last night…something happened when I got home."

Using as few words as possible, he detailed the attack. When he described the mummy, Stacy's eyes went wide but she didn't say anything until he finished.

"Why the hell didn't you call me?"

"I was fine. Nothing broken, just some bruises. The police took my statement and the hospital let me leave."

"You didn't mention the mummy?"

Tom gave a half-hearted laugh.

"Of course not. You think I'm stupid? They'd have tossed me into the psych ward. Speaking of which…."

Stacy took his hand in hers and a shiver ran across his neck that had nothing to do with his near-death experience.

"I don't think you're crazy. You're not the type to make shit up. And when you add it to what I found last night…." She took a deep breath and shook her head.

"Is it that bad?"

"It sure seems that way now."

She let go of his hand and opened the folder, which contained several sheets of paper that looked to be printouts or photocopies. Some paragraphs were highlighted in yellow.

"I told you I thought there was more to that symbol, and I was right. I had to go through a bunch of websites and old books to find it. I was up half the night. The problem is, there's a lot of ambiguity when it comes to ancient Egypt. What the symbols mean, how religions were practiced, what the inner workings of politics were. The translations aren't always accurate, or even complete. I tried to eliminate anything that didn't make sense based on the details of your case and I kept everything where multiple scholars agreed."

Tom leaned forward. "How do you know what wouldn't be important to the case? Even I don't know that. We have to look at every possibility."

"I don't think so." Stacy pushed one sheet toward him. "This definition, for instance. It says Seba represents a star. Artists used it to decorate rooms inside temples or tombs. It can also signify a starfish. However, many scholars agree that over time, Seba came to represent not just a star, but the actual Underworld, which they called the Duat. This was the realm of the dead and the circle around the star represents the entrance to the Duat. Literally, the gateway to the Underworld."

"All right, I get your meaning. That Underworld stuff sure sounds like it would have more to do with murders than a starfish. But why burn the mark into the victims' chests?"

"That's where the real research comes in. And why I look like something a witch's familiar just dragged in. Have you ever heard of an ushabti?"

"A who-whatty?"

"An ushabti."

Stacy and Tom both jumped at the unexpected voice from the doorway. A man stood there, his bearded face solemn and his coal-black eyes bright and intense, like a crow's. He wore light gray linen pants and a white shirt. Although only a few inches over five feet in height, he carried himself with an air of confidence that was echoed in his tone when he spoke.

"Oh!" Stacy gave a weak smile. "You scared the hell out of me. Tom, this is Professor Merakhmet. He's a visiting scholar from Egypt. He's here overseeing the Osiris exhibit. Professor, this is Tom Reardon, an old…um…friend of mine."

Merakhmet stepped into the office and gave a slight bow in Tom's direction. Once again, Tom caught a whiff of exotic spices. Pungent but not unpleasant. It reminded him of the incense cones he and his friends used to burn in high school to hide the pot smell when they smoked. The guard who'd let them in stood a few steps behind the professor. He nodded at them and kept walking.

"My apologies," Professor Merakhmet said. "I was passing by and couldn't help overhearing. It's not often people discuss the ushabti."

"You know about it?" Tom asked.

"Yes, I am quite familiar with the legends. What is it you are interested in?"

"Is it some kind of mummy?"

Merakhmet shrugged. "Yes, and no. Golem might be a more accurate term. It is a creature of the afterworld, much like a demon in Christianity. But it is frequently depicted as a mummy."

"You're losing me." Tom shook his head. "Is it a mummy or isn't it?"

Stacy slid another piece of paper over. This one had the word 'ushabti' at the top, followed by a description. Beneath was a picture of incredibly realistic statuettes of people standing in a row next to a sarcophagus. Tom picked up the paper and read.

"Ushabti were funerary figures placed in the tombs of the wealthy or powerful. The idea was that in the afterlife, they would be servants for

the deceased. Inscriptions on each gave the ushabti's name and denoted their willingness to serve throughout eternity."

Tom put the paper down. "Now I'm really lost."

"My ancestors believed the items interred with you when you died followed you in spirit to the Duat. Riches, pets, even servants. A prominent individual would often have his servants mummified and placed in the tomb with him in order to continue serving him in the Duat."

"So an ushabti is a servant for a dead rich guy."

"Yes. In some cases, priests and guards were also immortalized and laid to rest in the temples of the gods, for the same reason."

Tom frowned. Stacy shuffled through her papers and pulled out another one.

"I was confused, too, until I came across the story of Sokar." Before Tom could ask, she continued. "Sokar was a deity from the First Dynasty, back when Ra, Osiris, and Isis were the primary gods of Egypt. Originally, he was a god of rebirth, who aided souls in the transformation between life and death. But at some point, he becomes the right-hand man for Osiris, the ruler of the Underworld and god of the night. Sokar served Osiris and it became his responsibility to deliver the souls of the newly deceased to the Duat, where Osiris would enact their journey down the river of judgment and determine if their souls would reunite with their life force, their Ka, and live forever in paradise, or if they would spend time without end being tortured in Hell."

Tom rubbed his eyes. "I still don't see how this pertains to my case. Am I dealing with some kind of cult? Worshippers of Sokar or Seba?"

"I'm sorry, did you say your case? Are you a police officer?" Merakhmet's brow furrowed as he glanced at Tom.

"Sort of. I'm working with the police on the Ragman murders. I can't say much, but some of the evidence indicates that there might be involvement with ancient Egyptian religions."

"Tom was attacked by…we think it may have been the killer," Stacy added.

"That is most unfortunate. Yet you were able to escape serious injury, it would seem."

"I got lucky. So, what about this Seba-god-person?"

"Seba is not a god," Merakhmet said. "It is a thing."

"Here, look at this." Stacy slid over another page, this one with a picture on it. It showed a stone wall covered in hieroglyphics. She'd circled one area in red pen, and Tom's eyebrows shot up when he saw a mummy with its hands reaching out toward a naked, screaming man. On the man's chest was a circle with a crude star inside it.

The symbol of Seba.

"Holy shit!" Tom grabbed the paper and held it up.

"I don't know if there's a cult of Sokar today, but there sure as hell was three thousand years ago," Stacy said.

"There is not." Merakhmet gestured in the general direction of the museum's main area. "Out there is all that remains. Like all of the ancient religions, ours long ago became a part of history, overwhelmed by Christian and Muslim influences. I will now leave you to your research. If you ever have any questions, please feel free to ask me."

Merakhmet gave another quick bow and exited the office. Before the door closed, Tom caught a glimpse of Mahmoud, the security guard, standing in the hall. Merakhmet said something to him and they both walked away.

"Nice guy, but one of them needs to go easy on the cologne." Tom waved his hand around.

"Hush." Stacy gave him a conspiratorial grin. "He's a bit stuffy but pretty easy to work for. He oversees the Osiris collection. Started here around the same time I did. Keeps to himself, you rarely see him, except when he's adding something new to the exhibit. Which he's done a lot of lately. Apparently, he's gotten some major funding."

"Well, he seems to know his shit. What else do you have on this Sokar god?"

"Priests of the Order of Sokar were rumored to possess magical powers obtained from the Book of the Dead. One important spell involved calling forth an ushabti of Sokar and using it to murder criminals or followers of other religious sects that spoke out against Sokar, who supposedly was a cruel god. The ushabti would mark the victim with the

symbol of Seba, the gateway to the Duat. The mark let Sokar know the arriving Ka was unworthy and should be immediately sent to Hell. In this way, both Sokar and Osiris gained power in the Underworld and the priests of Sokar gained favor from him."

"Son of a bitch." Tom leaned back. "So some sick bastard is killing these people and then leaving the Seba mark on them to basically send their souls to Hell. If that doesn't sound like a cult, I don't know what does."

"That's not all. For Sokarites, the circle signified the gateway, and the five points of the star represented the human body. Head, arms, legs. And in order to release the Ka—"

"Let me guess. The limbs and head needed to be separated from the body after it was branded."

Stacy nodded. "Exactly."

"No wonder the ME couldn't figure out how the victims were dismembered. No ordinary human could do it. Which means that guy they found in Queens was just a diversion and the ushabti is still on the loose. I've got to tell Dan."

Tom stood up and then cursed.

"What?"

He slapped his hand against the wall. "Dan and I aren't on speaking terms right now. And I sure as hell can't go to Captain Green. What am I supposed to do?"

"I've got an idea."

Tom turned, already anticipating falling into her arms again after so long apart.

Stacy held out a thick, leather-clad book.

"Research. Maybe we can figure out where the ushabti will strike next. Have a seat. I'll order dinner."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ahmes the Second fumed as he walked back to the hotel where Gordon had arranged lodging for him the past year.

The detective had encountered the ushabti and lived!

It was unheard of to survive an attack by an ushabti, especially one as powerful as Akil Ahmose, servant to Sokar himself. Praise the gods he'd been in the hall at the right moment. He would not have believed it possible if he hadn't heard it with his own ears.

The only explanation was that Gordon, the fool, had used the spell to send the ushabti after Reardon, despite his assurances he wouldn't. On top of that, he'd undoubtably spoken the spell incorrectly.

And if he disobeyed their pact once, who was to say he wouldn't do it again? This time, with Ahmes as the target.

I will have to find a way to protect myself against the ushabti.

Footsteps behind him alerted Ahmes to the presence of another. He turned just as a young man wearing dirty pants and a worn leather jacket grabbed him by the arm and pressed a gun to his belly.

"Don't make a sound, asshole. Just hand over your wallet and you won't get hurt."

"You wish to rob me?" Ahmes placed his hand on the thief's arm. "Let us see who steals from who."

The boy let out a gasp and tried to pull away. He dropped the gun as his legs went limp and all the strength drained from his arms. He would have fallen except for Ahmes's grip on his wrist. In the space of seconds his muscles shrank and his skin pulled tight around his bones. His eyes bulged and then collapsed into their sockets. His lips retracted, exposing teeth that yellowed and gums that blackened within seconds. A final sigh escaped him as his lungs turned into dried-out sponges.

Ahmes let the corpse fall to the ground. The thief's life force surged through him, filling him with energy and memories of a life wasted on crime and drugs.

"No one will miss you, but Sobek waits with open jaws."

Laughing at the thought of the Hell awaiting the boy on the other side of the eternal river, Ahmes continued on his way. In the morning, he would speak with Gordon.

And make sure the man understood his place.



"Five minutes to take off, sir."

Elton Banks nodded without looking away from the window of his custom Gulfstream. Down on the tarmac, a team of six security guards stood in a rough circle around the plane. Two more sat at the back of the cabin, keeping a watchful eye on Banks and his wife.

"Elton, please, what is going on?" his wife, Barbara, asked from the seat next to him. He didn't answer. What could he say? That even after two whiskeys and half an Ambien he couldn't stop worrying about those bloody letters and that detective's parting words?

"If I were you, I'd double up on your security."

He'd read about the man they found in Queens, watched that pompous police captain tell the world the danger was over. But something didn't smell right, and he'd learned over the years to trust his nose. He'd had this feeling before, the cold, slippery invisible beast squirming in his guts, the tingling throughout his body. Usually right before some rival attempted a hostile takeover, or an investment experienced an unexpected change in volume. He'd never put stock in precognition or any superstitious claptrap, but he did believe the human subconscious could connect disparate pieces of information, identify seemingly random patterns, and come to accurate conclusions that to the less intelligent might seem like predicting the future.

And in this case, his inner self was screaming to get the hell out of New York.

So a little after ten, he'd had the jet fueled and told Barbara they were heading to London for an unexpected business trip. They'd come back when he knew for sure they were safe.

The flight attendant sealed the lock on the door and reminded everyone to fasten their seat belts. Then he took his seat on the other side of the bulkhead, behind a gauzy curtain. The engines whined as the pilot slowly applied more power. The plane picked up speed and the front end tilted up. The seats and floor vibrated, and the mechanical grinding of the landing gear retracting told Gordon they were in the air. He watched the lights of LaGuardia Airport grow smaller and he began to relax. Soon he'd—

A strong, hot breeze buffeted him and for a terrifying moment he thought the exit door had come unlatched. The sound of a balloon popping made him jump in his seat as he turned in time to see a cloud of dust and what looked like strips of cloth coalesce in the aisle. In seconds they'd shaped themselves into the form of a man so tall he had to stoop over. Gray bindings covered his entire body and his wide shoulders hit the overhead storage bins when he twisted around. Barbara screamed and the guards jumped from their seats.

Dark holes stared at Banks, endless empty spaces filled with a terrible hostility, as if eternity itself was sentient. The plane seemed to spin as he stared at them. The mouth opened, revealing a bottomless cavern.

"Elton Banksssss." The voice that emerged from that cave conjured images of arid heat and sandstorms.

The creature lunged forward and Barbara cried out again. It lifted her so violently her seatbelt tore away and her head smashed into the overhead bin. Her voice cut off mid-shout and she went limp. The monster threw her down the aisle.

"No!" Banks pressed himself against the window. This was worse than he'd feared. Whatever Gordon had sent after him wasn't human, and no guards would be able to stop it.

"Hold it right there. Don't move another inch." The two security guards stood a few feet back, their guns out. Behind the curtain, the attendant pounded on the pilot's door and shouted about a hijacking.

The creature ignored it all and leaned over the seat. The odors of ancient paper and musty caverns reached Banks. A giant hand pressed against his chest and fire filled his veins. Dry, cloth-covered fingers clawed into his mouth, choking him. He heard the *crack!* of pistols firing. Then something wrenched at his jaw and his entire world exploded in agony.

The last thing he saw was a field of stars blossoming in the creature's empty eyes.

★ ★ ★

The two guards emptied their clips into the thing attacking Elton Banks. It ignored them while it tore Banks's head off as easily as a man twisting the cap from a soda bottle. The plane veered sharply, sending both of them tumbling into nearby seats hard enough to break bones. The pilot's door opened and he staggered out, his white shirt covered in blood. A loud whistling filled the cabin and one of the guards, Max Bruno, immediately understood what had happened. One or more bullets had penetrated the pilot's door and done serious damage in the cockpit. Now they were losing pressure and the plane was out of control.

"Mayday! Mayday!" the copilot's voice echoed through the cabin. "Hijacking attempt on L427A. We are coming in hot. Repeat, we have sustained damage and coming in—"

The plane slewed again, in the other direction. Bruno flew across the row and slammed into another seat. His left arm snapped, joining his already shattered right wrist. Something struck him in the shoulder and wet liquid splashed his face.

One of Elton Banks's legs lay across his lap. The nose of the plane angled straight down and everything in the cabin tumbled forward. Bruno hit the seat in front of him as the oxygen masks dropped from the ceiling.

The creature dissolved into a whirlwind of cloth and disappeared.

And then there was only fire and pain.



The corridors of the temple stretched out endlessly ahead of Ahmes the Second. In his dream, he ran through them, sandals slapping against the hewn stone, the accursed ten somewhere ahead of him. He knew it was a dream because he wore modern clothes rather than the robes of his priesthood.

A scream echoed through the tunnels. Somewhere deeper in the temple, Akil Ahmose had caught another of the thieves and burned their Ka from their body for delivery to the Duat.

Ahmes turned the corner and the corpse lay there, dismembered and beheaded, the charred Seba on its chest. That made four so far. The metallic odor of blood coated his nose. He continued to run as scream after scream announced yet another foreigner's blighted soul delivered to the afterlife for eternal punishment.

He rounded a bend in time to see the ushabti rip the final interloper's head away and tear its limbs off, the imprint on the man's chest still bubbling and smoking.

The ushabti dropped the gushing torso and turned its celestial gaze toward Ahmes. The priest nodded at the corpse.

"You have done well, Akil Ahmose. Sokar will be pleased. Now I will return you to him." Ahmes spoke the incantation that would turn the ushabti to dust and send it back to the Duat.

Only the creature didn't crumble. Instead, it stepped forward, intoning Ahmes's true name as it reached out to take his Ka.

★ ★ ★

Ahmes sat up in bed, his shout of terror echoing in the empty hotel room. Sweat coated his body and his heart beat so hard he feared it might break through his rib cage. He looked down at his chest, half expecting to find the mark of Seba burned into his flesh.

A dream, yes, but no mere nightmare. The ushabti uttering his name was a dire portent of that which he dreaded most: the wrath of Osiris.

He spent the rest of the night awake, watching for any signs of the ushabti's appearance. His terror didn't ease until Ra opened his golden

eye and cast his brilliance on the world once more, making it safe from the powers of darkness until the heavenly cycle completed its daily run. Even then, he couldn't shake the feeling that a harbinger of doom loomed in the shadows. Never one to leave anything to chance, he dressed and hurried to the museum, arriving before any of the staff. In the storage room were several crates of artifacts waiting to be unpacked and put on display, many of them items from the Temple of Sokar that he'd obtained through various means, using Gordon's resources. In one was a copper medallion, an amulet from the temple of Sokar. Several figures were inscribed on it: The Eye of Horus, Nehebkau the snake god, and the wings of Isis. Ahmes took the medallion and slipped a simple chain through the top. He went to a nearby window, where a beam of sunlight streamed in through the dusty glass. Standing so that he faced the rising sun, he murmured a spell and lifted the amulet to Ra. The copper heated up until it was almost burning his hands, letting him know the spell was complete. Then he thanked Ra and Isis and slipped the chain over his head.

Should any demon come for him at night, he would now be protected by the dual forces of light and righteousness.

Try to betray me now, Henry Gordon. We shall see who ends up roasting in Sekhmet's fires.



When Tom's phone went off, he experienced a momentary disorientation. The nightstand was on his right, not his left. The pillows were too soft and smelled of flowers. Then he noticed Stacy sleeping next to him and he smiled as he remembered how their study session had taken an unexpected detour.

He fumbled with the pile of clothes on the floor until he found his pants and took the phone from his pocket. The sight of Joanna's number brought him wide awake.

"Hello?"

"Tom? Sorry to call so early. But I have some news about those

mummy wrappings and I want you and Dan to hear them before I turn in my report. How fast can you get to the lab?"

"Ummm…." Tom checked the time on his phone's display. Just past three-thirty. The lab was a good thirty minutes from Stacy's apartment, even with the streets empty. And he needed to get dressed, walk the two blocks to his car…faster to just Uber. "I can be there in less than an hour."

"Hurry." She hung up before he could ask what was so important.

"Who was that?" Stacy rolled over, a shadow against the white sheets. The musky odors of their lovemaking teased him. He fought the urge to just toss the phone away and pick up where they'd left off a few hours earlier, after finishing a bottle of wine while reading through Stacy's textbooks. The police had closed the case, Dan didn't want to have anything to do with him, and he probably wouldn't even be allowed in the lab. Why bother going when something much better was right in front of him?

No. He'd made a promise to himself to see the case through, and his gram had always said a real man keeps his promises, even those he makes in silence. Besides, for Joanna to call in the middle of the night it had to be something seriously important.

"Joanna. Something about our mummy. The real one. Gotta go." He picked up his clothes and started to dress.

"Come back when you're done and we'll finish what we started." She gave him a wink that indicated she meant more than research.

"Deal." He buttoned his shirt, located his shoes by the dresser, and stopped just long enough to give her a long kiss that tasted of sex and wine. "I'll call you later."

He got to the lab in forty minutes and, to his surprise, was buzzed through without a problem. Thanking the stars no one had thought to cancel his privileges, he hurried down the hall to Joanna's station, where he found Dan already there, reading something over her shoulder. Both of them looked as exhausted as Tom felt.

"Tom, good." Joanna flashed him a distracted smile. "I was just telling Dan we got the preliminary results of the cloth from the mummy

in Ibrahaim's apartment. Around two hundred years old at the most. And the chemical composition of the preserving fluids is completely different from what I found on the samples from the crime scenes, including the ones you gave me. It's all right there." She tapped the papers.

"So, we're dealing with two different mummies?"

"Yes. One from modern times, and one at least three thousand years old."

"Shit." Tom's gut twisted in a way he didn't like. Facts from Stacy's books rose up, riding a wave of cold dread. "You're talking about First Dynasty."

Joanna and Dan both frowned at him.

"I've been doing some research. With Stacy." Joanna's left eyebrow rose but he ignored it and kept talking. "About Egypt. And mummies. And the symbol on the bodies."

He filled them in on the cult of Sokar, ushabtis, and the mark of Seba being a way to sacrifice a soul to Sokar.

"The cult of Sokar was an offshoot of the sects that worshipped Osiris, back in the First Dynasty. Which happened to be about four thousand years ago, give or take."

"And you think that the murders were committed by a centuries-old mummy? What is this, the goddamn horror channel? Do you expect me to go to Green with this horseshit?" Dan stepped away from the desk, his face reddening and his eyes narrowed as looked from Tom to Joanna. "Are you two in on this together?"

"Dan—" Joanna stood, but Dan shook his head.

"No. I don't want to hear it. No more mummies, no more cults, no more bullshit! Don't you get it? None of it matters. The case is closed. Over. You want to bring estimated fabric dates and theories about Egyptian cults to the captain? Be my friggin' guest. Just keep me out of it."

He pushed past Tom and stormed out of the lab. Joanna went to follow but Tom stopped her with a touch to the arm.

"Let me. We need to finish this one way or another." Tom shrugged. "Even if it means a couple of black eyes."

He expected to find Dan outside, cooling off in the morning chill, or maybe in his car. Instead, he caught a glimpse of him at the end of the block, illuminated by a streetlight before turning the corner. Cursing under his breath, Tom started after him. When he got halfway down the next block, he paused. The entrance to a small park lay on his right, but up the street were a couple of bars with their lights still on.

Which option would an angry Dan have gone for? Booze or a quiet place to cool off?

In the old days, they'd have gone to a bar together. But alone…?

The park.

A heavy stillness settled over everything as he stepped through the opening in the wrought-iron fence separating the public space from the street. Only a block long and wide, the park was a mix of flat grassy areas and thickets of mixed trees. A few scattered streetlights illuminated random areas of the paths. Near the entrance, a row of wooden benches provided seating for mothers and nannies during the day.

Dan sat on one of them, his face buried in his hands. Tom stopped a few feet away.

"What all happened to you?"

Dan looked up at the question, his eyes filled with fury and his fists clenched.

"Why the hell can't you just leave us alone?"

"Hey, Joanna called me," Tom said. "About the case. Our case."

"There is no case and there is no 'our'. We're done. Over. I don't want to see you or hear your name again."

"Fine." Tom sat down at the other end of the bench. "But I wanna say something first."

"Of course you do." Dan rolled his eyes.

Tom cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry, man. For everything. Me and Stacy messed up that night. We were drunk and misread the signals. A big mistake. I own that. But, damn, why all the hatred? We fucked up. You were pissed. Maybe jealous. It ain't like we had an affair. I'll take responsibility for screwing up our friendship. But if there's something more going on, at least let me

know. 'Cause otherwise, you're really overreacting. Or maybe you're just so insecure about your own marriage you're taking it out on me."

Tom leaned back. He hadn't meant to say that last sentence. He was afraid he might've gone too far. But the pain inside him was so big…he'd loved Dan like a brother, would've taken a bullet for him. And for the past year, it was like a part of himself had died.

Dan was silent for a moment, and then shook his head and sighed.

"There's nothing else. No, I take that back. There's nothing else you did, except what any normal person would do in the same situation." He stared at his feet as he spoke. "You deserve an explanation. So does Joanna. I've tried with her. I don't think I've ever gotten it right, 'cause I keep getting so angry. We're in therapy for it. That night…I freaked out. Everything was going so great, and then all of a sudden Stacy and I are alone, and she's naked and in my lap, and damned if I wasn't enjoying it. But I got scared. 'Where's Joanna,' I asked, 'cause if she came out and found me like that, I knew she'd leave me. Stacy had both her hands around me and she looked up and smiled. 'Don't worry,' she said. 'Tom is taking good care of her.' That's when I freaked. I'd always been a little jealous of you two, the way you hit it off so well. You talked to her about all sorts of things I didn't. Sometimes I thought she had a little crush on you. So when I heard that, and then I ran in and saw you with her…well, you know what happened."

"Yeah, I remember." Dan had gotten so loud throwing them out that the neighbors shouted at them to be quiet. "But after, when things calmed down, why couldn't you talk to me about it?"

"'Cause I was angry, and embarrassed, and scared. Embarrassed not just for turning into a crazy asshole, but because of what I'd done with Stacy, and that I liked it. Scared that Joanna wanted to be with you. We almost broke up because of it. Because of me. I couldn't stop thinking that maybe she was sorry she didn't get to finish what got started. She was furious with the way I acted, and even more furious when I refused to accept your apologies. Kept saying our friendship was too good to ruin over a mistake. And that made me even more jealous, because she was taking your side."

"And I was right."

Tom and Dan both looked up at Joanna's voice. She stood just inside the park gate, arms crossed, glaring at the two of them.

"I should've figured you'd follow me," Tom said.

"I wanted to make sure you two didn't get arrested for brawling in public."

"So now what?" Tom looked at Dan. He shrugged.

"You want to keep investigating, go ahead. I'll even pass along any information I get. But I'm not risking my career going behind the captain's back. Just do me a favor."

"What?"

"Keep Joanna out of it."

Joanna started to protest and Dan held up his hand. "You're on the list for promotion. I don't want you getting in trouble. Or worse, getting a reputation for being a nutcase with all this crazy mummy talk. You can pass results to me and I can give them to Tom. Off the record. Deal?"

"It's not crazy. I know what I saw. That thing had me in its hands. I looked into its eyes, but they weren't eyes, they were like…." Tom shook his head, his expression haunted. "Never mind. I get it. I'll keep everything on the down low and—"

A sudden gust of wind blew leaves and dust around, causing him to shield his face. He stood, thinking it was the perfect sign that he should leave, head back to Stacy and her warm bed.

The breeze grew stronger, and the temperature rose. A gray cloud appeared in front of the bench. A flapping sound, like someone shaking a blanket, disturbed the silence. The gray mist coalesced into a miniature cyclone of whirling rags.

The shape grew larger. More defined. Arms formed, and legs.

The creature solidified with a distinct *pop!* and Tom sucked in a sharp breath. It stood a good seven feet tall, with broad shoulders and chest, and muscular arms. Cloth wrappings covered it completely except for the eyes and mouth, which were black holes, as if the monster were hollow inside. Yet somehow they emanated a malevolent intelligence.

The mummy! Tom's heart raced as it stared at him with those empty sockets, which seemed to reflect the stars and lamps despite their emptiness. His head swam and for a moment he thought he would pass out.

"Tom Reardon." Its voice was gravel and sand, bass notes and whispers. Dread gripped Tom with icy fingers, filled him with a fear worse than anything he'd ever experienced while on the job. The memory of its superhuman strength froze him in place.

Joanna screamed and his paralysis broke. He leaped away just as the mummy lunged at him. At the same time, Dan drew his gun and fired. The monster turned and swung a massive backhand that struck Dan on the shoulder and sent him tumbling over the bench. It came after Tom again, covering the space between them in one long stride. Tom got his gun out and was about to shoot when Joanna darted between them, a large branch in her hands. She jabbed it into the creature's mid-section like it was a sword.

The branch passed through it as if it were a ghost.

The mummy picked Joanna up, its enormous form dwarfing hers.

"Joanna!" Tom shouted. Somewhere behind him, Dan echoed her name.

Tom watched as it threw her over the bench and into some bushes. A fury rose up inside him, something he'd never felt, not even when his or Dan's lives were in danger. With a wordless roar, he ran straight at the mummy, firing shot after shot. Ignoring the bullets, it grabbed him by the shoulders and lifted him into the air. He shoved the pistol under its chin and fired until the gun clicked empty. Something pressed against his chest and sudden fire radiated through his body.

For an endless moment, time stood still and the pain doubled, then tripled. Behind the mummy, the first touch of dawn was turning the clouds pink and orange over the tops of the trees and Tom knew it was the last thing he'd ever see, that this was—

The mummy exploded with a sound like a large balloon popping.

Tom fell to the hard path, dust and bits of cloth raining down on him.

Despite the lingering pain in his chest, he got up and staggered to where Dan knelt next to an unmoving Joanna.

"She's alive." Dan said. Tom nodded and pulled out his phone to call nine-one-one, even as the first wail of police sirens shattered the night, growing louder with each heaving breath he took. His legs buckled and he fell down next to Dan.

"Still think I'm crazy?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

For Ahmes the Second, the morning news only added to the feeling of dread that lingered from his dream-omen. The good fortune of having Elton Banks meet his fate aboard an airplane provided small comfort and in no way eased the gnawing teeth of the fear-crocodile living inside his belly. The crash meant the police wouldn't be able to link Banks's death to the others, which would reinforce the idea that the police had found their murderer.

But the timing of it…. Banks had perished after sundown, as he should have. Except it appeared he wasn't the only one, according to the reporter on the television.

"The gruesome murder of Dennis Benton still has residents of the swanky Upper East Side frightened and concerned. While police continue to search the Ramble area of Central Park, where Benton's dismembered body was found, for clues, his family and friends are calling for increased police patrols and swift action."

Dismembered. The word immediately set Ahmes's hackles up. A quote from the jogger who'd found the body only reinforced it.

"Looked like someone hacked him to pieces. Arms, legs, head, all chopped off. Who'd do such a thing?"

Not who, what. The ushabti. Even without mention of a mark branded in the boy's chest, he instinctively knew this had to be the work of the inhuman creature.

The story brought back the images from his nightmare, and with them the continuing sense that something was wrong. Invisible fingers plucked at the lines of magic connecting him to the Duat, leaving him on edge. He found himself looking over his shoulders even in the relative safety of his hotel room, watching the shadows for movement.

The power of dark magics at work couldn't be denied; its presence

lay over the city like a blanket of rough wool across bare skin, itching and irritating. As the reporter continued speaking, a surety rose in Ahmes's heart.

This. This is the cause of my nightmare. Something has gone awry and my Ka felt it, was trying to warn me. The only question is, what does this boy have to do with Henry Gordon, and for what reason would Gordon want him dead?

He needed to find out. He pulled over his laptop and opened a search page.

Dennis Benton.



"I can't just sit here doing nothing all day."

"You can, and you will." A weird mixture of fear and relief filled Dan as he sat down on the edge of the couch. Joanna lay with a blanket wrapped over her legs, her face still far too pale, which only emphasized the dark circles under her eyes. The doctor at the emergency room had let her go home after tests showed she only had a mild concussion and no lurking hematomas on the brain. Rest, acetaminophen, and orders to call her doctor if her headache got worse or she experienced any other symptoms, such as blurred vision or nausea.

"You should be fine in forty-eight hours, but no work, no physical activity until then," the too-young looking ER resident had added.

Dan had called her office with the same story they'd given the police and hospital, a mugging in the park. Because of his status as a detective, he and Tom were allowed to go home, but would have to return to the station later to give statements. Except Dan didn't want to leave Joanna alone.

"What if it comes back?" he asked for the tenth time.

"I'll be fine," she said. "You said Tom shot it and blew it up. So it's dead, right? Or at least hurt real bad."

"A lot of other people shot it, too. Look what happened to them."

"I put four rounds right into its skull," Tom said. He'd stayed with them the entire time. "Maybe that's the difference."

"Or there's another reason," Stacy said, coming in from the kitchen. She'd met them at the hospital after Tom called her. He and Dan had agreed that it was safer for all of them to be together. "Tom, didn't you say it looked up at the sky? Was the sun coming up?"

"I was too busy trying to stay alive to notice," he answered, with a wry twist of his lips. "But it's sure possible. I know it was getting light out by the time the cops got there."

"That could be the answer. Sokar is a disciple of Osiris, who rules in darkness. Ra, the Sun God, is his opposite. Maybe the ushabti can't handle sunlight."

"All the murders were at night." Dan chewed at his lower lip, struggling with his indecision.

"Okay, then. It's dead or it can't hurt us until the sun goes down. Either way I'm safe." Joanna pointed at the door. "Go to work. All of you. Just be back before sunset."

They left, grudgingly, Dan the last to go after making her promise to check in every couple of hours so he knew she was safe.

Joanna waited ten minutes after the door closed behind him and then picked up her phone.

"Hello? It's Jo. Can you meet me for lunch?"



Dan jerked in his chair when his cell phone buzzed, startling him from the thoughts whirling through his head. He was supposed to be reading a case file, but for the last hour he'd just been staring at it. His entire world view had been flipped upside down and he was still struggling to come to terms with it.

A mummy.

But not the kind of mummy from the old movies. That'd be bad enough. No, this was far worse. A demon from Hell that could appear and vanish at will. Stacy called it an ushabti, and hopefully she'd be able to find out how to destroy it, if they hadn't accomplished that already. God knew he never wanted to see that thing again.

The phone buzzed again, and he hesitated in answering it. More than likely it would be more bad news. Because that was how his morning had gone so far. He and Tom had given their statements and then gone to see Captain Green. Their plan was to use the attack as a reason for re-opening the Ragman case, but Green had other ideas. With a smug Driscoll standing next to him, he'd informed them in no uncertain terms the case was closed. All of Tom's privileges had been revoked and he'd been told to go home. Fuming, Tom had stormed out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

Dan had tried once more to change the captain's mind.

"Sir, if you just look at all the evidence, it proves that—"

"Can it, Reese. I've got a new case for you." Green slid a thick file across the desk. "Over the past few weeks, we've had a big spike in murders among the homeless community. Mostly in the subways and under the FDR. Eleven we know of, and probably more, because there's been some missing persons reports. The head of some big shelter noticed the pattern and complained to the *Post* about how the police don't do enough to protect our indigent citizens. Now the mayor's office wants to show we're looking into it."

Desperate to avoid the reassignment, Dan thought hard for any excuse.

"But there's still interviews left to do for the Ragman case, and the paperwork—"

"Don't worry about that. Driscoll will handle the paperwork while you look into this. Shouldn't take more than a few days. And you can cross your Ts and whatever in your downtime."

"Wait, I'm on this alone?"

Green glared at him. "Christ, Reese, it's a bunch of dead bums. I think you can handle it. Probably some drug-addled box dweller. Just look into it and file a report."

"Yes, sir." Doing his best to avoid Driscoll's smirk, Dan took the file and returned to his desk. Somehow, the older detective had gotten Green's ear, probably because both of them wanted the case handed off to Queens. No doubt he'd milk the paperwork for as long as he could to get more overtime.

Dan slapped the file onto his desk. Green was right, it would probably be an easy case. The homeless community attracted a lot of wackos, plenty of them violent. But they weren't exactly criminal masterminds. It shouldn't take all that long to find the perp.

And you won't have to work with Driscoll while you do it.

That was something, at least. Better yet, having an easy case meant he'd have more time to help Tom put a stop to the – *say it, Dan. The mummy* – before it went after anyone else. Of course, there was always the chance Driscoll might actually do some detective work and put the pieces together.

Yeah, and maybe leprechauns will leave a pot of gold in my kitchen.

You couldn't count on Driscoll for anything except avoiding work.

After the conversation in Captain Green's office, Driscoll had come out, given Dan a sarcastic two-fingered salute, and left. *Probably to take a three-hour lunch somewhere.*

Another buzz. Clenching his teeth, Dan dug the phone out from under some papers.

"Reeves."

"Hey, it's Watson in the lab. I have the file with all the phone-tower dumps from the murder vics, which we've correlated with the actual call lists from the vics' phones. And there's a pattern that turned up you might want to see. I just emailed the report to you, with the numbers highlighted."

"Okay, I'll check it out. Thanks."

Dan smiled to himself. The lab hadn't been informed he wasn't on the case anymore. He opened his email on his desktop. The report was at the top of the inbox. It had been sent to Driscoll as well, although who knew when he'd read it. He downloaded the doc and scrolled through the list. When he came to the first highlighted number, he paused. An incoming call to Collingsworth's phone. Further down, the same number appeared on Shaun Prescott's cell. And also on Banks's and Oliver's. Switching over to the cell-tower records, he saw that the number belonged to Henry Gordon.

The same person who'd sent all of the threatening letters.

So why did he call all four of them – Dan checked the date – two weeks before the murders started? Did it have to do with the business deal Gordon told them about, or was it more threats? The dates would place them just before the letters.

He read through the lists again. Right after Gordon's calls, there were a flurry of calls between all three of the victims, plus Banks and several other numbers. He checked those against the list of people they'd questioned. All five were on it. Arnold Smythe, Stephen Dorchester, Lawrence Chatham, Thomas Lyons, Clive Pickwick.

Gordon calls ten men, supposedly about a business deal they reneged on. Afterward, those ten call each other within hours. None of them call Gordon back. A week later, three of them are murdered by a creature that shouldn't exist.

And then a fourth dies in a plane crash. After admitting Gordon has a chip on his shoulder because of an ancient family feud.

Everything pointed to Gordon as a prime suspect, but this was no ordinary case. No way he could turn himself into a supernatural creature and commit those murders. Still, it was obvious he had some kind of involvement.

Something Dan had read a long time ago came back to him. A story about the discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb and the curse associated with it. Several people involved in removing him from the tomb had died in suspicious ways.

If mummies are real, why not curses? Maybe Henry Gordon can shed some light on that.

He'd just have to figure out a way to question the man without Captain Green knowing about it.

With a sigh, he returned to the file in front of him. He still had a job to do, whether he liked it or not. Everything else would have to wait until his shift was over. He glanced at the dingy windows.

More importantly, if Stacy was correct, they needed to figure out a way to stay safe through the night.



"Joanna!"

Joanna Reese turned at the sound of Beth Nowicki's voice. Her old college roommate looked as if she hadn't aged a day since graduation, with the same oversized glasses, long, carrot-orange hair tied in a ponytail, and effervescent smile that lit up even the darkest day. The only difference was now she wore a tailored pantsuit more appropriate for her job as a historical librarian at the New York Public Library than the ripped jeans and black concert t-shirts of her youth.

"Beth!" The two women hugged and sat down on the bench Joanna had managed to snag before the lunch crowd filled up the park lawn across from the library's Sixty-Fifth Street location. As they'd agreed over the phone, both had brought their own lunches rather than buy hot dogs or empanadas from the nearby food carts. Joanna had stopped and picked up a burger and fries from Wendy's, while Beth had a sandwich and fruit salad she'd packed at home. As they ate, they reminisced about old times and for a while Joanna was able to forget all the craziness going on in her life. Until Beth asked how she and Dan were doing.

"I don't know." It hurt Joanna to say it, but Beth was her oldest confidant and she felt more comfortable opening up to her than anyone else, even Dr. Fleck. Or herself, when it came down to it.

"Spill, girl."

She did, filling Beth in on everything that had happened since the last time they'd spoken, back before the Christmas holiday. When she got to the part about Dan and Tom having to work together again, Beth shook her head, her ponytail bouncing on her shoulders.

"That is trouble in the making. How did Dan take it?"

"About as well as you'd expect. He's never gotten over what happened, he still thinks I've got a thing for Tom. And the worst part is, he may be right."

Beth paused with her sandwich halfway to her mouth.

Joanna nodded. "It sounds awful, doesn't it? I've never admitted this to anyone, not even our marriage counselor. That night…I wanted something to happen. That's why I didn't stop him when he came into the room. I didn't care about what Dan was doing, or what would

happen after. I just wanted Tom. And in a way, part of me still does. I think Dan senses that."

"Jo, it's okay to be attracted to other people. We all feel it sometimes. Especially if the person is 'the one that got away'. That doesn't mean you have a thing for someone, or that you're actually going to cheat."

"Except that night, I did. And when I think about it, which is way too often, I wonder what I'd do if I had the chance again. Every time we're near each other, that desire comes rushing back."

After a moment, Beth reached out and touched Joanna's leg. "You have three options. Tell Dan the truth, tell Tom you never want to see him again, or hook up with Tom and get it out of your system. Otherwise, it'll eat you up inside forever."

"Well, number three is out of the question. I'd never do that to Dan, and Tom wouldn't, either. And I don't think I can just erase my feelings, even if I don't see Tom anymore. Which leaves me back where I started. How can I tell Dan without ruining our marriage?"

"I don't know. Maybe you should ask your therapist."

"Great. But hey, changing the subject. How would you like to help me solve some murders?" This was the reason Joanna had called to arrange the lunch, and she was eager to get off the topic of her marriage, before she started crying. She'd done too much of that over the past year.

"Hell, yeah. What can I do?"

Joanna gave her a quick rundown of the key points, including the ancient mummy wrappings, the Egyptian cults, and the idea that somehow all the victims were tied together. She purposely left out being attacked by an actual mummy. No sense having her friend think she was crazy. Then she handed over a piece of paper with the names of the victims on it.

"Can you see if you can find anything that links their families? Not now, but in the past. Tom said there was a group of them who all served together in the British Army in Egypt, and after that they went on to build global fortunes."

"Looking for skeletons in the closet, huh? Sure, I'll give it a shot. I'll call you if I find anything." Beth stood up and crumpled her brown

lunch bag. "In the meantime, get your head on straight and do the right thing. You and Dan are too good together to ruin it."

"Yeah, I know. Thanks. For everything."

After they said goodbye and Beth went back to work, Joanna slowly headed for the park exit, thinking over the options Beth had laid out.

Cheat. Forget. Confess.

None of them carried any hope of easing the ache in her heart.



Tom, let's meet at the diner at six. I've got news.

Tom's heart jumped as he read the text message from Joanna. His first thought was she meant just the two of them. Then his common sense kicked in. *I've got news* meant it was about the case, and no doubt Dan would be there.

Why can't I stop remembering that night?

It was stupid. But he couldn't help it. The last few days, seeing her, thinking about how her naked body felt against his….

Stop.

Stacy would be over any minute. They planned on getting an early dinner and then doing more research. The idea was to stay in pairs so that no one would be alone during the night, in case they hadn't actually destroyed the ushabti.

For a moment, he considered not going. Even though things were civil now between him and Dan – due more to the mummy's attack and a shared desire to stop the creature than Dan's acceptance of what had happened – he still felt awkward around his old friends, and he could tell they did, too. As much as he hated to admit it, they might never be able to climb free from the mound of baggage they'd built up.

It is what it is. He was through apologizing. Time to move on.

Except he couldn't do that until they put an end to the ushabti.

Then they go their way, and I go mine. With Stacy. I'm not ruining things with her again.

OK, he texted back.

The apartment door opened.

"I'm here!" came Stacy's voice from the living room.

"Be right out." He pulled on his shirt and left the bedroom. He was about to tell Stacy the change in plans when his phone rang.

The caller ID came up as the Central Park precinct, where he'd done his first two years after joining the NYPD.

"Hello?"

"Tom? Debbie Yang. You busy?"

"Debbie! Hi." Tom motioned to Stacy that he had to take the call. "Never too busy for you. What's up?"

Debbie had been the desk sergeant at Central Park and later got promoted to overseeing the Evidence department. He was surprised to see she hadn't retired yet; she had to have put in her twenty and more by now.

"More like what I can do for you. I still owe you for Roy." Roy was Debbie's youngest son. He'd gotten in with a bad crowd in his early teens and Tom offered to speak with him, as he'd had his fair share of trouble growing up in New Orleans. It turned out they shared an interest in guitar, and Tom gave him lessons for a couple of years. Part of their deal was he'd stop hanging out with troublemakers. Roy had kept his end of the bargain and ended up joining a band, which now played clubs all over the city.

"You know that's something I enjoyed as much as he did. You don't owe me a darned thing."

"You might rethink that when you hear this. You know about the boy they found in the park? Dennis Benton?"

"I heard about it. Awful stuff." It had been on the news, but with everything that happened lately, he hadn't paid much attention.

"His arms and legs were forcibly removed. His head was ripped off. And there was a mark burned into his chest. Any of that sound familiar?"

"A mark? On his chest?" Tom put the call on speaker and grabbed a pen and paper from a kitchen drawer. "Was it a circle with a star inside it?"

Stacy's eyes went wide as she listened.

"Right the first time. I saw the pictures myself when I signed in the evidence. I heard through the rumor mill Reese is on the outs with Captain Green and the report went directly to Driscoll."

"Sonofabitch. Driscoll never said a word. I'll bet he told the detectives at Central Park to work directly with Queens, so he doesn't have to reopen the case."

"I figured. That's why I decided to call you. But you didn't hear it from me."

"Of course not. Thanks, Debbie. We're more than even now."

"No, we're not. My son's worth a million tips. Stay safe, Tom."

"You, too." He hung up and then pulled up a search engine he paid good money for, one that provided details on pretty much anyone with a public address.

Dennis Benton. Age seventeen. Lived at Eighty-First and Third.

Only a few blocks away.

Still got a few hours before we meet Joanna and Dan.

Captain Green would blow a gasket if they got involved.

More people might die if I don't. Including me.

The bruises from the mummy still ached, a reminder that he'd almost died, twice. They had no idea if they'd destroyed it or not. If they hadn't, their lives, and the lives of the people on that list, were still in danger. They needed to find out where it came from and why it was targeting specific people. He looked at Stacy.

"Change of plans. I'll explain on the way."



"Thanks again for seeing us, Mrs. Benton. I know this is a very difficult time for you and your family." Tom kept his voice low and respectful. As a cop, he'd had to inform too many mothers and fathers about their children's deaths. It never got easier, and he understood that the last thing a grieving parent needed was someone asking more questions.

"It's all right. Like we told the other private investigator, anything we can do to help find the bastard who…who took our son from us."

Tom paused.

"Other investigator?"

He'd been about to exit the apartment and leave the Bentons to their sorrow. He'd spoken to them for about fifteen minutes, getting as much background information as he could regarding the boy's habits and the family's business interests. As he'd expected, based on the news articles he'd read, nothing matched the other victims. Dennis Benton was a junior at a private school in Vermont, good student, no problems, had plans to go to art school for photography. He'd been home for spring break. The night he disappeared he'd gone out with his camera to take pictures of the park in the moonlight.

"Yes, the one who was here this morning. He said he was working with the police, too."

"Did you catch his name?" Tom asked, pulling his notepad out again.

Elisha Benton scrunched her face as she concentrated. "Machmat? Machmoud? I think he was Middle Eastern."

Tom controlled the surge of excitement rising up. Keeping his voice calm, he asked a final question. "Did he leave a card?"

"Now that I think about it, no." She took on a frightened expression. "Is something wrong? Should we have not spoken to him?"

"I'm sure everything's fine." Tom put on his most reassuring smile and pulled a business card from the back of his pad. "The police use a lot of outside investigators. We don't all know each other. Maybe this fellow just forgot to give you a card. But here's mine. If you think of anything, please call me. And again, my condolences."

"Thank you."

As he headed down in the elevator to where Stacy waited in the car, Tom's thoughts raced, replaying the conversation.

Middle Eastern. That couldn't be a coincidence.

"Well, how did it go?" Stacy asked.

He thought a minute before answering. He had an idea, but it was pretty far out.

"Let me run something by you…."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

This letter is to inform you of the recommended expulsion of your son, Peter, from Green Mountain Boys School, effective immediately. Your child is suspended from school until the disposition of this expulsion is confirmed following the forthcoming hearing. Peter is being recommended for expulsion for the following reason(s):

Peter was found to be in possession of marijuana without a prescription from a medical doctor. This is a violation of the school code of conduct, Rule 27.B.3.1.

Peter did knowingly sell and/or distribute marijuana to other students. This is a violation of the school code of conduct, Rule 27.B.3.3.

Several attempts were made to contact you but the numbers on file were no longer in service. This letter serves as official notification of the suspension and pending hearing, to be scheduled following mid-term recess. In the event….

Peter Gordon threw the letter on the floor. He'd expected it, had made sure to be in the lobby and get the mail every day before the housekeeper. Still, it pissed him off to read it in print.

Suspended. Expelled. All because that asshole Benton had ratted him out. It wasn't even like he'd been dealing anything bad. Some weed, a little Ecstasy. They'd told him he was lucky the police weren't called, which he supposed was true. If he'd been arrested, the old man would have been notified immediately. The cops wouldn't be fooled by fake phone numbers in the school records. Still, all it did was buy him some time. Sooner or later, the truth would come out. And then the old man might very well carry out his threat of military school being the next stop if Peter didn't clean up his act.

He'd hoped he could use the spring break to figure out a way of clearing his name. Maybe pinning the weed on some other kid. Or say he was set up. But that would take time, and neither had a guarantee of success.

Wait.

Something he'd heard, or read about, came to him. That if your roommate died, you got the rest of the semester off. They wouldn't kick him out after a tragedy, plus, he could blame everything on Nestor. There'd be no proof the weed was his, and if anyone ratted him for dealing, he'd say Nestor forced him to do it.

And now he had the perfect way to get rid of Nestor.

"Sorry, buddy. You were a decent roomie, but I'm not going to military school."

He opened his phone and pulled up a picture of him and Nestor standing next to each other in their room.

The spell had worked on Benton. Now it was time to see if it would really work again or if he'd have to do the whole ceremony over.

"Ushabti Akil Ahmose. This is Peter Gordon and I order you to kill Nestor Panchal." He stared at the picture, wondering if that would be enough for the demon to find the right person. It should be, since in the past it located people just by saying their name in the spell. But who the hell knew with demons?

After a minute, he turned the phone off. Based on the other murders, the demon wouldn't show up until nighttime, which meant he had a few hours to wait. Figuring he might as well enjoy the free time, he took out his stash and lit up a joint.

And prayed that by tomorrow, his worries would be over.



With each passing second, the bubble of uncomfortable silence surrounding the table grew stronger, to the point where Joanna could almost imagine they were alone in the diner.

Tom and Stacy had arrived less than five minutes after Dan and Joanna. There was just enough time for murmured hellos before the waitress came over and dropped off their menus.

Then all sound seemed to vanish.

Tom looked everywhere except across the table. Stacy inspected her

menu as if she'd never seen one before. Dan kept fidgeting with his hands under the table. Joanna noticed how close Tom and Stacy sat next to each other. Were they sleeping together again? She hated the needle stab of jealousy that came with the thought.

Stacy cleared her throat and nudged Tom with her shoulder. A signal. The kind couples do. She wanted him to break the silence.

Definitely sleeping together.

Tom pushed his menu around.

"So. This is more awkward than someone farting in a crowded elevator."

Joanna snorted and Dan glanced up with a grateful expression.

Leave it to Tom to lighten the mood. That was always his specialty.

But it worked. When Joanna opened her mouth, the power of speech had returned.

"I remember you and Dan telling that story."

Dan chuckled. "I still say it was Driscoll. Some of the stuff that guy ate for lunch…."

Another silence followed, but the waitress saved them by returning. They all ordered coffee and said they needed more time. When she left, something had changed. The discomfort of being with Tom and Stacy again still remained, but it no longer carried an immense weight.

"Joanna, you said you had news."

She nodded.

"Two things. One, I got the lab results back on the cloth fragments recovered from when we were attacked. Same as the others."

"So we know the ushabti thing is doing all the killing," Tom said.

"What else?" Stacy asked.

"I, uh, spoke to a friend of mine who works at the library. She's a historian. She's going to look into the names Elton Banks gave you."

"You could have told us that over the phone," Stacy said. Her voice sounded pleasant enough, but Joanna caught the meaning hidden in her words.

Why did you want to see my man?

"There's more." Dan put a piece of paper on the table. "A pattern of

phone calls between the vics two weeks before the first murder. All of them after they each received a call from Henry Gordon."

"Gordon?" Tom's eyebrows shot up. "So he did more than just send letters. What else did you find out from them?"

Dan shook his head.

"Nothing. Technically, I can't even speak to any of them. I've been taken off the case and assigned to something else. Some homeless murders."

Tom started to say something but just then the waitress returned with their coffee and asked if they were ready to order. Joanna hadn't been hungry when she arrived, nervousness killing her appetite, but now she wanted something. Comfort food.

"I'll have a grilled cheese with bacon, and fries," she said. Stacy ordered the same, without the bacon. Dan got his usual burger and Tom asked for a piece of cake and more coffee. That triggered a memory for Joanna. Back when he and Dan were partners, he'd always craved sweets when he was stressed.

After the waitress left, Dan nodded at Tom. "Go on."

"I found something out, too. There's been another murder. Dennis Benton, age seventeen. His family lives near Central Park, which is where they found his body after he'd been missing two days. According to my sources at the Central Park precinct, he had the mark of Seba burned into his chest."

"What does a teenager have to do with the other murders?" Joanna asked.

"That's what I want to know. Before we came here, I paid a visit to his family. They're rich, but not ultra-wealthy like the other vics." Tom recounted his conversation with Mrs. Benton, ending with her comments about the Middle Eastern investigator who'd visited her in the morning.

"We need to find out who that was," Dan said.

"This is going to sound crazy, but…." Tom paused while the waitress put down their food. When she left, he continued. "Mrs. Benton said his name was Makmat or Machmoud."

"So?"

"There's a guard who works at Stacy's museum. His name is Mahmoud."

Dan frowned. "That'd be a helluva coincidence."

"I met him. He's from Egypt. He matches the description Mrs. Benton gave, although so do thousands of other people. And he kept walking past Stacy's office while I was there. I thought he was just doing his rounds, but maybe not."

Dan looked at Stacy. "What can you tell us about him?"

She shrugged. "He seems nice enough. Polite but distant. But he's been there for almost as long as I have, and the murders only started less than two weeks ago."

"He might still be involved. I think we should dig into his background, see what we find. Maybe even track his comings and goings. Off the record."

Stacy grabbed Tom's hand. "I can do that. But more importantly, we have to do something about the ushabti. It came after Tom. Twice. We need to know why, and stop it."

"If it's still alive."

"I think it's going to take more than some bullets to kill it." Stacy's voice was grim.

Joanna's stomach gurgled and she pushed her dish away. Thinking about the creature was like having endless nightmares, only while awake.

Tom rubbed his eyes. Dark circles hung under them, matching counterparts to the bruises on his arms and back.

"So now what? How do we find the person or persons behind all this?"

"If there is anyone." Everyone looked at Dan and he shrugged. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but what if the ushabti got released by accident? Someone triggered a curse and doesn't even know it? Or is dead and can't tell us?"

"A curse is pretty specific," Stacy said. "Usually it'd be against whoever opened the tomb or robbed it. Tom didn't do either of those things, and I'm guessing neither did the boy in the park."

"We have to figure out the connection." Tom downed his coffee and picked at the cake crumbs on his plate.

"I'll be back in the lab tomorrow," Joanna said. "I can monitor the evidence reports as they come in."

"I can try to speak to some of the people on Banks's list without Captain Green or Driscoll finding out." Dan's annoyance at being kicked off the case was evident by his narrowed eyes and tight lips.

"While you do that, I'll try to pay a visit to Henry Gordon, if he'll see me." Tom's voice expressed his doubts of that occurring.

"I can go with you," Joanna said to Tom.

"No way." Dan gave an emphatic head shake. "I don't want you doing anything except going to work and coming home. You almost got killed once."

"But—"

"He's right," Tom interrupted. "You and Dan need to be careful. If either of you get in trouble, we lose all our sources of information."

Joanna wanted to say more, but she knew she wouldn't change their minds. Besides, it made sense. She wondered, though, if one or both of them had more personal reasons for not wanting her to accompany Tom.

And if she had her own for wanting to.

"That's settled, then. We all have our assignments for tomorrow. Tonight, we lay low and keep a watch for the ushabti. We'll check in on each other every couple of hours. Agreed?"

Everyone nodded. Dan reached for a fry and then changed his mind. Joanna had a feeling they'd all lost their appetites.

Collingsworth and the others, with all their security, hadn't stood a chance against their attackers.

What would she do if it came after Dan? Or her?

Next time they might not be so lucky.



Nestor Panchal opened the door to the room he shared with Peter Gordon and smiled.

No more roommate.

That asshole Gordon finally got what was coming to him. Too bad it didn't happen sooner. The loud music every night, the people showing up at all hours to buy or smoke pot, the skunk-stink of weed everywhere…he'd been the worst roommate ever. So bad that Nestor spent most of his time in the library or hanging out in the lounge with a few other kids who preferred video games and TV to getting wasted and staying up all night. There'd been several times he almost went to the Resident Assistant and complained, but he knew better. You didn't do that, especially not as a freshman. He hadn't needed anyone to tell him the pecking order when he arrived and found himself placed with a junior.

It didn't matter that the Panchal family had money, or that he'd gotten into Green Mountain School on his grades, or that he played two sports.

First-year student from a different country. If he got off on the wrong foot with the older kids, his next four years would be hell.

Now I don't have to worry!

He crossed the room and opened one of the windows. Even with Gordon gone for a week now, the place still reeked. Then he tossed his books on what used to be Gordon's bed and flopped into his chair. Technically, Gordon was only suspended, pending expulsion. But from what he'd heard, the expulsion hearing was merely a formality. Gordon had dug too deep a hole. He wasn't coming back. And from what Peter had said, Green Mountain was his last chance. After this, it was military school.

Serves you right, pendejo. *I hope they make your life as miserable as you made mine.*

He spun around in his chair to face his laptop. With everyone else gone for spring break, there wasn't much to do on campus except study and play video games. Which was fine by him. Going home meant helping the family run one of the two hotels they owned in Costa Rica. Not exactly a vacation. He put on his headphones and logged into the *World of Warfare* website.

"Greetings, Captain Panchal," the game intoned, as his avatar appeared on the screen.

Other names popped up along one side, remote players like him from around the world. Some he recognized. One of the avatars on the battlefield paused and waved.

"Hey, Nestor," a voice said in his headphones.

"*Hola*, Matthias."

A warm breeze blew across his back, bringing with it the unpleasant smell of swamp water. He thought about closing the window, but he didn't want to pause the game.

"Nestor Panchal."

Nestor frowned. He didn't recognize the deep, gravelly voice. He eyed the screen, but none of the other players were paying attention to his avatar. With a shrug, he lifted his gun and waded into battle against the alien horde swarming over the ridge ahead of them. Maybe someone had decided to disguise their voice for the game.

Or maybe the game gave the aliens the power of speech at this level. That'd be cool. Facing off against an enemy that—

A powerful hand gripped his shoulder and spun him around so hard his headphones flew off.

Bottomless black holes stared at him from a bandage-covered face. An enormous mouth opened, an infinite cavern filled with tiny specks of light like distant stars in space. Something heavy pressed against his chest and his lungs filled with fire. He tried to scream but all the muscles in his body went rigid as acid burned through his veins and knives stabbed his organs. The sweet, greasy smell of roasting meat filled his nose.

The room whirled around him and then he was staring at the ceiling. The creature with the empty eyes loomed over him. Agony exploded in his arms.

Nestor's last coherent thought before madness overtook him was that he should have gone home after all.

On the screen, a giant alien devoured Nestor's avatar.

The game continued on without him.

★ ★ ★

Peter Gordon stepped into the alley. The metal back door of the club closed behind him, muting the deafening roar of EDM down to a dull thud. He pulled out his phone, scrolled through the contacts to Nestor Panchal's name, and hit the call button.

"Hello. You've reached Nestor Panchal. Please leave a message and I'll return your call as soon as I can. Adios!"

Peter disconnected and slid the phone into his pocket with a smile. Three times he'd called since eleven, and three no answers. No way his roomie slept through that, and he really doubted that pussy had gone out anywhere.

Thank you, ushabti. Free semester, here I come!

He opened the door and the music blasted into the alley.

Time to party.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The East Side Rescue Mission sat on the corner of York and Sixty-Third, a depressingly gray, run-down building next to an empty lot. A couple of ragged, soiled blankets lay crumpled by the cement stairs and the whole area smelled of urine. Tattered cardboard boxes littered the dead grass of the open space to the right, the remains of shelters destroyed by the elements or abandoned by men and women who'd decided to take advantage of the warmer but more crowded conditions inside the shelter.

Dan's meeting with Chantal LaCroix, the director of the shelter, had been short. She'd had little information to give beyond what was already in the report she'd filed. Three of her regulars had turned up dead over the past two weeks, and now the rest of the local homeless community was frightened to death of the 'boogeyman' stalking them.

"Dey call him the negative man," she said, with a thick Jamaican lilt. "He appears in the day or night. Lures you in with money and whispers in your ear. And den you die."

It all sounded like hallucinations to Dan, and he said so.

"It's true that a lot of these people suffer from mental illness," she agreed, "and some abuse drugs or alcohol. But not all of dem. And even those that do, dey not incoherent all the time. Something bad happening. Too many people seen it, and not just in this neighborhood."

Dan understood her frustration. LeCroix was typical of the people who ran private or public shelters. Dedicated, overworked, and underpaid. Permanent bags under her eyes said she hadn't slept well in months, and the sour smell of her breath told him she was probably on her fourth or fifth cup of coffee, even though it wasn't noon yet. Indigestion, headaches, and heartache were part of life for her and those like her.

But it also meant she knew the people who moved through her mission better than anyone. If she said something was going on, there probably was.

Whispers in the ear, and then they die. Poison, perhaps? A needle, or something in a piece of food? He hoped not. The last thing he needed was a serial killer on the loose when he had much bigger things to worry about. Hopefully, it would turn out to be nothing but paranoia and gossip. Then he could—

"Dey say he turns folks into mummies."

Dan jumped at the word.

"Mummies? What does that mean?"

LeCroix rubbed her face. The phone rang and someone in the other room shouted Chantal's name. She reached for the phone, but before she picked it up, she fixed Dan with a hard stare.

"When those people found, dey all shriveled, like dey been dead for a hundred years."



Henry Gordon's building turned out to be a twenty-five-story complex less than two blocks from where the Benton family lived, although it might as well have been half a world away. It always amazed Tom how city neighborhoods could change so drastically from one street to the next. The Bentons had money, and their apartment probably cost more than Tom had made in all his years as a cop.

Gordon's penthouse suite didn't compare to the opulence of the Prescott or Banks residences, but it still made the Bentons' place seem modest.

Done in an ultra-modern chrome and white marble style that made Tom feel like he should don sterile lab gear, the wide, rectangular lobby boasted several pieces of abstract modern art comprised entirely of clear crystal formed into vaguely anthropomorphic shapes. A bank of elevators lined one side of the foyer, while the other side held several unmarked doors Tom assumed led to offices for the building's operations

and business managers. At the far end, a long reception counter done in ebony marble occupied the shorter wall. Two men dressed in black suits stood behind it.

Tom stopped as the thick glass doors whooshed shut behind him and Joanna.

"I still think this is a bad idea," he whispered from the side of his mouth, while keeping his gaze forward.

"We've been over this. Without Dan, you need me here."

She'd called him in the morning while he was getting dressed to say she had to go with him to see Gordon. Before he could object, she'd reminded him that his privileges had been revoked by the police. In turn, he reminded her that Dan would by royally pissed if he found out. Still, he couldn't deny she was right. Without police credentials, he stood no chance of getting in to see Henry Gordon again.

"Okay, let's do it," he said, praying their visit didn't get back to Captain Green.

Or Dan.

They approached the front desk, where the guards eyed them with all the emotion of lizards.

"Joanna Reeves, Crime Lab, and Tom Gordon, police liaison, here to see Henry Gordon." Tom held out his ID and one of the men, whose name tag read 'Alphonse', took it. The other, 'Lawrence', reached for Joanna's. His jacket slipped open, revealing the strap of a holster. Alphonse glanced at his partner and showed him Tom's ID.

"PI," he said, his baritone voice carrying more than a hint of disdain.

"This one's legit," Lawrence said. Both guards handed back the IDs.

"Do you have an appointment?" Alphonse asked in a neutral tone that somehow managed to carry a threat of ejection if they didn't.

"We're working an active murder investigation," Joanna said. "The NYPD doesn't need an appointment."

Alphonse stared at them for a moment, and then shrugged.

"Use the elevator at the far left. Hit P for penthouse. Someone will meet you there."

"Thank you." Joanna turned and headed for the bank of elevators,

Tom keeping pace. After pressing the Up button, he watched Alphonse speak into a white telephone. Neither of the guards' eyes left them as they waited for the elevator to descend.

When the elevator doors opened, a strong, almost spicy odor caused Tom to stifle a sneeze.

"Wooh. That is some strong cologne," Joanna said, waving a hand in front of her nose.

The elevator was as futuristic as the lobby, with white walls and floor, and polished chrome for the control panel. Each button was black glass, with the number painted on it in gold. The ascent to the penthouse took less than a minute, and when the doors opened, a burly man dressed in identical fashion to the lobby guards waited for them.

"Please follow me."

As with many penthouse apartments, the elevator opened into a cross between a short hallway and a large foyer rather than the actual apartment. Tom guessed there'd be living space on both sides, through one of the two sets of double doors on either side of the elevator. At the far end, where the guard led them, residents typically repurposed storage areas into gyms, offices, and, in extreme cases, an indoor pool or spa.

When the guard opened a smaller door, Tom saw he'd been right. Gordon sat behind a polished wood desk at the end of an expansive office. Thick carpet covered the floor, creating an almost museum-quality hush, and one wall had been replaced with floor-to-ceiling tinted windows that provided a view of Central Park. A computer and laptop occupied a portion of the desk. Behind Gordon were several cabinets, all closed. Tom assumed they contained televisions and a wet bar. Although for all he knew, there could be whips, chains, and other kinky paraphernalia.

Stop. You've been watching too many Shades of Gray *movies.*

"Officers. How can I help you today?" Gordon looked even paler than the last time they'd seen him, his face so pasty he appeared sickly.

"Sorry to bother you, but we had some follow-up questions regarding the deaths of Roger Collingsworth, Shaun Prescott, and Charles Oliver."

"I was informed that the man responsible for them was himself murdered."

"Yes." Tom nodded. "These are just follow-up questions. Dotting the Is, crossing the Ts, that sort of thing, so we can complete our paperwork."

"I see." Gordon glanced past them, toward a different door than they'd entered through, as if expecting someone. "Well, I am happy to help."

"You previously told me that you sent the deceased and some others a threatening letter regarding an investment opportunity."

"I never threatened them with anything except losing a chance to make some money."

"Right. But about a week before Roger Collingsworth was murdered, you placed a call to him, along with the other deceased and several men whose names match the list you gave me." Tom read off the names.

"I did?" Gordon's hands twitched and he moved them off the desk and onto his lap. "I mean, yes, I did."

"May I ask the purpose of that call?"

"Er, it had to do with the, erm, same business proposal. That was when I first informed them about it."

"And that would be…?"

"The purchase of some, er, artifacts. A good part of my business is buying and selling works of art, ancient relics, and such. I have the opportunity to obtain a rather large collection, but the asking price was too much for me alone. So I reached out to some others who I knew were also collectors, so they could advance me some of the money, which I would return after the auction or apply to anything they chose to bid on."

"I guess your friends must have been pretty excited."

"Oh?"

Tom pretended to check something in his notebook.

"Yes, according to our records, there were more than a dozen calls back and forth between the individuals you contacted. Odd, though."

Before Gordon could ask why, Joanna spoke up.

"None of them called you back."

Gordon's eyes darted from Tom to Joanna and back.

"Well. I can't say as to—"

"Were any of these antiquities from Egypt, by any chance?"

Joanna's question caused Gordon to twitch.

"Er, I, um, couldn't say. Possibly? Maybe? I'm sure there are items from all over the world. I don't know what anyone might decide to—"

"Where did you say the auction is being held?" Tom interrupted.

Silence followed the question. Gordon's face took on a greenish cast and beads of sweat popped up on his forehead.

"The, er, Egyptian Cultural Museum."

Tom raised an eyebrow.

"Then, I guess it would be fair to say there will be some items from Egypt up for bid?"

Gordon swallowed hard and nodded.

"Are you by any chance acquainted with anyone who works at the museum?"

Gordon swallowed several times. He looked so ill Tom took a step back in case the man threw up.

"I, er, yes, I suppose so. I'm a member of the board."

"Interesting." Joanna's eyebrows went up and Tom saw she was struggling not to smile.

"Okay. I think that's all the questions we had. Thank you for your time." Tom closed his notebook. "We'll be in touch if there's anything else."

"Have a good day, Mr. Gordon." Joanna gave him a little wave. Neither of them spoke while the guard escorted them back to the elevator or during the ride down to the lobby. They'd both noticed the camera in the ceiling and assumed it had sound as well as video. Only when they got to Tom's car did Joanna let out a laugh.

"Holy shit, did you see his face when you asked about the museum?"

Tom nodded.

"He was scared shitless. There's definitely some kind of Egypt connection there. My guess is those artifacts are black market, like the ones Banks hinted about."

"You should ask Stacy if she knows anything about this auction."

"Good idea." He rubbed his nose and sneezed. "I can still smell that cologne from the elevator."

"It was pretty strong."

"I keep thinking I've smelled it before."

"Poor you." Joanna checked her watch. "My lunch break is almost over. I need to get back."

"All right. Talk to you later. Thanks." Tom gave her a hug. "You were right. I wouldn't have gotten up there without you."

She gave him a kiss on the cheek and headed for her car. As he watched her leave, the memory of her lips erased all other thoughts.



From his vantage point in the doorway of an empty store across the street, Ahmes the Second watched the detectives leave Gordon's apartment building. The call from the security guards had given him just enough time to slip out the servants' entrance without being seen.

His visit with Gordon had not eased any of his worries. The fool had admitted to using the spell on Tom Reardon, not once, but twice. And both times it had failed. There was no explanation for that. He'd assured Ahmes he recited it correctly, and as much as it galled him to admit it, Ahmes believed him, since the other deaths had gone exactly as they should.

Which meant there had to be a different reason.

Possibilities whirled in Ahmes's head, none of them to his liking. The Greer woman at the museum, with her talk of the ushabti. Had she discovered something in her research? A protective spell would explain the detective's escapes. Or a magical amulet of some kind. Something similar to the invocation of protection Ahmes had cast for himself not long after he was revived in the museum last year. Originally it was to ensure his safety in a strange world, and later he'd maintained it because he feared Gordon, a weasel just like his great-grandsire, might try to double-cross him with a bullet to the back. Ahmes knew it was only greed and self-preservation keeping Gordon in line. He was not to be trusted. It showed in his voice, in his face.

And that was where the real danger lay.

The power to control an ushabti could be intoxicating. It was the reason only the most senior of the priests of Osiris knew the spells and had access to the Book of the Dead. Gordon could ruin their plans by getting too greedy. Or panicked.

What if Gordon decides to send the ushabti after me?

His protective magics only kept him safe from mortal threats. So the question became, who did he need to guard himself against? Greer and her detective friend? Henry Gordon? Both represented equal risks to the success of his plan.

Gordon promised another would die tonight. Let us see if he holds true to his word.

If he did, then it would only be another five days, a week at the most, and he could return to Abydos, restore the treasures to their rightful place within the temple, and claim his rewards in the afterlife.

An ancient proverb came to him.

"Vasil alqarib 'iilaa makan alhubut jzyyana ean tariq alsahb wjzyyana ean tariq tarkah." *The boatsman reacheth the landing partly by pulling, partly by letting go.*

Ahmes nodded to himself. He would continue to do his part and trust Fate to handle the things he couldn't control.

Only, as he headed to the corner to hail a cab, he couldn't help thinking of another saying he'd heard as a young priest.

"La yakun eind rafiq sariq lialaa yaqtalik."

Do not have a thief for a companion, lest he cause you to be killed.

Perhaps it was time to do research of his own and find a way to keep himself safe from the deadly hands of the ushabti Akil Ahmose.



The first thing Dan noticed when Liz Cho slid the body out of the cold storage locker was the smell.

"What is that?" he asked, as a faint mix of exotic spices wafted from the locker. Anywhere else, he might not have paid attention, but in

the morgue it stood out from the usual background of cleaning agents and death.

"Oils of some kind," the assistant ME said. "On the skin. We don't know if it was post-mortem or not, but it's on both arms."

"It smells like a head shop."

Cho nodded.

"Definitely a lot of the same ingredients as incense. We don't have the trace report back yet, but I don't need one. I can tell you exactly what's in it. Clove, sandalwood, myrrh, and cinnamon, plus some traces of other exotic oils and spices."

"How do you know that?"

"Because it's the seventh or eight instance we've seen. All homeless men or women, all within the last two weeks."

A nervous tingle came to life between Dan's shoulders. He pulled out the list of missing and dead persons he'd gotten from Chantal LaCroix.

"Any of the names match these?"

Cho took the list and nodded.

"Definitely. Probably others, but we don't have IDs yet. And the cause of death for all of them appears to be the same, although we don't know what it is yet."

"How can that be?"

"See for yourself." Cho pulled the sheet down, exposing the top half of the corpse.

A shriveled face stared up at Dan, its cheeks shrunken and its lips pulled back to reveal all its teeth. The flesh was grayish-brown and resembled tough, dried-out leather, although Dan had no intention of actually touching it to confirm pliability. The eyes had collapsed like two deflated balloons and the hair was so brittle that pieces of it had broken off just from the weight of the sheet. The rest of the body showed the same characteristics. Skin pulled so tight every bone showed, a sunken hollow below the ribs that reminded Dan of starvation victims. Cho removed the sheet completely, revealing withered genitals and legs desiccated to sticks. All four limbs were twisted and drawn up against the body, and the fingers and toes curled in.

"What in the actual hell?" Dan took a step away as another wave of incense billowed up.

"That's what we want to know. Dr. Ling's already sent out samples to the CDC and the FBI. Our first thought was some kind of disease, but the virology and immunology tests came back clean."

"And they all look like this?"

"Every one. Yu has a theory, but right now he can't prove it."

Dan took out his phone and snapped a couple of pictures, then motioned for her to put the gruesome corpse away.

"At this point, I'll listen to anything."

"The body's been sucked dry. Every bit of liquid removed from the cells. Nothing left but tissue, bone, and cartilage. We haven't autopsied this one yet, but we've done the others. Internal organs show the same extreme desiccation. What we can't determine is how it was done. There are no wounds of any kind. The only time I've ever seen anything like this is from South and Central America and the European Alps, when bodies are exposed to extremely arid conditions. They turn into mummies. But that takes months, sometimes years. And we know for a fact some of these people were alive less than a week or two ago."

Mummies. The word bounced inside Dan's head and dropped into his stomach like a stone.

"That didn't look like any mummy I've ever seen," he said, partly to reassure himself there was no connection to the ushabti killings.

"Actually, it does, you just don't know it. This is what they look like under the bandages. Mummification can occur naturally or artificially. It's simply the preservation of the body in a way that prevents decomposition. Under right conditions, such as a mix of dry heat or cold, the flesh loses all its moisture and hardens. Like making jerky. Or it can be a chemical change, like when bodies are trapped in peat bogs. That's more like preservation. But those processes require exactly the right conditions, none of which include lying in an alley in Manhattan."

"So what's Ba Ling's theory?"

"He thinks maybe someone put these people into a commercial

drying oven, but not one we've ever seen, because even then it would take well over a week to achieve this kind of effect."

"And the oils?"

"Some kind of ritual, is my guess."

"Great." Dan stepped away from the coolers. The smell of the morgue was beginning to make him nauseous, and he wanted nothing more than to escape into the fresh air outside.

"Send me whatever you have, and let me know the moment the rest of the results come in."

"Sure thing."

Dan left, cursing his bad luck. Cho hadn't asked if this case was related in any way to the Ragman murders, but he knew she had to be thinking it. Hell, by now, rumors had to be going around the whole morgue, and probably several precincts as well. Unexplainable causes of death. Mummies. Ritual killings. The only thing the new corpses lacked was a branded symbol.

No, it's even worse than that. Not a mark on the body to indicate a struggle or weapon. The complete opposite of what the ushabti does to its victims.

Dan got to his car and leaned against the door.

Had Green known any of this before assigning him the case? Was it punishment, or just coincidence?

Either way, he was stuck with it. And no leads to go on, other than pending lab results and a cause of death theory that seemed more appropriate to a comic book super villain than your average murderer.

A thought came to him, one that made him shiver in the cool air.

What if there's more than one supernatural creature out there?

It sounded like something from a horror film, but if one kind of demon could exist, why not others?

What would Tom do?

The question, unwelcome as always, forced him to take a mental step back and think logically. Forget the theories, forget the evidence. Start at the beginning. All killers, human or demon, had to have a motive or reason. An MO.

A pattern.

That's it. I need to see what the pattern is. Times, locations.

Dan got in the car and headed back to the precinct.

Time to do some old-fashioned research.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Joanna's cell rang just as she sat down to eat her lunch. When she saw Beth Nowicki's name on the ID, her pulse kicked up a notch.

"Beth, hi. What's up?"

"Hey, Jo. I've got something you might be interested in. Are you by your computer?"

"Hold on a minute." Joanna put down her sandwich and hurried from the break room back to her desk. "Okay, go ahead."

"I just sent you a picture," the librarian said. "Those names you gave me? They did serve in the military at the same time, but there was only one place where all of them were together."

"Where?" Joanna opened her work email and found the message from B.Nowicki. An image was attached.

"Egypt," came Beth's voice from the cell. Joanna's heart jumped while she waited for the picture to open.

Egypt again!

When the photo popped up, it showed a group of men dressed in khaki uniforms, black socks, and black boots. All of them wore white, dome-shaped helmets and had oversized mustaches. The pyramids of Giza loomed in the distance. Despite being black and white, the photo gave the impression of a sweltering day. At the bottom of the picture someone had written *Alexandria, eighteen-eighty-eight*, and below that a list of names.

"What can you tell me about them?"

"Apparently, ten of them left right after the picture was taken and returned to England, and right after that all their fortunes took off. They went from average members of high society to some of the richest men of their time. I put their names in the email."

"Wait." Joanna looked at the picture again. Eleven men stood there. "You said ten of them. What about the other one?"

"I don't know what happened to him. I'll keep digging, but I figured you'd want the pic right away."

"Definitely, thanks." Joanna said goodbye and studied the picture. It had the blurred, faded quality of a copy taken from microfiche of an old newspaper. The photographer had stood at a distance to get the entire group into the shot, along with the background. All of which made it impossible to really see any details beyond the mustaches, dark spots for eyes, and uniforms. But the names were still legible. She compared them to the list Beth had attached, of the ten who returned to England.

Eleven men arrived in Egypt and all of them left together. Except for one.

Simon Gordon.

Dan and Tom need to see this.

She pulled out her cell but stopped when Leonard Gray called her on the office phone.

"Ms. Reese? Could you please come here right now?" Her supervisor hung up before she could ask him the reason. It wasn't like him to use such a curt tone, even when he was stressed.

"You wanted to see me?" Joanna asked, when she got to Gray's office. He looked up from a mound of paperwork and scowled as he pointed at a chair. Behind his glasses, anger sparked in his normally sleepy eyes.

"Sit." She did, her confusion at his evident anger growing by the second. He tossed a piece of paper at her. "Explain this."

She took it and saw it was a lab report for the cloth scraps Tom had given her from the attack in the park. A quick glance confirmed her suspicions. The exact same chemical traces as the pieces found at the Ragman murder scenes. The ones that had disintegrated.

"They're a match," she said, standing up. "I knew they would be. This ties—"

"Sit down." Gray's voice cracked like a whip. Joanna dropped back into the chair.

"What—"

"Who authorized those tests?" Gray asked. "I know I didn't. We didn't get a request from any precinct. There's no evidence number. Nothing."

Joanna's guts turned into a ball of cold, twisting worms. She'd known she was breaking protocol when she ordered the tests, but it hadn't been anything extensive and with the volume of testing the lab did each day slipping them in shouldn't have drawn any attention.

Not only that, why did the results go to him and not me?

Something was not right.

"I did, sir," she said. "The samples weren't from an actual case, but they were given to me by Tom Reardon after we were assaulted two nights ago. We believe they're related to the Ragman case. The chemical analysis shows—"

"I know what it shows. I can read it. That doesn't change the fact that you disregarded protocol and misused funds. That," he pointed at the paper she held, "is nothing but wasted money. There's no chain of evidence. This is totally inadmissible."

"I understand that," Joanna said. "It was for confirmation of a theory. Whoever killed those people is still out there, and came after us. This case shouldn't be closed, and now Dan can go to Captain Green with proof."

Gray sighed and ran his hands through his hair.

"Joanna, I'm afraid I have no choice but to put a formal warning in your file."

"What?" Joanna stood again. "Len, I know I screwed up but—"

"That's not all. I got a call today from Captain Green. He said he received a call that you and Reardon questioned someone relating to this same case. Technically, that's a crime. Impersonating police officers."

"That's not true! Tom identified himself as a special liaison and I specifically said I was from the lab."

"It doesn't matter. Neither of you had official permission to be there. I backed you when Driscoll complained about you working a crime scene, because there were extenuating circumstances and Dan was running the case. But this…. That man you visited—"

"Henry Gordon."

"—filed a complaint. And then Green tore me a new asshole. You put me in a damn bad position, Joanna. I can't protect you."

"I'm sorry, Len. I didn't mean for that to happen."

He nodded.

"Do us both a favor. Keep your head down and just do your job until this blows over. And for god's sake, no more playing private detective. Let it go. If Reardon wants to poke around, that's his business. He doesn't work for the city. We do, and that means we follow orders."

"Yes, sir." Joanna went back to her desk and then detoured to the bathroom, where she slammed a stall door a couple of times.

How was she supposed to just let it go? There was a *thing* out there not only killing people, but more than likely still after Tom and Dan – and by association, her.

Fuck it.

She took out her phone and dialed Tom.

Maybe she couldn't play detective, but there was no reason she couldn't supply one with information.



Lawrence Chatham poured two glasses of wine and paused for a moment to admire the young woman reclining on the couch in his den. Her green silken dress clung to her body in ways that not only showed off her perfect curves but also made it clear she wore nothing beneath it. Her hair, a brilliant blonde nature could never produce, flowed over her shoulders in gentle waves. She'd kicked off her shoes and folded her legs under her in a casually sensual pose only achievable through years of practice. Her bright green eyes reflected the light from the fireplace as she watched him.

She oozed sex, and Lawrence more than appreciated the effort. For the price he'd paid, he expected it.

"Here you go, my dear," he said. "This is a Blandy's fourteen-nineteen. Quite possibly the best Madeira you'll ever taste. Only six hundred bottles produced each year, at a cost of five thousand dollars each."

"Mmm, you know how to make a girl feel special." The woman, who he only knew as Misty, took a sip, grimaced, and then quickly covered up her gaffe with a broad smile. "Delicious."

Chatham held back a comment. He should have known it would be wasted on her unrefined American palate. Not to worry. She wasn't here for her appreciation of wine. Or the expensive dinner and show he'd treated her to. Those were only foreplay; a woman of Misty's caliber required certain things before completing her part of their transaction, and over the years he'd found the level of enthusiasm put forth in the bedroom was directly proportional to the amount of money he spent during the evening.

"Speaking of delicious, you're looking particularly appetizing in that dress. But I dare say you'd look better out of it." Chatham set his glass down and eased his bulky frame next to her. She slipped the tiny shoulder straps down her arms in a slow, sultry move. The fine material flowed like water over the mounds of her breasts, revealing them to be just as exquisite as he'd imagined them. He leaned forward, his heart thumping hard from a combination of desire, alcohol, and Cialis.

A heavy breeze redolent of stagnant water blew through the room and he looked up, ready to fire whatever staff member had dared to open the door.

In the center of the room, a whirling gray mass was dimly visible. It gained solidity, resolved into flapping, spinning bands of cloth. Sparks flew from the fireplace, whipped around by the wind. Then, with a *pop!* like a jar opening, the cloud and wind disappeared.

In its place stood a gray giant.

"Lawrence Chatham."

Chatham's heart stuttered painfully as he backed away from the monster.

No!

Chatham barely heard Misty's screams. Empty eye sockets locked on to him and he stumbled, suddenly lightheaded. The creature charged forward with surprising speed. Chatham hit the edge of a cocktail table and stumbled, catching himself on the arm of the couch. A flash of

green went past and then Misty was gone, her cries for help echoing in the hallway.

Massive hands grabbed him, the powerful fingers crushing his arms. The thing lifted him as if he weighed nothing and slammed him onto the couch. He tried to shout but a hammer blow to his chest knocked the air from his lungs.

This can't be happening. I sent the money—

Fire erupted in his ample midsection, a burning that spread to his arms and legs. His body heaved and he vomited lobster, champagne, and cheesecake. The remains of his dinner pooled in his mouth and ran back down his throat, choking him.

The dreadful face stared down at him and the black hole of its mouth opened wider and wider until it was all Chatham could see.

Pain exploded in his left arm. Then his right.

The darkness swallowed him and in it he discovered an awful truth.

Death is only the beginning for the damned.

And the demons of Hell were real.



Peter Gordon kicked the door closed and threw his keys across the room.

"Fuck!"

He clenched his fists, wishing he could punch something. Someone. But the apartment had cement and steel under the drywall and even in his fury he wasn't stupid enough to break a hand.

That bitch. That fucking bitch.

After all the money he'd spent on her, all the time he'd invested getting into her pants, she'd dumped him. Just like that. No call. No text. Blew him off like…like…he was some ordinary jerkbag. And then she had the nerve to show up at the club anyway, hanging all over some douchebag muscle head.

"Geez, Pete, what's your deal? We had a fun weekend. Get over it."

He'd made to grab her arm but the gym rat stepped between them.

"Take a hike before I break your head."

His face grew hot and he almost threw his drink in the asshole's face. Common sense took over just in time and instead he looked around the hulk's shoulder at Tia, who smirked back at him and gave him a dismissive wave.

"Buh-bye."

To make things worse, all her friends had seen. There'd been no way he could stick around after that kind of public humiliation. Shit, it'd be weeks before he could even show his face there again.

Goddamn whore. That's what she was. Tia the whore Lopez. I should go on Insta and tell the whole world. Maybe post a few of the pictures I took. See how her new boyfriend likes that.

He cursed again. It wouldn't work. He'd either end up arrested for revenge porn or get put in the hospital.

I wish she would just get hit by a bus. Or—

He stopped in the middle of the room, a smile coming to his face. The bitch thought it was funny ripping someone's heart out?

Let's see how she likes it.

★ ★ ★

Tia Lopez was lost in the music when rough hands grabbed her shoulders and spun her around. The combination of molly and vodka filling her veins created a rainbow haze over everything she saw and coated her thoughts in cotton candy. A really tall man in weird clothes stood in front of her. She tried to focus as the crowd backed away, leaving her and the giant in the middle of an empty circle. The deep bass beat thrummed through her body, each pulse urging her to keep dancing. She looked around but couldn't see Derek in the blur of faces at the periphery of the circle.

The giant man bent down. He was wrapped in cloth, even his face. Strips of it hung down like he was starting to come apart. His mask had holes for the eyes and mouth.

Maybe it's part of the show. That made sense. Clubs did stuff like that all the time. Hired dancers, had people dress in costumes. And this one

had picked her to dance with. She eyed his muscular body. Even bigger and better than Derek's.

Lucky me.

She put her arms around his waist and ground into him. She wondered what he looked like under the costume. Maybe they could do more than dance.

"Tia Lopez." His voice was deep and masculine. Hearing him say her name sent shivers down her back and between her legs. The hell with Derek. If he was lucky, he could join in later.

"Right here, baby," she said, pushing her hips forward. His hand slid up her belly to her breasts and electric waves of pleasure rippled out from her nipples.

Fire detonated in her chest and she screamed.

She never heard the crowd echoing her cries.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The chirping of his phone roused Tom from a fitful sleep. Dreams of shambling monsters chasing him and Stacy through a distorted version of a pyramid in the middle of Central Park had haunted him all night.

When he saw Joanna's number, the hairs on his neck stood up. For her to call before dawn meant some kind of real emergency.

"What's wrong?"

"Something big is going down. I think it's the mummy. I just heard it on the scanner. A nightclub, multiple bodies, ambulances, the works."

"How do you know it's our guy?"

"Reports said there were body pieces all over."

"All right, give me the address. I'll go check it out."

"I'll see you there."

"Bad idea," Tom said, pulling on his jeans. "Aren't you already in hot water with your boss?"

"It's a nightclub. I'll say I was out dancing. He can't prove different."

"What about Dan?"

"He got called out earlier. Another body turned up for his case."

Something in her voice told Tom there was more going on than just a murder call, but he didn't pry. The last thing he wanted to do was get involved in Joanna and Dan's marital issues.

"Dammit, Joanna, this is gonna bite you in the ass."

"I don't care. I'm going, either with or without you."

"Fine." Tom grabbed his gun and wallet. "How long will it take you to get here?"

"I'm already on the way."

Tom had no problem locating the scene. Police cars and ambulances filled the street, creating a chaotic red and blue light show on the nearby

buildings. Yellow tape cordoned off an unassuming brownstone. He recognized the situation right away. Underground club, probably hip hop or EDM, the kind rich teens and twenty-somethings flocked to. Fifty bucks to get in and then pay through the nose for watered-down drinks. Half the crowd high on coke or Ecstasy, the other half either selling or looking to buy. Girls in outfits so skimpy they might as well be in their underwear.

Crowds lined both sidewalks, some of them residents of the neighborhood – older, dressed in bathrobes or coats over pajamas to ward off the cold – others obviously club goers, still in their party wear, hugging each other or themselves and shivering.

Tom pushed his way through the throng to the yellow barrier, where an officer with shock-glazed eyes asked him for his ID. As he fished it out, Joanna appeared at the doorway, wearing a disposable white mask.

"Tom! Over here. Officer, please let him through, he's with me."

The officer stepped aside, too shaken to even question Joanna's level of authority despite her red dress and high-heeled shoes. She looked as traumatized as the officer, her face nearly as colorless as her mask. Tom steeled himself for what waited inside, because it had to be damn bad.

Joanna led him down a narrow, dark flight of stairs, keeping one hand on the wall to steady herself as she tried to keep her footing on the uneven brick steps.

"It's a real mess," she said. "Dr. Salonga is there. I heard her say there are three dead, including the intended victim, and lots of injuries. Concussions and broken bones, mostly."

"Do they know what happened?" As they walked down a long corridor that smelled of old beer, piss, and pot, Tom slipped on a blue paper mask, a leftover from the pandemic years. He'd bought boxes of them at the time and still had them lying around in his car and house. They were perfect for crime scenes where you might not want to breathe the air.

They also did a good job of preventing people from recognizing you, which he assumed was why Joanna wore hers.

"Witnesses said the attacker fought his way through the crowd to

reach the victim, a young girl. Two security guards tried to pull him off. They're the other fatalities. Then he disappeared."

"Description?"

"A large man in a Halloween costume. Sound familiar?"

Before he could answer, they turned a corner and entered the main dance floor-slash-bar. Someone had turned on the house floods, but colored dance lights still blinked and strobed, casting dim splashes of red, blue, and green across everything. It gave the broad room a weird, almost underwater effect that made Tom a little dizzy until he saw the corpses in the center of the floor. Then he forgot everything else.

It was easy to tell who the security guards were. Two men, each missing one arm, the rest of their limbs bent in ways the human anatomy was never meant to achieve. Tom pictured the guards approaching the mummy in a threatening manner, one maybe aiming a gun or throwing a punch. He remembered the speed of the thing and had no trouble imagining it grabbing the outstretched arm and tearing it away with its supernatural strength.

Between them, the main victim looked more like scraps from a butcher shop than a human being. Her arms and legs rested several feet from her headless torso. A lake of blood covered the floor beneath her. Gore-crusted bones protruded from the torn flesh of her limbs, and despite the revulsion coursing through him, Tom's training allowed him to register that the ends of the bones were rounded and smooth, indicating they'd been ripped from the socket, not cut or snapped.

His stomach churned as he imagined the mummy twisting and pulling the limbs like a man separating a chicken wing.

That's something I won't be ordering for a long, long time.

The girl's clothes were shredded and the mark of Seba burned into her flesh just below her breasts.

Tom closed his eyes and fought down his nausea before forcing himself to take another look. This time, he noticed something that he'd missed before.

"Where's the head?"

"Over there." An officer pointed across the room. The head sat against a wall, the ends of the trachea and some tendons dangling from the stump of the neck. Brown, tangled hair, matted with blood, covered the face. Based on the splatter, Tom figured either the mummy had thrown it or the crowd, in their mad rush to escape the carnage, had kicked it.

"What are we going to do?" Joanna asked in a low voice.

Tom shook his head, swallowing back the bile threatening to rise up from his stomach.

"I don't know. We can't go to Driscoll or Banks with a story about a mummy. We need to find out what this victim has in common with the others. Can you get a look at the file?"

Joanna chewed at her lip.

"With Dan off the case, that'll be hard. But I'll try."

One of the CSI's radios squawked to life.

"This is 47 Adam. We have a probable One Eight Seven at One Sixty-Five Seventieth and Third. Repeat, One Eight Seven."

"47 Adam, this is Central. Do you require backup?"

"Backup, CSU, coroner. One victim. I think it's the Ragman again."

"47 Adam, can that talk. Backup on the way. Secure the scene and wait."

"Roger that."

Tom looked at Joanna.

"You heard?"

She nodded. "I can't go. They'll want me at the lab."

"All right. I'll check it out and call you later."

She grabbed his arm.

"Be careful."

"You, too."

Their eyes locked, and the urge to kiss her was so strong that Tom backed up a step. The feeling confused him because he'd never experienced it with her before. Sure, she was attractive, and that night in her apartment he'd definitely wanted to have sex with her, but that's all it had been. This was different. There was definitely a spark, and the way she looked at him said it was mutual.

"I better go."

"Yeah." She squeezed his arm once more and then walked away. He couldn't help watching, her tight dress accentuating every curve and movement.

Then a rush of guilt assaulted him. He was with Stacy now, and they had a really good thing going.

Yet no matter how much he tried to put her out of his mind, the image of Joanna in her red dress kept coming back as he headed for his car.



The first thing Dan noticed as he approached the body was the smell: cloves, cinnamon, and sandalwood. It provided a bizarre counterpart to the odors of garbage and piss in the alley.

A plainclothes officer with a flashlight stood next to a thin woman in a blue medical examiner's jacket. A second officer spoke to an old woman dressed in layers of dirty, ragged clothing, her white hair poorly tucked into a knit cap with several holes in it. He assumed she'd been the one to find the body.

"Officer Reese," Dan said to the assistant ME, who glanced up and nodded.

"Sammy Butler. You got a real weird one here." She stepped away so Dan could get a better view. The corpse looked just like the ones Liz Cho had shown him, arms and legs contorted, body doubled over, flesh withered beneath clothes that were now five sizes too large. The mouth hung open in a skeletal scream and only fragments of hair remained on the head.

"Number eleven." Dan averted his light from the dead man's eyes, which had collapsed inside their sockets.

"No shit?" Butler's voice showed no emotion. "That's New York for you."

Dan glanced at her. The woman was probably only in her early thirties, far too young to have such a jaded outlook.

Butler seemed to understand Dan's surprise.

"I did three years at a coroner's office upstate, town called Rocky Point. You want weird? This is nothing compared to what I saw there."

"Can you tell me anything about this one?"

"Not much." Butler counted on her fingers as she spoke. "No obvious wounds, although there could be something under the clothes. Body looks like it was drained of all liquids, at least in the skin and muscles. That's probably what caused the twisting of the limbs, the muscles shrinking and tightening. Don't ask me for a time of death. Body temp is ambient, so it's been in this condition a minimum of four or five hours, maybe longer, depending on the temperature when it was placed here. If you ask me, somebody killed him, baked him in an oven, and then dumped him."

"That's what Dr. Ling said about the others."

"There you go." Butler nodded again, her blonde hair bobbing in time to the movement, and then turned as an NYPD van pulled up. Two crime scene officers got out, motioning for her and Dan to step back. With nothing to do but watch, Dan pulled out his phone and tried calling Joanna. He'd lost his temper when she told him about getting in trouble at work, all because of Tom and his so-called evidence. That had escalated into a full-blown argument, with him accusing her of putting her job on the line because of her feelings for Tom, and her shouting at him that she was trying to help keep them all alive and he was being an insecure jerk.

He'd responded by saying he had every right to be insecure when his wife was running around with her ex-lover.

The moment the words came out, he wished he could take them back. But it was too late. She'd stormed into the bedroom and slammed the door.

He'd spent the rest of the night on the couch, until the call came in for a body in the alley.

Before he left, he tried apologizing through the door. There'd been no answer.

Just like there'd been no answer to his two text messages, and now a phone call.

"Dammit, Joanna. Just let me apologize," he said, when her voice mail came on. He hung up and was about to text again when his radio came to life.

"This is 47 Adam. We have a probable One Eight Seven at One Sixty-Five Seventieth and Third. Repeat, One Eight Seven."

"47 Adam, this is Central. Do you require backup?"

"Backup, CSU, coroner. One victim. I think it's the Ragman again."

Dan ran for his car without pausing to respond.

★ ★ ★

"What are you doing here?"

Dan stopped short at the sight of Tom Reardon standing in the lobby of the crime scene building. Despite their current truce, his anger rose up again and by the way Tom's eyes widened and he backed up a step, he knew his old partner saw it on his face.

"Heard it on the scanner. Knew it had to be related to the mummy."

"How?" Dan went to press the elevator button and saw Tom had beaten him to it.

"Besides the call mentioning the Ragman? The address." When Dan gave him a quizzical look, Tom added, "It's Reginald Chatham. One of the names on the list. You didn't know?"

"I was at a murder scene. Soon as I heard Ragman, I came right here."

The elevator opened and they got in. Dan made it a point to stand as far from Tom as possible. Neither of them said anything on the ride up to the penthouse. When they got there, a uniformed officer handed them gloves and booties and pointed them in the direction of the crime scene.

As soon as he walked in, Dan knew the ushabti was responsible.

The victim's mutilated body rested in a pool of blood, body parts scattered around the room. On his ample belly, the mark of Seba stood out clearly against the pale flesh.

Dan was approaching the body when Chad Driscoll's voice boomed from the doorway.

"Who the hell called you two?"

Dan turned, not bothering to hide his frustration.

"If this is related to the other murders, then our case is still open. Or do you think this is just a coincidence?"

"We don't know anything yet, Pieces." Driscoll sidestepped a dismembered arm and approached the blood-stained couch. "Could be a copycat. Doorman says moneybags here came home with a high-class hooker. Video shows her running out the back exit. That sounds pretty suspicious to me. Maybe this is just a robbery gone bad."

"You think a hooker did this?" Tom waved his arm around.

"She could've drugged the old man and then called her pimp."

"You can't be that stupid," Dan said.

Driscoll's face went red.

"Yeah? At least I'm smart enough to know who my wife's sleeping with."

Dan's fist connected with Driscoll's mouth before his brain registered he'd thrown the punch. Driscoll stumbled back, slipped in a puddle of blood, and landed with a wet *splat* on the gore-soaked carpet. When he got up, his whole right side was painted in red. He rubbed his jaw and glared at Dan with fury in his eyes.

"You're done, Pieces. I hope they take your fucking badge away for that." Driscoll stormed out of the room. The other officers stared at him and then at Dan, their expressions already shifting from surprise to holding back grins. Dan knew half of them were glad someone finally put Driscoll on his ass, the rest anticipating spreading the story to everyone at the precinct.

Dan took a deep breath, the gravity of his actions becoming more apparent as his anger faded. Green would throw a fit when he found out. And judging from the way the uniforms were ducking out of the room with their phones, that would be sooner rather than later.

"Oh, man, you should not have done that." Reardon's unusually serious tone matched his expression of concern.

"Shut the fuck up." Dan closed his eyes. At that moment, he'd have welcomed the goddamned ushabti showing up, so he could shoot the bastard back to whatever hell it came from.

What's done is done. He'd worry about it later. He took a deep breath and then got out his phone and started snapping pictures. He still had a job to do.

Although maybe not for long.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"This is goddamned unacceptable!" Lester Green's face had gone three shades darker and his eyes were bulging more than normal as he shouted at Dan. "I won't have it. Not on my watch. Badge and gun, right now. You're not only off the case, you're on administrative leave until further notice. You better get in touch with your union rep, because there will be a hearing."

Biting his tongue not to say anything that would dig his hole deeper, Dan placed his badge and gun on the desk, his face hot from anger and the humiliation of having to do it in front of that fuckwit Driscoll, who stood by the window smirking while Green tore Dan a new asshole. The bruise on Driscoll's cheek provided no consolation for Dan's dressing down.

There'd been no excuse he could give for his actions. A cop didn't hit another cop on duty, especially at a crime scene. Even if the recipient of the punch was a total dick with a big mouth. Had it happened off duty in a bar, there'd have been no repercussions except an unofficial warning to knock it off. On top of everything, the press was in an uproar over the two new murders. Headlines screamed about the Ragman returning and the police dropping the ball, and Dan knew the big brass had to be leaning heavy on Green. Which meant the captain needed a scapegoat.

With nothing more to say, Dan left the office. When he got outside, he called Joanna, who still didn't pick up.

"Fuck me." He put the phone away. Now what? If he was lucky, his union rep would negotiate some kind of unpaid leave followed by a transfer to a different precinct. Most likely some crap hole in the Bronx, or way out in Far Rockaway. And he could kiss any promotions goodbye for a few years, at least.

On top of that, he'd probably damaged his marriage worse than his career.

He was tempted to blame Reardon. Logically, he knew it wasn't Tom's fault. He'd been on the edge of losing control for a year. Therapy hadn't helped, knowing how miserable he was making Joanna hadn't helped. But even now, as much as he wanted to, he couldn't let go of the anger and jealousy that had been poisoning him since that moment he'd seen Tom and Joanna naked in bed together, obviously enjoying themselves.

Find the ushabti and destroy it. Then Tom will go away and you can focus on saving your marriage.

If only it were that easy.



Two murders in one night!

Ahmes's hands shook as he slammed the morning paper down.

Chatham's name was a welcome sight, but a girl? In a nightclub?

What in Osiris's name was Gordon thinking?

Taking a disposable phone from among several in his nightstand drawer, he punched in Gordon's cell number from memory. The other man answered on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Did you perform the rite?"

"Yes," Gordon replied, his voice smug. "Judging from the news, Lawrence experienced a fatal case of interruptus at—"

"Quiet. How many times?"

"How many times what?"

"The spell, you fool. How many times did you use it?"

"Once. Always once. Why? What happened?" Gordon's voice took on a nervous quiver.

"The ushabti appeared twice last night. A young woman. Who else is in your home?"

"No one except my usual staff during the day, and at night it's just the two security guards downstairs and the one in the hallway by the lift."

"What about your son?"

"He's still away at school."

"Then one of your employees has stolen a copy of the spell and is using it for their own purposes."

"That's impossible. None of them ever come into my private office except to clean it. Even my assistant has never been here."

"Text me the names and addresses of your cleaning people. A wise man trusts no one but the gods."

Ahmes hung up and waited for the information to arrive, his own words coming back to him. Trust no one. Which meant Gordon as well. The man could be lying. But for what reason? Why would he want the girl dead?

When the information arrived, he located each address on a map. He intended to search as many of them as he could.

And woe to whichever of them had dared commit the sacrilege of calling forth the ushabti for any purpose other than to serve the will of Sokar.



Joanna was reading through the ME's preliminary reports on the Chatham and Lopez murders when someone cleared their throat behind her. She turned and found Leonard Gray standing there, with a security guard behind him.

A cold ball formed in her stomach. There was only one reason for the guard's presence.

"Len, what's going on?"

His answer confirmed her fears.

"Jesus, Joanna. You just couldn't leave well enough alone. First you show up at a crime scene and then you access files you don't have approval to read."

"It's not what you think," she said, desperate to avoid the inevitable. She needed more time with the files. If she had enough evidence to build a strong case, maybe she could convince Len, or anyone, to listen to her.

"I was at the club by accident. And there were some anomalies in the evidence from the Collingsworth case I wanted to—"

"Stop." Gray shook his head. "You were seen inside the club with Tom Reardon. After the attack. Not outside with the other witnesses. And our department has received no evidence yet from the Lopez or Chatham scenes, so you had no reason to access those files. Did you think no one would be monitoring you after the last time?"

"Len, please. Just listen—"

"You are officially suspended without pay. HR will be in touch regarding a hearing, which will determine if you can still work for the lab or if you'll be terminated. Considering your husband has been suspended as well, I think it's best if you pack up your things now and assume you won't be coming back."

"What? Dan was suspended, too?"

Gray sighed. Behind his glasses, his eyes were sad and hurt.

"You left me no choice, Joanna. I'm sorry." He stepped aside so she could stand up. "Officer DeLongi will escort you out."

Ten minutes later, Joanna stood on the sidewalk outside the lab, all that remained of her dream job sitting in the bottom of a cardboard box. Tears ran down her cheeks as she tried to wrap her head around everything that had happened. Her job. Dan's. Their marriage.

She'd purposely not responded to any of Dan's messages or texts throughout the morning, not wanting to continue their argument over the phone.

The idea of going home had been something she'd been dreading since she left the apartment.

Now it would be so much worse.



Ahmes stood in Henry Gordon's industrial-sized kitchen, resisting the urge to just kill the old fool and deal with the remaining names on the list in a more direct manner, like a knife to the throat. But that was his

frustration talking, and he knew better than to deviate from his vow to Sokar.

Still, it was so tempting….

He'd spent the day ransacking the homes of the only people in Gordon's employ who, according to him, had access to his private office. Two housekeepers. When those searches turned up nothing, he'd shown up unannounced at Gordon's penthouse and demanded to see the office, where he'd searched every nook and corner for signs of a camera or microphone. Gordon had then opened a drawer in his desk and shown that the spell sheets and paraphernalia were all there.

"The only time they come out is when I do the spell," he'd said, and Ahmes believed him. Or, at least he believed the man believed it. If someone had snuck in, Gordon would never know. The drawer didn't have a lock on it. But it did seem unlikely. The security guards downstairs never left their post, and the one stationed at the elevator remained in the corridor at all times. All their log entries matched the people who'd come to the apartment in the past two weeks.

"Maybe someone else knows about the spell. Some other Egyptian."

Ahmes started to tell Gordon that was impossible, but then he stopped. For the first time, he wondered if perhaps he'd been mistaken. That someone else in the city had the power to call forth an ushabti. The odds seemed astronomical. Yet, in theory, all it required was a copy of the Book of the Dead and some common items. As far as he knew, no one in the modern world possessed a copy of the book except for the one he'd obtained at a high price through Gordon's black market connections. But he had no way of being certain. If one copy existed, there could be others.

Perhaps it is a blessing in disguise.

The unexpected thought made him pause. After all, the deaths had nothing in common with his own targets. Which would create confusion for the police. And if the unknown spellcaster wasn't calling upon Akil Ahmose, then the additional deaths would bring no undue attention to Ahmes the Duat.

With relief easing the heavy yoke of worry on his shoulders, he bade goodbye to Gordon with a final admonition to be extra vigilant.

"We are so close now," he said. "Do nothing to impede our success."

"You have my word," Gordon replied. "All I want is to enjoy my wealth and know that the treachery inflicted on my great-grandfather has been repaid in bloody spades."

Ahmes exited the apartment, a single thought in his head.

Treachery will be repaid indeed. But not in the way you expect, Henry Gordon.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Henry Gordon sat at his desk, an untouched whiskey by his hand, the remaining spell sheets stacked in front of him. In his head, he replayed the conversation he'd had with the high priest. He'd been going over it for almost a half hour. Something about it wasn't sitting well with him, but he couldn't pinpoint it. A word, a tone, a facial expression….

The man was hiding something.

Gordon prided himself on being a strong judge of character. His ability to read people had played a big part in his ability to build a thriving business empire.

On the surface, nothing seemed amiss. The usual threats to be careful, to complete his tasks. But right at the end, when he'd mentioned to the priest about repaying the treachery done to his great-grandfather….

The priest's face. Gordon focused on the image. A look in his eyes, the slightest quiver at the corner of his mouth….

As if he were trying to hold back a smile.

Treachery? Could the man be planning to cheat him? There was a lot of money at stake. Were it anyone else, he'd consider that motive enough. But what good was wealth to a man who intended to return to the land of the dead? Over and over, the priest had insisted his goals were to avenge the sacrilege of his god's temple and return himself to a place of favor in the afterlife. So if not wealth, then what?

It was my great-grandfather who killed him. The reason for his being here in the first place.

Suddenly the idea of a double-cross made sense. He needed Gordon dead to complete his revenge. From the start, Ahmes had always intended to kill him; he'd just found a way to use him first. But how? And when? Ahmes was forbidden from calling the ushabti himself, because he said

that would be a sin in the eyes of Osiris. However, there was nothing stopping the priest from putting a bullet in his head. Or calling forth some other dark magic to do his dirty work for him.

How did one protect themself from the supernatural?

He looked at the spell.

The priest had insisted only nine spells could be read. That had proven to be a lie, since Henry had already sent the ushabti after that detective, and it hadn't affected his ability to call it forth afterward. And now Ahmes feared someone else might be using it as well.

If Ahmes had lied about that, he could be lying about anything. Or everything.

Gordon took a sip of whiskey.

In any business deal, it always made sense to protect your interests. *I'm not going to let him play me for a fool.*

After checking to make sure the sun had fully set, he quickly arranged the candles and lit them. Following instructions that he now knew by heart, he used a sewing needle to prick his finger and draw forth a few drops of blood, which he let drip into a small bowl. Then it was just a matter of filling in the proper line and reading the spell, with a slight change in the wording.

Hear me, Ushabti Akil Ahmose

I call you to do my bidding

And rid the world of any who mean to do me harm, whoever or wherever they may be.

As he watched the spell sheet burn, he prayed it would be enough. There was no way to know if the spell worked until he found himself in actual danger. And if it didn't….

He'd be joining the others in eternal Hell.



Dan expected Joanna to be asleep when he got home. Instead, he found her sitting on the couch, an empty bottle of wine and a box of tissues next to her. It didn't take a detective to see she'd been crying, and guilt

nearly made him nauseous. He'd stopped on the way home for a couple of drinks because he wanted to get his frustrations out before he faced Joanna. Now it just seemed selfish.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I've been trying to tell you all day," he said, sitting down next to her. He reached for her and paused, their argument and subsequent silence still fresh in his mind. He wasn't sure what he'd expected when he got home, but it wasn't this. A cold fear woke inside him, that he was the cause of her distress, and she was about to tell him their marriage was over.

She fell into his arms and pressed her head against his chest. Her words were muffled and full of tears but he understood them.

"I got fired today. They fucking fired me!"

"Ah, hell." He stroked her hair. He didn't bother asking why. Coming on the heels of his own suspension, the reason was obvious. "I'm sorry. It's all my fault. They suspended me, too."

Joanna shook her head. "I know, but this is all on me."

She told him about visiting the crime scene at the club with Tom and then accessing files without permission.

"I know you said not to, but I couldn't stop myself. And I tried to get hold of you to come with me but you were out on a case and then not answering the phone and—"

Dan's earlier anger threatened to rise up again but he forced it down. He couldn't be mad at her. He'd have done exactly the same thing. Even his enmity toward Tom seemed muted, as if the bitterness inside him had finally burst and all the jealousy and rage oozed out. In its wake, there was only a dull resignation, an acceptance that the responsibility for so much of what had gone wrong the past year rested squarely on his shoulders. Their marriage problems, his inability to forgive anyone, his piss-poor attitude toward everybody in his life.

It all seemed so stupid and petty now, compared to the important things. Joanna. Their careers.

Surviving an ancient curse come to life.

"It's okay," he said, holding her tight. "We'll figure it out. I should

have listened to you from the beginning. Now we need to focus on what matters. Destroying that ushabti."

"But now we won't have access to the police files or lab results."

Dan snorted. "None of that helped us anyhow. We're going to have to do this on our own. The others will be here soon. Maybe they'll have some ideas."

"God, I hope so."

So do I, Dan couldn't help thinking.

Otherwise, they were all as good as dead.



Beth Nowicki rubbed her eyes and looked at the faded, blurred article again. A digitized file from a microfilm copy of a newspaper page printed in eighteen eighty-eight. *The Egyptian Gazette.*

Only two paragraphs long, but with a picture accompanying it. And the name. She checked the list Joanna had given her. Yes, there it was.

This could be the clue she needs.

Beth checked her phone. Almost ten-thirty. She couldn't remember if Joanna was working the late shift this week. Better not to call her cell if she had to be up early for work.

I'll leave a message on her work phone and email the article.

"Joanna, it's Beth. I think I found something you'll be interested in. I emailed a newspaper article to you. Call me after you read it. There's definitely a connection—"

A hot wind gusted through the library, scattering papers in all directions. Beth stood up and looked around. There were no windows or external doors nearby.

The deep shadows between the aisles, which had always seemed soothing to her, now projected an air of menace.

The breeze continued to blow, accompanied by a garbage can stink. Movement a few feet away caught her attention. A gray, whirling shape next to the end of the table. In the blink of an eye, it took on the form of a towering man wrapped in bandages.

No, strips of cloth.

Ragman!

Beth had followed all the news articles relating to Joanna's case. And now her research had drawn the killer's attention. She picked up a heavy book from the pile she'd gathered and threw it at the colossal intruder. It struck him in the shoulder but by then Beth was already sprinting for the exit.

"Help! He-oof!"

A heavy blow to her back knocked her off her feet and sent her sliding into a bookcase. Her head struck the hard wood and her vision lit up with colored fireworks. Before she could catch her breath, the intruder loomed over her.

"Beth Nowicki." The voice echoed off the tiled floor and stone walls. Two bottomless pits stared at her. Tiny points of light glittered deep within their unfathomable depths. The room spun in circles, revolving around the creature's face.

Fire exploded in her chest and stole the air from her lungs, trapping her scream in her head. Invisible flames engulfed her body. Agony raced along her nerves into her brain, robbing her of the ability to think.

But the pain never ended.



Peter Gordon took a deep hit from his vape pen and held in a scream while the atomized liquid THC filled his lungs with mentholated coolness.

Goddamn that Richard Flaherty!

He'd woken a few hours earlier to find a message on his phone from the headmaster at Green Mountain Boys School. The first part was exactly what he'd expected, informing him of Nestor's terrible demise and offering condolences on the tragic circumstances. Only instead of finishing with an assurance that all charges would be dropped out of respect for his loss, Flaherty had stated in no uncertain terms that the case against him would continue and his suspension still remained in effect.

No, this won't do at all. Peter took another hit. Pinning the drugs

on Nestor was now his only defense, but a very risky one. Especially with the headmaster obviously out to get him. Of course, if Flaherty wasn't there….

Peter smiled and closed his eyes, picturing the headmaster's face.

"Akil Ahmose, I want you to kill Richard Flaherty. Tonight. He is my enemy."

With a sigh, he lay back on the pillows of his bed, the tension oozing from his body.

Surprise, Richie. I don't think you'll be seeing me at any hearings.



"Arnold Smythe."

The rough, rumbling voice came from behind him. Smythe dropped his newspaper and let out a startled yelp at the sight of the towering man standing by the doorway. He sprang up from his seat, decades of martial arts training rushing back to trigger muscle memory even as he struggled to comprehend the intruder. Next to him, his wife, Maggie, screamed as she got her first look at the creature that had appeared in their reading room.

Wrapped entirely in cloth, with black, empty holes for eyes and a mouth, it cut short Maggie's second cry with a backhand to the face that lifted her off the ground and shattered her neck with an audible *crack*. The creature grabbed the oversized couch and tossed it across the room as if it were no more than a pillow.

Leonard and Wilson, Arnold's twin sons, burst in. Both attended graduate school but were home for spring break.

"Mom!" one of them shouted. The creature looked their way and Arnold used the distraction to open his rifle cabinet and pull out a Remington side-by-side twelve-gauge shotgun. Almost a hundred years old, it was in pristine condition, like all his guns. He slammed two cartridges into it and fired both rounds into the chest of the behemoth. Dust and scraps of cloth exploded outward and two giant holes opened in its chest.

Then closed up an instant later.

Arnold knew right then it was the creature that killed his old friends, and there was no defeating it. That goddamned Henry Gordon had double-crossed him. If he didn't do something drastic, he'd pay the same price as the others.

"Over here!" he called to his sons. At the same time, he triggered the door to his safe room. Using one hadn't saved Charles Oliver or Leslie Prescott, but he had a different escape in mind.

Len and Wilson ran across the room and followed him as he ducked into the reinforced space behind the gun cabinet. As soon as they were through, he sealed the door shut. Only instead of counting on that being enough to protect them, he opened a second door, in the floor. Stairs led down into a basement passage he'd had built in case of a home invasion. Rather than being trapped inside the safe room if thieves decided to set the house on fire, he had a backup strategy in place. The corridor took them to what had originally been a bomb shelter back when their Westchester County mansion was built in the fifties. He'd upgraded it into a modern space large enough for the whole family to wait out any kind of long-term emergency, from a few days to a months-long siege if the local nuclear power plant ever melted down or terrorists decided to attack the suburbs of New York. Three feet of concrete buttressed with steel rebar, battery-operated power to last several months, and enough food and water for almost a year, if rationed carefully.

Arnold keyed the code to open the airlock-style door and then turned as someone shouted from behind him.

The creature held Len in the air. Powerful arms squeezed and the snap of breaking bones filled the space. Len vomited blood and more of it gushed from his nose. The monster dropped him and drove a fist into Wilson's stomach so hard it came out his back, dripping gore and flesh. It shook the dead boy's body off and charged forward, its bloody palm spread wide.

Arnold had just enough time to curse his great-grandfather, Pierce, and all the men who'd plundered the ancient tomb with Simon bloody Gordon.

Then the fires of Hell erupted in his chest, wiping out all other thoughts.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Tom had a slice of pizza halfway to his mouth when Dan dropped a picture in front of him.

"What do you make of this?"

The photo showed a grotesque, twisted human body with the skin so withered the outlines of the bones were visible beneath. Only clumps of dry, brittle hair remained on the head. The tight flesh rendered the person's sex unidentifiable, with the chest completely flat and the face little more than a skull.

As Tom examined the photo, Stacy leaned over his shoulder.

"Is that the stolen mummy?"

Tom looked up sharply. "What makes you say that?"

"You said a mummy was found in that apartment in Queens. Joanna's dating of the wrappings showed it was only a few hundred years old and didn't have the right chemicals in it. This is a picture of a mummy. A mummy without the wrappings. But it's not an ancient Egyptian mummy. The skin would be much darker because of the chemicals they used. And harder, like petrified leather. This looks more pliable, although it's hard to say from a picture. It could also be a naturally mummified corpse, like from the Alps or South America."

Dan placed more photos on the table. "These people were all found right here in Manhattan over the past couple of months. Street people who turned up dead, presumed murdered. I took the photos myself at the morgue and at the most recent crime scene." He tapped one of the pictures.

"Those are the homeless murders you were working on before you…." Joanna let the question trail off when she saw Dan's lips tighten.

He nodded. Using the pictures as aids, he quickly filled them in on

the details of the case. He also passed around a copy of the case file. He and Tom had always made it a habit to keep a duplicate copy of every case they worked on, so if they wanted to go over something in the middle of the night, they didn't need to bring files home or log into the police system. Now he was glad he'd never gotten out of the habit, because it meant he still had his Ragman notes and the homeless murders information available.

"Liz Cho at the ME's office mentioned the same thing," Dan said, looking at Stacy. "South American or European mummies. That's what made me think the cases might be related. She told me Dr. Ling's theory is someone put these people into a drying oven."

"That would do it," Joanna said. "Slowly evaporate the moisture from the bodies. The flesh would shrink, causing the deformation of the bodies."

"Anything else about them?" Tom asked, without looking up from examining the photos.

Dan frowned as he concentrated. The bodies had all been similar. The locations of the crimes were all in the file, along with the ME's notes. He could almost smell the oils—

"Oils."

"What?" Tom asked through a mouthful of pizza.

"Liz said the bodies all had traces of this weird substance on their arms. Some kind of essential oil. It should be in the file. Cinnamon, clove…."

Tom flipped through the pages.

"Here. Sandalwood and myrrh are the other two."

"That sounds like incense," Joanna said.

"It reminded me of a head shop."

"Holy shit!" Tom stood up so fast Stacy almost dropped her soda. "I think I witnessed one of those murders."

"What? When?" Dan spread the pictures out again. "Which one?"

"I don't know. Remember the day you saw me coming out of the precinct? You were with Driscoll, right after the ushabti killed Collingsworth."

Dan nodded. Joanna and Stacy moved their chairs closer.

"I was heading home from work the previous night. Saw what looked like a guy roughing up a homeless woman in an alley. Stupid me, I tried to help her. He jumped me, whacked me on the head, and then grabbed me. My whole body felt like it was on fire. I got off two shots. Didn't hit him but he bolted like a rabbit. Next thing I knew, I woke up in the hospital with an aching head. But here's the kicker. I got a look at the woman before he conked me. Her face was all shrunken, like she'd starved to death. Almost like these," Tom tapped the photos, "but not as extreme. And one more thing."

Everyone waited for him to continue.

"There was a smell around her. Incense. I remember 'cause it seemed weird that a homeless person would wear perfume."

Dan flipped through his file.

"Let's see. Victims on or around the date of the Collingsworth murder…okay, there was one the week before and two the week after. Two of them were women. Where were you attacked?"

Tom told him the street, and Dan compared it to where the victims had been found.

"Okay, here's a match. Ellen Keysling. Age fifty-two. No address of record, no next of kin. Cause of death is listed as natural because there were no wounds found on the body. But the autopsy report states 'extreme desiccation of the flesh and torsion of the limbs consistent with contraction of the musculature and connective tissues'. Same as all the others."

"What if the ushabti is the cause of all of them?" Joanna asked. "Maybe it's like a vampire. It has to suck the life out of people in order to survive."

"The person that attacked me in that alley was an ordinary man," Tom countered. "Shorter than me. Stocky. Dressed in a white suit. Or maybe gray. I never saw his face, it was too dark."

"What he did to you, and her, wasn't ordinary," Stacy said. "There are all kinds of creatures in Egyptian mythology. If the ushabti is real, why not others? I need to do more research."

"You can use my computer." Dan motioned toward his office. "The

rest of us will look for any other murders that might fit these two patterns. We're not leaving this apartment tonight."

Stacy nodded and headed for the office, pizza and soda in her hands. Joanna grabbed her laptop and said she'd start with news stories for the past year. Dan looked at Tom.

"I guess I should fill you in on all the details."

"Yeah."

An awkward silence followed. The last thing Dan had intended was for him and Tom to be alone in his living room working side by side. Even with their new truce, it brought back too many memories, good and bad. What the hell was he supposed to say?

Tom shook his head. "Look, man, let's just both admit this is damn weird and try to ignore it. Where'd the other murders happen? Is there a pattern?"

Grateful to focus on the case, Dan shrugged. "That's what I've been trying to figure out. There doesn't seem to be one."

Tom smiled. "There's always a pattern. We just need to look harder."



Breaking News

STOWE, VT (AP) – Police were called to the scene of a gruesome murder at the home of Richard Flaherty this evening. According to a source within the Stowe police department, Flaherty, the headmaster of the nearby Green Mountain Boys School, was violently attacked by as yet unknown assailants. Police are investigating possible motives. Flaherty's wife, Annette, has been taken to a local hospital suffering from shock. Sources say the body was dismembered in the kitchen. No official statement has been released.

This is the second murder involving the Green Mountain Boys School to rock this quiet community in the past days. Earlier in the week, a student, Nestor Panchal, was killed in a similar fashion in his dormitory room. His death is still under investigation and—"

Henry Gordon slammed his laptop closed. The two names

continued to flash before his eyes. Nestor Panchal. Richard Flaherty. Peter's roommate and the headmaster of Peter's school. Violent deaths. Dismemberment.

It couldn't be coincidence.

The ushabti.

But how? And why?

Did it get Peter as well?

Cold fear erupted in Henry's stomach. He grabbed his phone and hit Peter's number. No answer, just voice mail.

That doesn't mean anything, he tried telling himself. *The boy rarely answers calls or emails. Not unless he needs something.*

If anything had happened to Peter, the school would've informed him immediately.

Unless his body hasn't been found yet.

No. The police would've immediately looked for him after Nestor's death. Which means….

They know where he is. And that he's alive.

A new kind of panic replaced the terror of thinking his son was dead.

The girl in the nightclub. The boy in the park. Both Peter's age. Both victims of an ushabti, according to the priest. Ahmes had suspected someone working for Henry. What if it was….

Henry jumped up from the couch where he'd been reading through the news for anything about Arnold Smythe's death. Peter's room was at the far end of the apartment. When Henry got there and threw the door open, he found the bed made and the dressers clean, a sure sign Peter hadn't come home without telling him.

It had to be him. No other explanation made sense. And why would the boy come home but not stay—

No. He wouldn't. And on the heels of that thought came another.

Yes, he would. Just not here.

Henry called another number.

"Good evening. Bristol on Park. How may I help you?"

"This is Henry Gordon. Is my son Peter staying there, or has he been there recently?"

"Hello, Mr. Gordon. I haven't seen him, and no one's been up to your apartment during my shift. I can check the log, if you want."

"Yes, right away." Henry waited while the security guard reviewed the files. Why hadn't he thought of it before? The old apartment was only a few blocks away. He'd rented it out for a while after they moved, but since November it had been empty after the last tenant left. He'd planned on renovating it before renting it again, but then fulfilling his bargain with Ahmes had become his number one priority.

It would be easy enough for Peter to snag one of the spare keys and stay there.

"Mr. Gordon? I checked all our logs for the past two months. No one's been to your apartment except for the cleaning service that comes on the first of each month."

"Let me know if anyone tries to go up there. Immediately."

Henry disconnected while the security guard was still answering him. Returning to his laptop, he opened one of his online bank accounts. If Peter wasn't there, he had to be staying somewhere else in the city.

And that meant there'd be a money trail to follow. He just had to find it.

★ ★ ★

A few blocks away, Dante Granger hung up the phone and turned to the boy sitting next to him in the security office.

"Dude, your old man is such a prick. How'd you know he'd call?"

"He's been trying my phone all night," Peter lied. He'd been monitoring the news for Flaherty's death and knew that as soon as his father saw the story, and learned about Nestor, he'd figure out Peter wasn't at school anymore. It wouldn't take him long to think of the old apartment. "I'll bet he comes over here tomorrow. Did you erase all the video footage of me?"

"Just like you asked. You got my stuff?"

Peter passed over the joint he'd been smoking and tossed a plastic baggie full of pills onto the desk.

"Payment in full, my man. X, some ro, and a bunch of oxys. More where that came from, if I get another two weeks here without anyone knowing."

Granger shoved the bag into his pocket. Keeping Gordon's secret was the best thing to happen to him in years. Free weed, free drugs, all he had to do was delete some files each night. The other guards didn't even know, because the brat was smart enough to always use the back entrance.

"Two weeks, two months, whatever you need." Granger took another hit.

Life was good.



Tom sipped his third coffee of the morning and stared out the window of Dan's car as the rush hour traffic whizzed by. His eyes burned and his body ached. Everyone had gone to bed around one a.m., and he'd offered to keep watch, knowing that between Dan's lumpy reclining chair and the constant threat of the ushabti appearing any time, he'd get no sleep. He'd spent most of the night pacing or sitting at the table, while Stacy slept on the couch. As the hours passed, his thoughts wandered in circles, from the insane impossibility of murderous demons and mummies – in Manhattan! – to seeing Joanna in bed, dressed in only a t-shirt, her surprise changing to lust as he sat down and kissed her. The feel of her breasts in his hands, her lips against his….

Stop! Guilt had led to introspection. It annoyed him more than he cared to admit that he couldn't get Joanna out of his mind. He loved her, for sure, but not in a romantic way. If his ma had been alive, she'd have said he and Joanna were like sister and brother from some other mother, two peas in a pod. In many ways she'd been as good or better a friend than Dan.

Sometimes a person wants a thing jus' 'cause they can't have it.

Another of his ma's pearls of wisdom. He wished she was still

around so he could see her face when he told her she'd been right more times than he'd given her credit for in his youth.

Thankfully, Dan and the others had risen with the sun. They'd made coffee and toast while dawn turned the tops of the buildings from pale pink to rose to yellow, everyone looking as uncomfortable as Tom felt. By mutual unspoken agreement, all conversation had centered around their plans for the day, which they'd made the previous night.

Joanna would contact her friend at the library to see if she'd learned anything. Tom and Dan were going to the morgue to see if they could get Tom inside to look at the mummified bodies. In the meantime, Stacy had to get to the museum. In between her regular duties she'd try to get more research done. Before dark, everyone would meet at the museum and then return to the apartment in the hopes of surviving another night.

By then, they hoped to have an idea of how to defeat the ushabti.

Now, parked outside the morgue, Tom waited for the caffeine to kick in and wake up his brain. They had a long day ahead, followed by most likely an even longer night. They'd need to be at peak alertness if they wanted to survive.

His phone vibrated, alerting him to an incoming text.

"We're good to go," he said, reading it. He'd contacted Debbie Yang at the Central Park precinct to see if she could pull some strings at the morgue. "Debbie says we should go to the back door. Dr. Porr is on duty, and she'll let us have a few minutes with the bodies. But we have to be gone before Doc Salonga gets in at nine."

"That gives us about a half hour, plenty of time."

They went around the building to the bay where the bodies were brought in. Cathy Porr was waiting for them.

"In and out," she said, walking them to the storage area. "And if Salonga shows up early, I never saw you."

"We really appreciate it, Doc," Tom said. "I promise, we'll be gone before you know it."

"You owe me a dinner. And not McDonald's." She handed Tom a piece of paper. "The locker numbers for your bodies are on here."

The moment Tom opened the first locker, he recognized the odor.

"That's definitely the same as what I smelled in the alley, on that woman," he told Dan. "And I could swear I smelled it more recently, too, but I'll be damned if I can remember where."

"Maybe it was on me after the last time I was here." Dan opened the other lockers and they did a quick examination of all the bodies, but Tom couldn't spot anything that wasn't already in Dan's notes. With ten minutes to spare, they ducked out the back door and returned to their car.

"Now what?" Tom asked as they buckled up. The familiarity of the sickly-sweet odor lingered in his brain, teasing him by staying just out of reach in his memory.

Dan shrugged.

"We go over the reports again. And hope Joanna or Stacy have better luck."

Dan continued to talk about the two cases on the way home, but Tom found himself only half listening, his thoughts circling back again and again to the odor from the alley.

Where had he smelled it?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Holy shit.

Joanna stared at the name on the computer screen. The odds were just too great for it to be coincidence.

Peter Gordon.

She'd been on the computer since everyone left. After leaving a message for Beth Nowicki, she'd poured a second cup of coffee and tried to think of search parameters outside of those Dan and Tom had already done. Concentrating had been hard at first, because she kept thinking about how much easier the work would be if she could use the terminal at her desk in the lab, which in turn kept triggering cycles of depression and anger over her dismissal. But then, as she fought the temptation to add a dollop of whiskey to the coffee, inspiration had hit out of nowhere.

Think outside the box.

What if the box is Manhattan?

Maybe the answer was to cast a wider net.

She pulled up a new search page and typed in 'murder+dismemberment'.

Pages of results had come up, which she immediately refined to include only the past twelve months. That reduced the number significantly; apparently, chopping up bodies wasn't as common as one would think, thank god.

At the bottom of the first page, she'd found a story from Vermont, about a headmaster of a private boys' school being found hacked to pieces in his house. And near the end, a mention that it was the second such murder at the school in a week. The other one being a student. Whose roommate just happened to be Peter Gordon.

Anticipation sending her pulse rocketing, Joanna checked Henry Gordon's file. Sure enough, he had a son, Peter, age sixteen.

Depression, booze, and coffee all forgotten, she looked up the number for the Stowe crime scene lab and called the director's office. When the admin answered, Joanna gave a fake name and introduced herself as a senior CSU from Manhattan with some questions about a case.

You've already been fired, she thought, while waiting for the director to come on. *What more can they do if you get caught?*

"This is Dr. James," a deep voice said.

"Hi." Joanna stuck with her impersonation. "I'm calling regarding the murders of Richard Flaherty and Nestor Panchal. I'm working on some similar cases here in New York, and I wonder if you could answer a few questions."

"I'm not supposed to talk about ongoing investigations," James said. "You'd need to speak with Captain Elsevoir, he's in charge."

"I have a message in for him," Joanna lied. "But maybe you can just confirm a few things, off the record, lab to lab?"

"Go ahead."

"Did either of the bodies have a mark burned into the chest? A circle with a five-pointed star inside?"

"They did." The man's tone was both grudging and curious.

"And were all four limbs and the head forcibly removed from the body, as if torn, rather than cut with any kind of weapon?"

"Yes. How many cases did you say you've seen there?"

"Seven and counting. I believe yours and ours are definitely the same, um, MO."

"Can you share anything else with us?" Now the director's voice took on a note of excitement Joanna knew well. Scientists weren't that much different from detectives. Both got off on solving mysteries.

"I'll have my office send everything to Captain Elsevoir after I speak with him. Thank you so much." She hung up before he could ask anything else.

Two people dead at Peter Gordon's school, and several of his father's business associates killed as well. Now if she could just figure out how the girl in the nightclub fit in….

She picked up her cell and pulled up Dan's number.

This couldn't wait until dinner.



"Hot damn."

Dan stared at a map of Manhattan. For the past two hours he, Joanna, and Tom had compared notes and discovered that several seemingly unrelated facts and events now appeared to link both cases in ways they'd never imagined.

All involving Henry Gordon.

The first mummification had occurred at the Egyptian Cultural Museum a year ago, and not long after that Gordon had purchased the museum and set himself up as Chairman of the Board. Three of the ushabti's victims came from the Green Mountain Academy, where Gordon's son, Peter, was a student. Seven others involved people Henry Gordon had threatened after a business deal gone sour. Halfway through their research, Dan had put up the map and started placing colored pins at the site of each death. Yellow for mummifications, green for the ushabti.

The pattern quickly became obvious.

More than three quarters of the mummifications, including several dating back months before Dan got the case, were located within twenty blocks of the Egyptian Cultural Museum. A few outliers dotted the West Side. Of the ushabti killings, seven of the eleven had occurred on the East Side, the exceptions being the student and headmaster in Vermont, Arnold Smythe in Westchester, and Elton Banks, who'd died in his plane but it seemed likely the ushabti was responsible.

"What about Bahaman Ibrahaim?" Joanna asked. "He was killed in the style of the ushabti, but he also looked partly mummified."

"I think we can all agree that was a red herring to throw us off the trail," Dan said. "No way the ushabti did that."

"Chopping him up also helps hide the mummification." Tom placed a yellow pin at the address in Queens, and another right near the museum.

"What's that one?" Joanna asked.

"That's where I was attacked. That woman ended up partially mummified, just like Ibrahaim."

Dan took two red pins and stuck them near the center of the pattern, which was a rough square stretching from Central Park to the East River, and from Fifty-Ninth Street to Seventy-Ninth.

"Henry Gordon's apartment building, and his office."

Tom looked at Dan.

"Captain Green said you needed evidence. I think we've got it."



"More research on the ushabti?"

Stacy jumped in her chair at the voice behind her. She hadn't heard Professor Merakhmet enter the office. Her cheeks grew warm at being caught doing personal work on company time. She nodded without looking up.

"Yes. I'm sorry. The police asked for my help, not just with that case but with some other murders, too. Strange ones."

Merakhmet bent down to look at her screen.

"Vampirism in ancient Egypt? How does this relate to your police work?"

"Bodies have been found drained of all fluids. Almost mummified, in the way extreme heat and aridity might do. Tom and his partner feel there might be a link."

"Vampirism is quite prevalent in the myths of Egypt. It is believed Sekhmet was the first of the line, but many of the gods and demi-gods were also vampires. They were worshipped for their power and knowledge. It is possible they are the basis for the European superstitions. However, they have little to do with mummies or ushabtis."

Stacy clicked on a different tab.

"According to this, ushabtis are in service to Osiris, god of the dead. And Osiris is a vampire in many of the ancient stories."

"The gods rarely involved themselves in the doings of men. It was

the high priests that practiced magic and served as the representatives of the gods on Earth."

"Magic like calling an ushabti?"

Merakhmet nodded.

"Yes, a high priest could very well do that."

Stacy scribbled notes on a scrap of paper.

"What else? Were there any spells that would basically mummify someone?"

"There probably were. The priests of that time were supposed to have great powers at their disposal, which the last of them took to their graves. The Book of the Dead is but a myth now, all copies of it long turned to dust. I myself have only read of one such spell, but there are no accounts of it ever actually being used. Just that it existed as a way of achieving immortality."

"How so?" Stacy continued to write.

"It is said that under the right circumstances a man could return from the Duat if his Ka was bound to his physical body upon death. Once revived, that person would need to constantly feed on the life force of others in order to remain alive." Merakhmet scratched his chin. "I suppose, in a way, this could fit your vampire theory. But only a priest of the highest order would be capable of this, and to do so would be unthinkable."

"Why?" Stacy looked up and was startled to find the professor's face twisted in what almost looked like pain, his gaze unfocused.

"Imagine being cast into the afterlife without a Ka. No chance to be reunited with the Ba, no chance to reach the end of the black river and achieve eternal peace. It would be an endless Hell of torture and agony, while feeling that half of you is always missing. I cannot think of a more horrific fate."

"That does sound awful," Stacy murmured, her attention still on her notes. If she could find—

"Perhaps we can discuss this more at a future time? There are some new arrivals in need of cataloging."

"What? Oh, yes, of course. I'll be right there." Stacy's embarrassment

returned at Merakhmet's not-so-subtle reminder she had a job to do. But first, she had to call Tom.

Ushabtis and vampires, all stemming from magic. What if someone had discovered an ancient book of spells, like the Book of the Dead?

If so, their situation had just grown exponentially more dangerous.



The last thing Dan expected when he and Tom entered Captain Green's office was to see Chad Driscoll standing by the window. He wore a smug grin that warned them things were already not going their way even before they had a chance to speak.

"Make it quick," Green said. He didn't ask them to sit. Another bad sign. The captain looked five years older than the last time Dan had seen him and judging from the puffy bags under his bloodshot eyes he hadn't been sleeping well. There had to be a lot of people breathing down his neck with the growing number of deaths. Dan didn't envy his position at all.

"We have new information about the Ragman case," Dan said, wasting no time on pleasantries. "They're linked in some way to the deaths in the homeless community, and we've got a rough pattern. Henry Gordon—"

"We know all about Gordon," Driscoll interrupted. "Started looking into him as soon as he admitted he was basically blackmailing the victims."

"With all due respect," Tom said, ignoring Driscoll and looking at Green, "there's a lot more going on than just blackmail. There are still several men whose lives are in danger, and not from an ordinary killer. We believe—"

"It doesn't matter what you believe," Driscoll cut in again. "We've got the situation under control. Go home and leave this to the big boys."

"You don't understand what you're dealing with!" Dan's frustrations burst out. Tom tapped his arm, warning him to keep his composure.

"Oh, I think we do," Driscoll said. "We've been monitoring Gordon's phones and email. There's another shipment of artifacts coming in to the

Egyptian Cultural Museum soon and then everything is being sold at the gala. Once the money changes hands, we grab Gordon and confiscate everything at the museum and his warehouse. Case closed."

"What?" Dan glanced from Driscoll to Green. "Smuggling? That's what you think this is about?"

Green nodded. "Gordon's been using the museum as a cover to bring in black market artifacts. He tried to get some of his old British buddies to help buy them, and if they didn't, he had them killed. Don't know the why of that yet, maybe he thinks he can negotiate with other family members, or frighten them into paying. But the remaining four have ponied up a good deal of money."

"We've got them under surveillance, too," Driscoll added. "Just in case Gordon decides to pull a double-cross."

"That's the least of your problems. Those men need to be under protective custody. The thing that's doing the killing—"

"Thing?" Driscoll let out a laugh. "Not more of that mummy bullshit."

"Enough." Green held up his hand. "I agreed to hear you out because you were both good cops at one time. But I'm not in the mood for crazy theories. Go home and stay out of it. This doesn't concern you anymore."

"Yeah, maybe you should forget police work and start a swingers' club. Seems you're good at that."

Tom grabbed Dan's arm and pulled him toward the door before he could say anything else.

"Let's go. They're not going to listen." He glanced back. "But fair warning. Y'all are in over your heads and there's gonna be more deaths. Nothing you can do will stop them."

"Oooh, booga-booga, Tommy-boy. I'm so scared."

Tom slammed the door on Driscoll's laughter. Neither he nor Dan spoke until they were outside. Then Dan shook his head, his anger draining, replaced by cold resignation. It was going to be up to them to stop the ushabti, and they had no idea how to do it. He looked at Tom and was surprised to find his old partner smiling.

"Why the fuck are you so happy?"

Tom's grin grew wider. "Because thank the stars Driscoll's a grade-A idiot. He gave us a lead."

"What?"

"He mentioned a gala coming up. We find out what and when it is, I'll bet that's where we catch Gordon with whoever or whatever is controlling the ushabti."



"Thanks for doing this."

Joanna and Stacy stood on the steps of a satellite laboratory of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner Department of Forensic Biology. The day had been crazy for Joanna. First the discovery of Henry Gordon's involvement with the museum, and then the awful shock of seeing Beth Nowicki's name in the news as the latest victim of the Ragman. She'd been deep in anguished guilt over getting Beth involved when Stacy called, saying Tom hadn't answered his phone or texts.

"They went to see Captain Green," she'd told Stacy, while trying to hold back tears. "Probably has his phone turned off."

Stacy immediately heard that something was wrong and when she asked about it, Joanna had broken down.

"It's not your fault," Stacy said, after Joanna poured out her grief. "You didn't know then what could happen. None of us did."

"But she wouldn't have died if it wasn't for me. And even worse, I feel helpless. At least if I was still in the lab, I'd be doing something of value, maybe finding the clue that leads us to who's controlling the creature."

There was a moment of quiet on the phone, and then Stacy said, "I shouldn't be telling you this, but I have an ex who works at one of the NYPD's DNA labs. She owes me a favor. Maybe I can get her to let you use her computer to look at the case files. I'll leave work a little early and we'll go together."

Joanna had jumped at the chance. Anything to atone in some way for Beth. Except now, as they approached the doors, she couldn't help feeling nervous. What if they got caught? She'd already been fired. This

could land her in jail. But there was no time for second-guessing as Stacy led them inside, where a pretty Asian woman immediately waved to them from the lobby.

"Stacy, over here."

"Melissa, hi! Joanna, this is Melissa Kim," Stacy said.

"Hello." The woman nodded at Joanna but her attention returned almost instantly to Stacy. "So, what's the big secret project? Are you trying to get DNA from one of your mummies?"

Stacy's face grew serious and Joanna understood she hadn't told her old girlfriend the real reason for their visit. That guess got confirmed when Stacy lowered her voice.

"Can we talk in private? Like, in your office?"

Kim gave her a confused frown but shrugged. "Sure, follow me."

After stopping at the front desk to get them visitor passes – Joanna cringed when handing over her license but no alarms were triggered – Kim led them down a hall to a small, compulsively neat office, where Stacy explained in a few short sentences what they needed.

Kim's eyes went wide and her eyebrows shot up.

"Are you crazy? I could lose my job for that. What makes you think—?"

"You owe me," Stacy said. "You wouldn't have this job if it wasn't for me."

For a moment, Kim didn't say anything. Her expression turned hard, her lips tightening and eyes going cold. When she finally spoke, it was with barely controlled fury.

"After all this time, you're going to pull that bullshit?"

Stacy looked crestfallen but didn't back down. "I have to. I'm sorry, but it's that important."

"Really?"

"Life or death. I swear. I wouldn't if I wasn't desperate, you know that."

Another long stare, and then Kim sighed. "It better be." She took out a piece of paper and wrote something on it. "My password. I'm going to grab a cup of coffee in the break room. Maybe a sandwich.

When I come back, I'm going to walk you to the exit and I never want to see you again. Understand? We're even now."

"Thank you." Stacy waited until Kim left, shutting the door behind her, then motioned for Joanna to take Kim's seat.

"Do what you have to, and make it quick." There was a sadness in her eyes that told Joanna that calling in the favor had hurt Stacy more than she was letting on.

Joanna logged in and quickly accessed the files for the Lopez and Nowicki cases. She didn't even bother reading them, just hit print, after checking that the printer was in Kim's office and not shared somewhere else in the building. While she waited, she had the idea to check her work email. Odds were it had been turned off, but municipal agencies worked slow and—

"Yes!"

"What?" Stacy asked, coming around to look over Joanna's shoulder.

"You have to love the government. My email is still active and they didn't change my password." She scrolled through the inbox. Dozens of messages had accumulated, mostly internal stuff. Then the name B. Nowicki caught her eye. Dated the same day Beth had died.

She hesitated before opening it. *Oh, Beth, I am sorry.*

"Holy shit." Stacy was looking over her shoulder.

"What?" Joanna stared at Beth's message saying she'd found the person Simon Gordon murdered in Egypt a century ago. Below that was a photo of a faded newspaper page.

Stacy tapped the screen, her face pale.

"That picture. We need to show this to Tom and Dan right away."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"Okay, so what's the big news?" Dan asked, as soon as he and Tom found seats in Stacy's office. With Stacy and Joanna already there, the small space was cramped, but no one suggested going somewhere else. The message from the women had been too urgent.

Come to the museum as soon as you can. Important.

"We think we know who's controlling the ushabti," Stacy said.

"What? Who?"

Joanna handed Dan a printout of the picture Beth had sent her. He read the caption underneath aloud.

"Lieutenant Simon Gordon of the British Army was arrested for the murder of Ahmes Merakhmet, a tradesman in Abydos. Gordon is also charged with theft and desecration, having been found in possession of antiquities from one of the region's many ruins."

Dan looked up.

"Merakhmet. Isn't that the name of the professor you work with here?"

Stacy nodded. "And Simon Gordon is Henry Gordon's great-grandfather."

"Merakhmet! That's it." Tom smacked his hand on the desk. "The smell. From the bodies. I knew it was familiar but I couldn't place it in the morgue. It's the same as the cologne he wears."

"Earlier today, Merakhmet told me there's a way to reincarnate a person if their Ka hasn't traveled to the Duat. But in order to remain alive, the person must periodically drain the life force from someone. I'll bet he uses essential oils as part of the spell. He said it was from the Book of the Dead, an ancient book of spells and rituals dating from before the beginning of the First Kingdom. When we learned he's the same man in the picture, we came back here and I snuck into his office."

"You did what?" Tom practically shouted.

"Listen. I found it. The Book of the Dead." Stacy indicated a thick, leather-bound tome on her desk. "If we can translate it, we can find the spell that stops the ushabti."

"So it's Merakhmet killing those people." Tom grimaced. "If I'd just shot him in that alley, none of this would have happened."

"Actually, you couldn't have hurt me."

Ahmes Merakhmet stood at the door, a large pistol trained on the occupants of the room.

Dan reached for his gun but Merakhmet was faster. He grabbed Joanna and put the pistol to her head.

"Place your guns on the floor." He waited until both Dan and Tom tossed their guns down. "I was hoping to complete my work here and leave without killing you, but now I have no choice."

"You're the one calling the ushabti," Stacy said.

"No. That would assure me of eternal damnation. I gave the spell to Henry Gordon."

"But you did murder all those homeless people." Dan's voice burned with barely controlled anger. His entire body remained tense, ready to leap at Merakhmet the moment the man let his guard down.

"A person does what he must to survive," the man said. "I didn't wait for centuries, trapped within my bindings, just to let the idea of a few deaths stop me from completing my sacred vow."

"All this for revenge for Simon Gordon killing you?"

"Not for my death. Because they desecrated the temple of Sokar and cast disgrace on his name!" Merakhmet tightened his grip on Joanna and she closed her eyes. "Now—"

A heavy wind sent papers flying through the office. Merakhmet gasped and let go of Joanna as a cloudy shape coalesced between Dan and Tom. Dan leaped for Joanna and pulled her away from Merakhmet while Tom dove to the floor, rolling and pulling his backup gun from its ankle holster. He aimed at Merakhmet but the ushabti solidified, blocking his view. It focused its empty gaze on Dan and Joanna.

"Daniel Reese," it intoned.

Dan pushed Joanna to the side as the ushabti came at him. Remembering how bullets just passed through it, Tom fired at its legs so he wouldn't hit Dan. Blue light flashed simultaneously with the crackling sound of a bug zapper as Stacy jammed a small Taser against the ushabti. It batted her away with a massive arm and she flew over the desk to land next to Tom.

The ushabti pressed a hand against Dan's chest. His shirt caught fire and he screamed. The roasted meat smell of burning flesh filled the air. Tom grabbed the Book of the Dead off the desk and jumped onto the creature's back. He pounded on the ushabti's head with the tome while Dan continued to shout and Joanna cried out his name.

With a sudden twist, the ushabti let go of Dan and swung around, tossing Tom away like he weighed nothing. The giant mummy picked up the spell book and exploded into dust.

As Tom ran to Stacy's unmoving form, he heard Joanna shout from Dan's side.

"I think he's dead!"



Ahmes the Second, the last high priest of Sokar, raced through the main exhibit hall of the museum, past a startled guard, and out the front doors. At the bottom of the steps, he looked around, positive the ushabti would appear. When it didn't, he hurried down the tightly packed sidewalk, well aware that if Akil Ahmose wanted him, no crowd would prevent it from fulfilling its goal.

Which was what?

The creature had gone for the detective named Reese. Most likely that fool Gordon using the spell for his own purposes again. But then it had stopped and returned to the Duat, taking the Book of the Dead with it.

Had that been its purpose? To return the ancient grimoire back to the Underworld, where it originated? Or had Gordon sent it to obtain the book, so that he could wield its power?

Ahmes the Second cursed under his breath. Gordon, the lying sack of camel shit, deserved the most foul of deaths, and soon would experience just that.

I cannot trust him any longer.

It was only a matter of time before Gordon got it into his head to send the ushabti after him. The cartouche he wore should guard him, but there was always a chance something could go wrong, such as someone taking the cartouche away from him. If that happened, he'd be helpless against the ushabti. The protection spells he'd cast were only effective against attacks by weapons of metal and wood, not bare flesh. He needed something more, but nothing at the museum would be appropriate.

A block ahead, a pink neon sign advertised Tattoos – While You Wait!

Ahmes smiled.

Sokar had once again shown him the path.



Dan woke to darkness and mud.

He sat up, his back wet from the damp ground. Tall, thick grasses surrounded him and a night sky sat overhead. The air was hot and dry despite the moist soil, and it carried the heavy, organic smell of nearby water, similar yet not the same as the Hudson River he was so familiar with. He gasped as his memories returned.

The ushabti attacking. Fire in his lungs. Pain spreading through his body….

He stood up and groaned as a dull, throbbing ache filled him. Looking down, he saw the front of his shirt was burnt and tattered, and charred, blistered flesh covered his chest.

Jesus. Am I dead?

According to Stacy, victims of the ushabti went to some kind of Egyptian Hell. He certainly wasn't in Manhattan, although he felt alive enough. The rough edges of the reeds scratched his skin and the heat already had him sweating. The vaguely sulfurous odor of the mud grew stronger as he moved. Something splashed off to his right and he pushed his way through the vegetation toward the sound. After only a few yards

he came to the bank of an enormous river. So wide he couldn't see across, so long it seemed to stretch endlessly in both directions. A full moon shone in the black sky, surrounded by myriad stars. Their light reflected off the calm surface of the water.

Rustling from within the reeds alerted Dan to the fact that he wasn't alone. His hand went to his waist and he cursed when he found no gun there. The same with his ankle when he checked for his second holster. Although he wore the clothes he'd had on earlier, his pockets were empty. No phone, no wallet. The rustling grew louder and closer, coming from multiple points. Dan backed up, putting as much space between him and the grassy jungle as he could without stepping into the water.

Something snorted. A pig-like grunt answered it. Other sounds reached him. Snuffling, panting, a deep *chunk-glunk*, a high-pitched *skreee*. Eyes appeared between the stalks, some golden-yellow, others reddish-orange, a few the ghostly pale green of animals caught by a flashlight. Many of the eyes were at his height or taller.

He glanced back. The river was only another step away, and its murky darkness hid all clues to its depth and what lurked within. About twenty feet separated him from the grass wall, not nearly enough space if something – or some *things* – decided to charge him. His only option would be to run, either left or right. He had no hope that either direction led to safety; the odds seemed good there'd be more creatures lurking in the reeds regardless of his choice.

As if summoned by his thoughts, the reeds parted and a man with a hawk's face stepped out. Instead of hands he had reptilian claws. Other creatures emerged, all of them part-human, part-animal. Their heads were those of crocodiles, water buffalos, hyenas, cats, and goats. Most of them possessed human bodies, most sexless, but some had the wings of ravens or eagles. They surrounded him, cutting off any escape.

A splash in the river made him jump, imagining some sort of sea creature emerging from the water to attack from behind. He turned and instead found a raft made of logs and woven reeds sitting at the bank. On it stood a hooded figure, the face hidden in darkness. Thin, bone-white hands gripped a long pole.

"Come." The voice seemed to be inside Dan's head. He hesitated. Stepping onto the raft seemed just as dangerous as remaining on the shore.

"This is not your place," the voice said. "Unless you want to die now."

The hybrid beasts snuffled and grunted, and several stepped toward him.

Dan climbed onto the raft. The mysterious figure pushed off with the pole and they picked up speed as they moved down the river.

"Where are you taking me? Hell, where am I?" Without an immediate threat coming at him, Dan was able to finally consider his situation.

The boatman remained silent. Dan asked again, and when he still received no answer, settled for watching the shoreline, in the hopes of spotting some recognizable landmark. Every now and then he caught glimpses of beasts lurking in the reeds, and the occasional loud splash in the river told him things larger than fish swam in those depths. He kept to the center of the raft, as if that would offer any safety if something attacked from below.

The smooth motion of the raft and the steady chorus of howls, grunts, and yelps from both sides of the river made the passage of time impossible to determine for Dan. The moon and stars remained in place despite the raft's continued travel. After what could have been an hour or three, an orange glow appeared on the horizon. It quickly intensified, which seemed wrong given their slow speed. Within minutes, the luminosity resolved into a wall of flame, covering the entire surface of the water with fire. He turned to say something to the boatman and stopped, the words catching in his throat, when he saw that the radiance didn't illuminate the man's face. Within the cowl, only empty blackness resided, reminding Dan too much of the ushabti's hollow eyes.

"The Lake of Fire," the figure's solemn voice intoned. He motioned ahead with one hand. Dan eyed the approaching blaze and wondered if it was the Hell from Stacy's research. He looked over at the shore, thinking he might chance the river and the beasts waiting on land rather than burn for eternity, and gasped as a rocky cliff came into view. Atop it stood a giant man, easily forty feet tall, with the head of a lion. In one gigantic hand he held a sword of obsidian.

"Shezmu, God of Blood, Guardian of the Lake and the entrance to the Land of the Dead."

The giant glanced down at them and its eyes turned from amber to red. It motioned with the sword and the fire parted ahead of the raft, creating a canal through which the boatman guided them. The stench of burning sulfur and roasting flesh surrounded them. Dan's stomach heaved and he vomited into the water.

The water churned and something part crocodile, part shark surged up, snapping at the remains of Dan's lunch. Dan rolled away from the edge as water splashed over him, stinking worse than any swamp he'd ever encountered. It left an oily sensation on his skin that no amount of rubbing removed.

Despite the ten-foot-high flames around them, the temperature remained hot but bearable. Amphibious creatures periodically raised their heads, unfazed by the burning water. They glared at the passing boat with yellow, pupil-less eyes but made no attempt to move closer. Once, Dan looked back and saw the fire closing the temporary gap behind them, cutting off any hope of turning around.

He'd just sat down, resigned to another interminable passage until they reached their destination, when the walls of fire split in two broad arcs that circled a rocky island. Upon it stood a temple several hundred feet high, with broad, stone stairs leading up to a series of columns that blocked Dan's view of what lay inside.

"The Hall of Judgment." The words came from behind Dan and also sounded inside his head. "Osiris awaits."

The raft touched the narrow beach and came to a stop. Dan stood and looked at the boatman, who pointed at the temple.

"What if I don't—"

The boatman jabbed at Dan with his pole, striking him in the ribs. Dan stumbled back and fell onto the beach. Before he could stand, the boatman pushed off and disappeared into the flames.

Dan rose and brushed the sand off. The fire-ring moved closer, and the creatures within it crept forward. As much as he feared entering Osiris's temple, Dan understood he had no choice. He approached

the imposing steps, desperately trying to remember anything Stacy and Tom had said about Osiris. He was the god of death and controlled the Underworld, what Stacy called the Duat, but everything else was a blank.

Climbing the forty-nine stairs left him winded, and he paused by one of the towering stone pillars to catch his breath. Ahead, the entrance still gave no clue as to what kinds of horrors waited inside. Just a black square of impenetrable darkness. Every fiber of Dan's being screamed at him not to enter, that certain death lay ahead.

Movement within the dark caught his eye. Two figures emerged, one male, one female, both wearing golden masks in the form of jackal heads. Gold armor covered them from neck to toes, and each one carried a spear of gold. They stood at least seven feet tall and made no sound as they approached. The woman motioned at him with her spear, indicating he should go with them. His ribs still aching from the boatman's strike, he had no desire to test these two. Dwarfed on either side, he entered the temple, while saying a prayer he would survive.

Torches flared on the stone walls as they passed, and a short walk brought them to a grand chamber, at the end of which stood an enormous throne. Seated on it was a giant man dressed in white robes, with a tall, conical white hat. Easily twelve feet in height, his skin was green and he wore a long, black goatee that came to his chest. His eyes burned with the red of live coals. Next to him was an equally massive man who, like the guards, had the face of a jackal.

Only his was not a mask.

Anubis! The name came to him, and with it a chilling lesson from Stacy.

"Anubis was the god of mummification and death. It was his job to enact whatever judgment Osiris passed, and also ensure that no souls left the Duat."

The jackal-god spoke, his deep voice booming through the cavernous hall. "Step forward and be judged."

One of the guards pushed Dan and he stumbled before regaining his balance. Wary of a spear to the back, he approached the throne. Anubis moved aside, revealing a gigantic golden scale. A ten-foot bar connected the two round pans, each the size of a bed. The entire scale floated

magically in the air. Next to it waited a creature like something out of a drug-induced nightmare. The head of a crocodile, the body of a lion, gray, pebbly skin, legs as thick as tree trunks, and large, round breasts. Behind it, dozens of figures in gray robes, their faces hidden, stood in rows. One of them, the tallest, wore a helmet in the shape of a bird's head and held a scroll and a piece of black chalk in bird-like hands.

Anubis used his foot to push one of the pans to the ground. The guards shoved Dan again.

This is it. Judgment. Heaven or Hell.

Joanna. I'm sorry it happened this way. I love you.

His stomach churned and his legs trembled as he stepped onto the platform. Anubis took his foot away. Osiris rose from his throne and dropped a multi-colored feather onto the other side of the scale. The feather, only a couple of feet long, floated down and came to rest on the metal.

The scale vibrated and then rose up in the air, both sides swaying up and down. The motion slowed, and then stopped.

With Dan's side noticeably lower.

Osiris stared down at Dan.

"Daniel Reese. You have been judged."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Stacy paused just inside the doors of the museum, her heart beating so hard she feared it would stop her from hearing anyone approaching.

What had once been like a second home to her had transformed into a place of terror, where possible death waited around every corner, within each shadow. The last thing she'd wanted was to return, after learning the truth about Merakhmet and being attacked by the ushabti. But if there was a chance to save Dan's life, she had to risk it.

Still, she hadn't told the others her plan, mostly because Tom would've insisted on coming with her and they'd need him alive to stop Gordon and Merakhmet if Dan died. Instead, she'd made up a quick story about needing a book from home that might help them.

Now she wished Tom was with her, if only because his gun made a much better weapon than the little Taser gripped in her fist. Not that it had done much good the last time; her shoulder still ached from where the ushabti struck her. Still, it might protect her from the priest if she encountered him.

Assuming any weapons worked on him. It was his comment about Tom not being able to hurt him that had triggered her memory. He probably had a spell of protection around him, and that had reminded her of something that lay in a case in the museum's grand hall. An item that had come in several months earlier, one of the many objects Merakhmet had somehow procured.

The necklace of Ma'at.

According to legend, it provided protection against Ammit, the Eater of the Dead, the one who devoured any soul Osiris deemed unworthy of everlasting life. With the mouth of a crocodile and a body half-lioness and half-hippo, Ammit served as the gateway to Hell after a soul was judged.

If the ancient writings were true, the necklace of Ma'at, who represented truth and justice, would prevent Ammit from consuming the Ka of whoever wore it.

Stacy had no idea what that actually meant. She only hoped it would bring Dan's life force back to his body.

Either that or send him into the Duat forever. He would be dead, but at least in paradise rather than Hell.

She crept across the wide room, moving from one display case to the next. A couple of times she paused, certain she'd heard the echo of footsteps somewhere in the building, but they never came closer. She hoped it was just one of the guards making their rounds.

The case was located near the far end of the hall, with several other displays dating from the Fourth and Fifth dynasties. A stylized painting of the goddess Ma'at behind the necklace showed a statuesque woman with a single multi-colored feather in her hair.

A plaque below the necklace read: *Goddess of truth, justice, wisdom, the stars, law, morality, order, harmony, the seasons, and cosmic balance. The feather of Ma'at is used to weigh against the souls of those judged by Osiris in the afterlife.*

The necklace itself was a simple gold chain with a pair of eagle's wings in the center. Stacy tapped in the code on the electronic lock to disengage the alarm and opened the case. The necklace weighed next to nothing, and rather than risk losing it by putting it in her pocket, she slipped it over her neck. There was a moment of disappointment when she didn't feel any different, and then she chided herself for being stupid.

What were you expecting, some kind of transformation like Wonder Woman?

She considered sneaking into her office for her books, but the thought of going through the halls and passing Merakhmet's office was too much. Instead, she replaced the case and left, praying she'd make it back to the hospital before it was too late.



"There's nothing else we can do except wait for the rest of the blood tests to come back. Transport will come as soon as a room is ready."

The doctor nodded to Joanna and Tom and then left them alone with Dan. He lay on a bed in the emergency room, sectioned away from other patients by a cheap blue curtain. He'd been unconscious since they'd brought him there more than three hours earlier. The staff had run every test imaginable, from CT scans to ultrasounds, and taken more than six tubes of blood. Other than the nasty burn on his chest where the ushabti had seared the mark of Seba, everything had come back normal.

Yet he still ran a fever of a hundred and three, and alternated between periods of moaning and thrashing and an almost death-like stillness. The doctor said it wasn't a coma, that he'd never seen anything like it before.

Joanna said nothing, but she feared she knew exactly what had happened to her husband.

His soul had traveled to some kind of supernatural afterlife, leaving his empty body behind. Stacy had gone home to see if there was anything in her books that would help. Now there was nothing to do but watch and wait as Dan endured whatever lay on the other side.

Please, God, bring him back.

Tom reached out and took her hand.

"He's a fighter. He won't give up. And neither should we."

"I know." Tom's hand offered strength and hope, two things she needed. In that moment, she knew that whatever fire had burned between them was gone. Only the love of friendship remained.

"I wanted you for so long," she whispered, staring at Dan but speaking to Tom. He seemed to understand, because his grip tightened. "I don't know why. That night…it was like a part of me was left unfulfilled, always wondering what if…. And I think Dan knew it, too. Even though I denied it. Just once, that's all I wanted."

"Me, too," Tom said. "I never stopped thinking about you. Even after all this time. And when this all happened, those feelings came back even stronger."

"I don't want you anymore, though."

Tom laughed. "And I don't want you no more, either. I'm in love with Stacy. Really in love. I just want the four of us to be good again.

The kind of good that like, years from now, we all end up in the same old folks home together."

"I want my husband back." Joanna wiped tears from her cheeks.

The curtain rattled and Stacy stepped through.

"Good. Because I might have a way to do that." She took off the necklace of Ma'at and held it out to Joanna. "Here.."

Joanna took it. "What do I do with it?"

"You have to put it on him. The necklace is supposed to—"

Dan's back arched and he moaned. The alarms on the machines hooked up to him went off all at once. Green lines on the screens turned red. Dan's eyes opened wide and his mouth gaped. All of his muscles tensed and his limbs went rigid. A nurse rushed in and shouted for help.

"Hurry! He's seizing!"



Ahmes the Second cursed his foul luck as he hurried down the sidewalk. He'd returned to the museum just in time to see the Greer woman remove the necklace of Ma'at from its case. Damn her! She'd proven too intelligent for his liking. And as long as she had it, he couldn't risk accosting her without drawing Ma'at's wrath onto himself.

Still, things weren't totally ruined. He was permanently protected against the ushabti now, no matter if that damn fool Gordon had sent it or someone else was controlling it. Only one more day until the gala at the museum, and then all that remained was to finish Gordon, arrange shipment of all the treasures back to Egypt, and return home. After that, once the items were safely restored to their rightful place, he would end the spell and journey back to the Duat, where he would reside forever as a hero, the one who'd righted the wrongs against Sokar and returned his god to a rightful place of honor in Osiris's eyes.

For all of that to happen, though, he needed Gordon to remain safe for the next twenty-four hours. As long as someone else was able to control an ushabti, anyone could be a target, including Gordon himself.

Which was why he had to meet with the man as soon as possible. He needed to find a cell phone and contact Gordon.

Before the police did.



"Vital signs are dropping," a nurse said. Another placed an oxygen mask over Dan's face, while a burly male orderly attempted to hold him down.

"Pushing two hundred cc's of dantrolene!" shouted the ER doctor, as he shot the drug into Dan's IV. Dan's violent spasms subsided but his body still twitched randomly. His eyes opened and closed, and he gasped for air.

"We may need to intubate," the doctor said. "And get the cart ready."

One of the nurses wheeled over the crash cart. When Joanna saw the paddles, she hid her face in Tom's chest.

"Wait!" Stacy pushed Joanna forward. "Put it on his neck. Hurry!"

"Get them out of here!" the doctor shouted. The orderly went to grab Joanna, but Tom blocked his way.

"Let her do it," Tom said. "Then we'll leave."

The doctor stepped aside, muttering something about religious nuts. Joanna hurriedly clasped the necklace around Dan's neck. It instantly glowed a bright golden-yellow.

Smoke rose from Dan's chest. His back arched and he cried out.

"No!"



"No!" Dan shouted, as the crocodile-headed beast approached him, its jaws opening wider and wider, until it seemed she could swallow a car.

"Wait." Anubis lowered his spear, blocking the monster's approach. "Look."

The three gods turned toward the scale, where the side with the feather had sunk to the ground while Dan's side rose into the air. At the same time, a tingling sensation, not quite a burn but not unpleasant, came

to life around Dan's neck. He looked down to see a golden glow at the top of his chest.

"Ma'at has marked you as hers," Osiris said. "Tell me, human, how is it you hold the favor of the Goddess of Truth and Justice?"

Dan shook his head. "I don't know. I'm a police officer. I serve justice every day."

"What brought you here?"

It took Dan several seconds to answer, as the idea of being interrogated by an actual god caused his tongue to momentarily freeze.

"My friends and I were attacked by an ushabti. It touched me. It's killed many people. I was trying to stop it."

Osiris stood up, towering over everyone else in the hall, even Anubis.

"I have sent none of my servants to the mortal realm. You know this as true?"

"I do." Dan backed up as far as the gold tray of the scale allowed. "A priest named Ahmes Merakhmet has used magic to return to life and take revenge, using the ushabti. He said something about the temple of Sokar."

Anubis went to Osiris and whispered in his ear. Osiris frowned. Anubis pointed his spear at the mark of Seba on Dan's chest. Osiris's frown deepened, and he sat and rested his chin on his fist, contemplating Dan, who felt the weight of the god's gaze like the way the air grew heavier right before a terrible storm. It took all his strength to remain standing when all he wanted to do was fall to his knees and beg the god of death to spare him.

After a prolonged silence, Osiris waved his hand and the entire scale settled to the ground. Dan jumped off but stopped when two of Anubis's guards came at him with their weapons at the ready.

"Hold," Osiris said, and the guards stepped back. "Daniel Reese, it appears Ma'at has set you on a different path than the one Fate intended. In this, she has done me a favor, which I shall return. You have been judged, and I find that it is not yet your destiny to travel the Duat. Go back to the land of the living, and when the time comes, know that you owe your life to me."

Before Dan could speak, Anubis touched him with his spear. A white light filled the chamber. The air grew hotter and a heavy wind whipped around in circles.

The last thing he saw was Osiris's fiery gaze.



"Whoever controls the ushabti has become a danger to us. We must protect ourselves."

Ahmes the Second stood on the sidewalk outside Henry Gordon's apartment. He kept glancing nervously up and down the sidewalk as he spoke. Henry could almost feel the fear coming off him. He'd never seen the priest this way, and he didn't like it. If a high priest of Sokar was frightened, that didn't bode well for a mere human. More than ever, he was glad he'd said his altered spell, although he had no idea if one ushabti could defend someone from another. Would they cancel each other out? Fight? He hoped he never found out.

He also said nothing about the spell as Ahmes continued speaking.

"There is a way to guarantee safety from an ushabti attack. It is a special cartouche, a magical symbol of protection. Here." He held out a gold chain with a copper medallion at the end, similar in size and shape to a military dog tag.

Henry took it. Several glyphs were carved into the metal. The Eye of Horus, a snake, and two wings.

"I wear the same cartouche." Ahmes lifted his shirt, displaying a freshly inked tattoo comprising identical symbols, as well as several others. "No ushabti can harm us as long as we are protected."

"Thank you." Henry slipped the chain over his neck, unsure of whether he should be relieved or worried. He now had guaranteed safety from the ushabti – something he felt surer than ever he needed, if his theory was correct – but he'd lost his ability to send the ushabti after Ahmes if the priest decided to double-cross him. Now he'd have to figure something else out.

"Is everything arranged for tomorrow night?" Ahmes asked.

Henry nodded. "Yes. The money has been transferred, the remaining targets will all be there, and the artifacts will be packed and shipped to the warehouse during the gala."

"Good. Let us pray for success." Ahmes gave a small bow and headed down the sidewalk.

Pray all you want, Henry thought, as he made his way up the stairs. *Tomorrow night you will meet your gods, although not in the way you expect.*

Now he just had to figure out how to make it happen.



Dan came awake, his scream still on his lips. Alarms rang and beeped, something was pressed against his face, and bright light blinded him. He swung his arms to stop Anubis's attack and several hands grabbed him, forcing him back onto….

A bed?

Voices reached him through his tears. People shouting.

Then he heard Joanna.

"Dan! Dan!"

"Joanna?" The word came out muffled. Someone yelled for everyone to back up. The pressure on his face disappeared and he tried to say Joanna's name again. Sandpaper coated his throat and he coughed. A straw touched his lips and he sucked at it, drawing cool, wonderful water into his mouth. Nothing had ever tasted so good! But after only a few sips it disappeared. He blinked several times and the light grew bearable. Indistinct shapes became clear. Faces staring down at him. Strangers.

Then one of them moved and Joanna appeared, looking like she hadn't slept in a week.

"Dan!" She leaned down and wrapped her arms around him. He returned the hug, savoring the warmth of her body, the softness of her flesh, against him.

"Am I really back?" he whispered. If this turned out to be a cruel trick by Osiris, he'd—

"Yes. You're alive. We thought…we thought we'd lost you."

"Where am I?"

"New York Presbyterian." Another familiar voice. Tom Reardon peered over Joanna's shoulder, a relieved smile on his face. "You gave us a scare, brother."

"Mr. Reese," a new voice interrupted. "Please lie back. You're in no condition to move yet." A man in a white coat eased Joanna away and placed a stethoscope against Dan's chest.

"Actually, I feel fine." To his surprise, Dan felt as refreshed as if he'd had the best night's sleep of his life. He pushed himself up. Energy coursed through his body. He remembered everything, from the ushabti's attack at the museum to his journey through the Duat. Something bumped against his chest. A chain, with a medallion. When it moved, he saw a fresh scar just below the base of his throat.

A feather. Three inches long, every detail burned into his skin. Below it, the charred, blistered flesh had healed, leaving only a pale, white circle.

Ma'at has marked you as hers.

"We need to talk," he said, swinging his legs around. Several alarms beeped.

"You're not going anywhere," the doctor objected. "You were practically in a coma a minute ago, and having seizures."

"Trust me, Doc, I'm fine. I'd explain, but you'd never believe me. Give me the paperwork to check out against doctor's orders, I have to leave. A police emergency," he added, before the doctor could say anything else.

"It's a matter of life and death," Tom said. The doctor looked at them, and then at the medallion on Dan's neck. His eyes told them he knew something beyond ordinary had happened in his ER, and he wanted to know what. After a moment, he motioned for the nurses to disconnect Dan from the equipment.

"Fine. But don't make me regret this."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It was close to four in the morning when Tom, Stacy, and Joanna collapsed onto the couches and chairs in the Reeses' apartment. Dan, on the other hand, couldn't stop pacing from the living room to the kitchen and back again. During the ride from the hospital, he'd detailed his experiences in the Duat and Joanna told him about the necklace, and what had happened after she put it on him.

"There must be another way we can protect ourselves," Stacy said, rubbing her eyes. "If only the ushabti hadn't taken the Book of the Dead. As soon as it's light, I'll go back to the museum and get the rest of my books, and whatever's in Merakhmet's office. Maybe there'll be something that can help us."

"You mean *we'll* go." Tom gave her a mock glare. "Just in case that damned priest decides to show up."

With only a couple of hours until dawn, they decided it wasn't worth trying to sleep. So while Joanna made coffee and toast, Tom and Dan worked on their strategy for stopping Gordon.

"First, we need to know what his ultimate plan is. Getting revenge for his great-grandfather is one thing. But why the others? What connection does his son's school have with the men who killed Simon Gordon?" Dan looked at the pattern on the map and cursed. They were still just as much in the dark about Gordon's motives as ever.

"What if it's about his son?" Joanna asked. "Maybe something happened to the kid, and Gordon was pissed about it?"

"One way to find out." Tom grabbed his phone and punched in a number. "Sergeant Yang, please." There was a wait, and then he spoke again. "Debbie? Hi. Tom Reardon. I know I said we were more than even, but can you do me one more small favor? I'll never ask anything again."

A pause, and Tom smiled.

"You're the best. I just need a couple of phone dumps. The girl in the nightclub massacre, Tia Lopez. And Peter Gordon, age sixteen." He looked up Henry Gordon's address and gave it to her. After he thanked her and hung up, he shrugged. "We'll see if there's a connection. In the meantime, Stacy, can you draw us a map of the entire museum?"

"I can do better. When I started work, part of the welcome packet was a map of the building, including the parts off limits to the public. I probably still have it somewhere in my emails." She got her phone from her purse and started searching.

"Now what?" Joanna asked.

Dan poured a second cup of coffee.

"We wait."



Henry Gordon touched the medallion hanging from his neck as he sipped a cup of coffee and watched the sky slowly lighten. He'd barely slept, thanks to a bad case of nerves, and he'd spent most of the night either mentally reviewing his plans for the coming evening or jumping at every sound in the apartment, positive the ushabti was about to appear.

His certainty that it would come after him had grown in tandem with his anxiety. He felt sure Ahmes would double-cross him. It's what he'd have done in a similar situation, and a good part of his success as a businessman was to always assume the worst in people. He couldn't forget that the only reason Ahmes had even come back to life was for revenge against the Gordon family. It didn't seem far-fetched to think the priest still had that as his ultimate goal, and that he'd lied about not being able to call the ushabti himself.

At the same time, it wasn't just Ahmes he needed to worry about. His worst fears had been confirmed regarding who else controlled the ushabti. A little digging by his security team had turned up all the evidence he needed. The headmaster at Green Mountain and Peter's roommate, Nestor Panchal, both being killed in the same week, the same

way? That had been all Henry needed to have the investigator look into the other two deaths and see if there was any connection to Peter. And sure enough, it turned out the boy in the park had also gone to Peter's school, and the girl in the nightclub had been seen with Peter, who was definitely hiding somewhere in the city. Most likely the old apartment, despite what the guards said. They might not have seen him. Hell, he might have paid them to lie for him.

Down on the street, the first rumbles and honks of morning traffic echoed through the as-yet empty canyons of the city.

Sunrise. He was safe.

But for how long? He had no idea why Peter was killing people from his school. That worried him the most. Peter was an angry, undisciplined child. Always had been, even before the divorce and his mother's death. It would be very much like him to use the ushabti on a whim, anytime he didn't get his way.

Which made him more dangerous than the police or the priest.

Especially when it came to a father he had never gotten along with.

Maybe I can use that to my advantage.

Henry got his phone and hit Peter's number. When it went to voice mail, he was ready.

"Peter, this is your father. I know what you're doing. It needs to stop, at least for now. The police are getting too close, and there are other powers involved that you're not aware of. Meet me at home tomorrow morning and I'll explain everything. In the meantime, don't use it again. It's too dangerous."

Henry hit the pound sign to end the message. Hopefully, the boy would listen to reason.

If not, he might be surprised at how far a man would go to keep himself safe.



Dan and Tom were studying the map of the museum when the phone records Tom had requested came through. He made a note to send

Debbie Yang the biggest bouquet of flowers he could afford and then forwarded the files to Dan's computer so they could print them out.

It only took a few minutes to find the common denominators.

"Look at this. Peter Gordon called Nestor Panchal a couple of hours after the murder."

"And he called Tia Lopez several times the night she was killed." Dan highlighted the numbers in yellow. "Plus, they called each other on multiple occasions before that night, but then she stops calling him."

"No recent calls to or from the roommate before the murder."

"Here's something else. On the nights of both murders, Gordon's calls to the victims are short."

Tom nodded. "Short as in leaving a message."

"Or maybe just to see if anyone answers. Confirmation of death."

"So we've got Henry Gordon murdering specific people for revenge and/or blackmail. Why is he killing the others for his son?"

Joanna put down the book on Egyptian spells she'd been reading and came over to the table. "What kind of father would do that?"

"The kind that's already murdered seven people?" Stacy asked.

"Maybe he's not. Maybe it's the boy. They could both be using the ushabti."

"We need to pay the Gordons a visit."

"Sounds good." Tom grabbed his jacket. "You guys keep looking into those spells. We're gonna need all the protection we can get tonight."

The ride to Gordon's apartment building seemed to take forever, thanks to Manhattan's perpetual construction and too many vehicles cramming narrow streets. When they arrived, Dan parked directly out front and slipped his placard in the window.

Inside, the security guard at the front desk called up to Gordon's apartment, listened to someone for a moment, and then put the phone down.

"Mr. Gordon is not at home."

"His office said he was," Dan said. They'd called there first, assuming he'd be at work.

The security guard shrugged.

"What about his son, Peter? Can we speak to him?"

"He isn't home, either."

"You didn't even ask. How do you know?"

Another silent stare.

"C'mon, we won't get anywhere with him. Let's check the other residence."

Tucked among the phone records had been two calls to a number that turned out to be an apartment complex only a few blocks from Gordon's penthouse. A quick records search showed that Gordon also owned an apartment there. The moment they arrived it became apparent the security team had been briefed about their coming, and this time they were turned away without even the pretense of calling the apartment.

With no other options, they decided they might as well start preparing for the gala. After a quick stop at Tom's to pick up more ammunition and guns, they returned to Dan's and laid out everything they'd need on the bed.

"Vests won't help against an ushabti," Stacy said, coming into the room.

"Merakhmet might be armed. Same with Gordon. If I had body armor, I'd wear that shit." For once, Tom's expression was grim. Dan felt the same way. They'd already survived multiple attacks by the ushabti, and only luck and magic had saved them. They couldn't count on it happening again.

Stacy bit her lip. She'd been poring through the pile of books she and Tom brought back from the museum, but so far neither she nor Joanna had found anything useful. Dan knew they were both feeling the pressure of coming up empty. It was etched into the lines around their mouths and on their foreheads, lurking in the dark hollows under their eyes.

Look at us, he thought. Two weeks ago, he and Joanna were clinging to the last hopes for their marriage and no one was speaking to Tom or Stacy. Now they'd become a team. No, more than a team.

A family.

He would die for any of them, and he knew they'd do the same for him.

Dan glanced at Tom and in his eyes saw the same acceptance he felt. They might not come back tonight, and that sucked. But they wouldn't go down without a fight.

"I'm your backup, and you're mine." Tom checked the clip for his Glock and slammed it back home. The same thing he'd said the night they'd met. Dan smiled.

"Damn straight, partner."



"Daniel Reese. Thomas Reardon. I want them dead."

Peter Gordon prowled the living room of the old apartment. He'd gotten the old man's message when he woke, and hadn't believed it. No way the cops were on to him. Even if they put some of the pieces together, they had no real evidence linking him to any of the murders. Hell, he could prove he'd been in New York when Nestor and Flaherty got butchered. And the security guards downstairs would vouch that he'd been in the apartment when Tia and Dennis were killed.

But those goddamned cops had showed up at his door. After going to his father's? Maybe they *did* know something. Probably because of all the people the old man had targeted. That would be just his shitty luck, to have the cops on his ass because the old bastard got careless.

The thought of military school had been bad enough. But prison? For murder?

No fuckin' way.

Which was why he'd made sure to get the names of the two cops from the guards. With them out of the way, any investigation would be screwed up for weeks. Maybe forever. That would give him plenty of time to come up with a more permanent solution. Why his father hadn't figured that out just showed how soft he'd gotten. Or senile.

Shit, we have a damned ushabti. They could send new cops every week and we could kill them all, without any way to trace it back to us.

In fact, if it came down to it, anyone who got in the way could end up in pieces.

Including the man who held the family fortune in his hands.

If he couldn't even keep the cops away, maybe it was time for fresh blood to take over.

Peter lit up a joint and sat down.

There were plans to make, and not much time to make them.



Ahmes the Second peered out the window of his hotel while he waited for Gordon to answer the phone. He'd been keeping watch on the sidewalk all day, just in case the police, or that damned Greer woman and her friends, showed up. If they did, it meant Gordon had betrayed him. So far, there'd been no sign of discovery, but he didn't trust it not to happen. He kept touching his chest where the fresh tattoo still itched. It was because of Stacy Greer that he'd added several additional symbols to the cartouche to protect against the ushabti. They protected against any demon she might figure out how to call forth.

He hoped.

"Hello?"

"It is I," Ahmes said. "Are all the preparations made?"

"Everything is set to go. After we're done at the museum, and the rest of the money from Lawrence and the others clears into my offshore account, I'll give the word to send all the remaining artifacts to the warehouse for you. Then I'll say the remaining four spells."

"No. I want you to say them at the museum. The chaos of having so many deaths happen in a public setting will ensure that all the police resources are tied up there. I do not want anyone stopping the transfers or interrupting the loading of the ship."

"Fine," came Gordon's aggravated reply. *"I can use one of the storage areas."*

"And one other thing," Ahmes continued. "You must find out who else has been using the spells and dispose of them. Otherwise, your life will always be in danger."

A partial lie, but Ahmes felt no qualms about it. The real reason for

his concern was his own Ka. While the ushabti couldn't harm him in this world, his protection would end the moment he returned to the Duat. The more the ushabti interacted with the human plane of existence, the more likely Osiris would find out. And then he would loose his wrath on Sokar, who would, in turn, condemn a certain priest to eons of torture.

A long pause at the other end told Ahmes Gordon wasn't happy with the idea.

Or perhaps he's hiding something.

Does he know who it is?

"Yes, I've been thinking the same thing," Gordon finally said.

Ahmes frowned. Gordon's voice carried the steel tones of truth.

Yet something didn't feel right.

"I will meet you at seven." Ahmes ended the call and checked the time. Still three hours to go.

More than enough time to complete the preparations he needed to make.



"We can't wait any longer."

Dan slipped his pistol into the holster nestled against his ribs. His jacket barely fit over the Kevlar vest he wore beneath his shirt. Tom looked just as bulky and uncomfortable, but both of them were used to the heavy gear.

"Dammit." Stacy slammed a book closed. "I know there's something. If we just had a little more time…."

"Sorry, love bug." Tom leaned down and kissed the top of her head. "We need to be at the museum before the auction starts. We still don't know what Gordon and Merakhmet have planned, but it's going down tonight. I can feel it."

"I love you." Joanna pulled Dan into a tight hug. Her cheek was damp against his neck, but he didn't tell her everything would be okay. That was a promise he didn't know if he could keep. Instead, he told her he loved her and no matter what, they weren't to leave the apartment.

She nodded. They'd been over it before. So far, the ushabti had only come after him and Tom, which meant she and Stacy would likely be safe as long as they kept their distance. In the event anything happened, Dan hoped that would be the end of it, that Gordon would leave the women alone. If he didn't….

Ahmes Merakhmet isn't the only one to come back from the Duat. I did it once, and I'll do it again if either of them so much as touches a hair on her head.

Watching Tom saying goodbye to Stacy, he had a feeling his partner was probably thinking a similar thought.

The ride to the museum was a silent one, both men lost in their thoughts. Dan tried to think of a time when they'd been in a more dire situation, and he couldn't. He and Tom had faced armed criminals, responded to riots and terrorist bombings, and pulled people from burning vehicles, but he'd never felt such a fear that they might not come home. Every cop understood that the next shift might be their last, that they put their lives on the line just by leaving their house.

This was different.

A supernatural creature that could tear you from limb to limb and send your soul to Hell, at the beck and call of a psychotic millionaire. A reincarnated Egyptian priest with the power to suck the life from you with just a touch.

Nothing could prepare you for that.

He glanced at Tom and saw his partner staring forward, a smile on his face.

"What the hell are you smiling at?"

Tom shook his head as he answered. "It took a freakin' ushabti to bring us all back together."

Dan started to make a sarcastic comment and then stopped. For the first time in more than a year, he was able to think about what happened in the apartment that night without any anger or jealousy.

And it felt good.

"All that money I spent on marriage counseling. Guess I should have just summoned a demon instead." He laughed, and Tom joined him. Then Tom's face grew serious.

"As crazy as it sounds, I'm glad it happened."

Dan parked behind the museum and took a deep breath.

"Me, too. Now, let's go kill a mummy."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Henry Gordon checked his phone. Seven forty-three. Sundown would be in two minutes. Fifteen minutes after that, the gala would officially start, and the auction would begin at eight-thirty. He'd already seen Thomas Lyons and Stephen Dorchester arrive, their faces tense and eyes searching nervously. He had no doubt Lawrence McCullough and Clive Pickwick, the remaining two on the list, would show up soon. All four of them had complained bitterly about the second round of money he demanded, but after Smythe's death they'd assured him the money would be in his account before the auction started.

Too bad for you, he thought. *You should have convinced the others to pay their share.*

Not that it would matter in the end. They were all going to end up in the same place.

He wished he could do the spells now and leave, but that wasn't possible. First, he had to arrange the transfer of the money from the holding account to his private one in the Caymans, the one nobody but him knew about, the one the feds couldn't touch. Plus, he couldn't do the spells until full dark, which meant waiting until at least eight.

It struck him that before encountering Ahmes and striking the bargain that saved his life, he'd never paid any attention to when sunrise and sunset occurred. Night and day just happened, earlier in the winter than the summer, and the only times that mattered were opening and closing of the stock market, meetings, and dinner reservations.

Now look at me. Marking the minutes until I can recite an incantation that brings forth a demon to do my bidding.

If only he'd had this knowledge earlier in life, he'd have amassed the greatest fortune in the world. So many things would have been different.

Business competitors, his first wife, the doctors who couldn't save his second wife…they'd have been on their knees begging for mercy, ready to do anything and everything he wanted.

Who's to say that can't still happen?

He'd been pondering that a lot recently. Ahmes insisted that the spell had to be used as little as possible, or else the wrath of Osiris might fall on them both. But he'd already sent it after those cops twice, and it was pretty obvious his son had used it several times. And so far no vengeful god had come for him. Hell, he wasn't even Egyptian; maybe their afterlife, their gods, didn't even apply to him. He only had Ahmes's word on that. For all he knew, it was entirely possible none of the people the ushabti had killed even went to the Duat, or wherever it was the creature supposedly sent their souls.

What if the only danger was to Ahmes?

That would explain why he was so upset with the unplanned murders. He'd made a bargain in the Underworld, and it was his immortal soul at risk.

Why should I care?

Henry took out his phone and did something he should have done weeks ago.

He took a picture of the spell.



"I didn't expect this big of a crowd," Tom whispered. There had to be over a hundred people packed into the main exhibit hall.

"Yeah, it's going to make our job more difficult, that's for sure." Dan's voice came through tinny but clear in Tom's earbud. He stood on one side of the hall, while Dan had taken a spot on the other end. The cases and statues had all been moved to the periphery, to allow room for cocktail tables in one section and several rows of folding chairs in another, in front of which a small dais had been set up. That's where the auction would be held, while those who weren't bidding could mingle among the displays or just enjoy the free booze.

They'd already spotted several plainclothes cops circulating through the crowd, their sport coats and pantsuits blatantly obvious among the sea of tuxedos and gowns. Driscoll had shown up just before eight, taking a permanent spot next to a crudité table, where he helped himself to handfuls of crackers and cheese while eyeing the gathering as if he had everything under control. The police presence was made even more apparent by several uniformed officers standing by all the exits.

"Auction starts in five minutes," Dan said. "No sign of Merakhmet or Gordon. How do you think this will go down?"

"Badly. Anything happens in a crowd like this, there's gonna be a mad rush to the doors. I think we should move toward the center before the chaos starts."

"Roger that."

Tom couldn't see Dan from his vantage point, but he pictured his partner weaving his way through the clusters of guests. Tom took a few steps and almost immediately had to change direction and turn his face away as several undercover officers hurried past to meet up with Driscoll at the appetizer table. Tom stopped and told Dan to do the same.

"Something's going down. Driscoll and the others are on high alert."

"I see it. Maybe Gordon's arrived? Keep your eyes – oh, shit."

Tom was about to ask what happened when he saw it. A swirling, gray cloud forming in the center of the room. The shape grew larger. People pointed in the direction of the whirling mass. A loud *pop!* caused several alarmed shouts.

The ushabti appeared, towering over the guests.

It strode forward to a gray-haired man standing at one of the high hats. The man dropped his drink but seemed frozen in place.

"Stephen Dorchester." The ushabti's growling voice reached Tom above the din of the crowd. The ushabti's arm shot out and struck the man in the chest. Smoke and fire rose from his clothes. He screamed, which triggered an instant reaction. People cried out and ran for the exits. Others hid behind tables or glass cases. Men and women stumbled over chairs and fell to the floor, where they were trampled by their fellow socialites.

Dorchester's screams rose in volume and then stopped. A cop ran past Tom, who caught some of the chatter from his radio.

"—blood everywhere – what is that thing – holy shit it killed him – where is it – over there – his head, his head—"

Shots rang out, followed by more screaming. Tom dodged a fallen table and suddenly there was empty space in front of him. Blood and body parts covered the floor. The ushabti held a struggling portly man in the air. Blood gushed from a hole where his arm used to be. Three uniformed cops opened fire on the ushabti. Shrieks of pain told Tom at least some of the bullets missed their mark and struck bystanders. The ushabti dropped the injured man and attacked the officers, paying no mind to the bullets that passed through its body. Within seconds, all three cops lay dead and the mummy had returned to dismembering its victim.

"I see the priest!" Dan shouted. "He's in the hallway."

Tom turned and caught sight of a familiar face near the bar.

"I've got eyes on Gordon. Going after him."

He skirted the pool of blood and sprinted for the door where he'd seen Gordon. Halfway there, Dan let out a curse that stopped Tom in his tracks.

"Fuck! It's here."

Tom looked back and sure enough, the ushabti was gone. The man it had been ravaging lay in pieces, his head nowhere to be seen. The towering form of the ushabti was clearly visible by the far exit, approaching Dan and several officers with extended arms.

Praying the scar on Dan's chest would offer some protection, Tom changed direction and headed across the room as gunfire broke out again.



"I've got it!"

Stacy jumped up from the table. Joanna, who'd been in the bathroom, came running.

"What?"

"Our answer. A cartouche that stops the ushabti!" She pointed at a

picture in the book she'd been reading. It showed three symbols in a row: The Eye of Horus, a serpent, and two spread wings.

"Take a picture and send it to Dan and Tom."

"It doesn't work that way," Stacy said. "It has to be part of you, or worn on the body."

"Part of you, how? You mean like, carved in our skin?"

Stacy dug a marker from her purse.

"Nothing so drastic. Hold out your arm."

Forcing herself to work carefully, Stacy drew the three symbols on Joanna's forearm. Then she copied the cartouche onto her own arm.

"Don't we have to say a spell or something?" Joanna asked.

"It doesn't say anything about one. Just the cartouche."

"If you send it to Tom and Dan, they can draw it?"

Stacy shrugged. "Theoretically. But if they did it wrong, it wouldn't work."

"Do it." Joanna stood up and grabbed her coat.

"Where are you going?" Stacy asked, as she sent the message.

"You mean where are *we* going." Joanna tossed Stacy a jacket. "To make sure the men we love don't get killed."



Ahmes watched as Ushabti Akil Ahmose ended the lives of the four remaining descendants of the blasphemers who had desecrated his temple. Were it up to him, he'd obliterate their entire bloodlines, but lives for lives, that was the proper way of things. *Ka-Maat*, what these people would call karma, insisted on it. Eleven killed him and robbed his god in the material and cosmic manner, and therefore eleven had to die.

Just one more, he thought. *And my work is done.*

The chaos in the museum was exactly as he'd expected, people shouting and running in all directions, the police failing in their attempt to stop the ushabti. Several officers were dead as well, along with more than a few patrons who either got in the ushabti's way or were trampled in the melee.

With each Ka Akil Ahmose sent to Sokar, Ahmes imagined his own favor growing in the god's eyes as Sokar's own reputation was restored. With the last man from the list dead, Ahmes prepared to find Gordon and leave. He planned to take the bastard's life at the warehouse, after he was sure all the artifacts were ready to ship back to Egypt.

In the main hall, the ushabti dropped the torso of its last victim and looked around the room.

Instead of disappearing, it headed in Ahmes's direction.

Something's wrong. Akil Ahmose should have returned to the Duat, its job here done. It has to be Gordon, trying to double-cross me.

At that moment, he saw a familiar face running in his direction.

The police officer from the museum. He had survived the ushabti's attack!

It should have been impossible. But there he was. Ahmes turned and ran down the hall, heading for the back exit. Voices shouted behind him but he didn't stop.

He needed to get to the warehouse right away and deal with Gordon, the traitor.



"Hold it right there!"

Chad Driscoll stepped in front of Dan and pointed a gun at his chest. Behind him were several police officers, some of whom Dan recognized from the precinct.

"Chad. The guy that just ran out, he's responsible for all this. Him and Gordon."

"It's back!" an officer shouted.

Dan turned in time to see the ushabti appear only a few feet away. Its empty eyes zeroed in on Dan and it held out its arms toward him.

"Daniel Reese," it intoned.

"Fuck, it's here!" Dan shouted, for Tom's benefit.

Gunfire erupted around him.



Henry Gordon fought his way through the throngs of people outside the museum until he reached a relatively open area. The strident wail of approaching sirens told him he couldn't afford to wait around. His heart beat like crazy, and not just from the panic of the mayhem inside or almost getting caught by that damn detective.

He'd done it!

The money had been transferred to the offshore account and the majority of the artifacts, except for a few items in the museum that would be held as evidence, were in the warehouse being prepared for shipment. Now all he had to do was go home, pick up his passport and banking papers, and he could head off to the Cayman Islands for a well-deserved retirement.

As he hurried down the block, he called for his limo to pick him up one street over.

By the time the police sorted through everything that happened, he'd be in the air. With dozens of witnesses to the ushabti's violence, the police would be looking for a giant dressed as a mummy. And as long as he wasn't charged with a crime, he'd be safe in the Caymans. Extradition didn't cover people wanted for questioning. He'd even be happy to provide them with a statement. Through his attorney, of course.

He smiled as the limo pulled up.

Everything had gone exactly as he'd planned.



Dan crouched between Driscoll and a uniformed officer and fired at the ushabti. The creature had already taken dozens of bullets with no effect.

"Aim for the head!" Dan shouted. He pulled the trigger again and cursed when nothing happened.

Someone squeezed in next to him and handed him another gun before he could dig for a spare clip.

Tom Reardon.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Dan shouted, taking the pistol. Tom had no protection against the ushabti. Of course, Dan had no idea if he did, either, but at least he had a slim chance.

"Looked like you needed some help," Tom replied, firing at the ushabti. It paused, glancing from Dan to Tom and back again, as if trying to choose its target. The police continued shooting, but the holes in the ancient wrappings vanished as fast as they appeared.

Two police officers rushed the ushabti and it grabbed one, ripped the man's arm off, then picked up the other cop and threw him a good fifteen feet through the air.

"Fuck this, let SWAT deal with it." Driscoll ran for the exit, shouting for the other officers to follow.

The ushabti ignored the fleeing men and came at Dan and Tom. They backed up but neither fled, unwilling to endanger any of the people outside. Besides, the monster would find them no matter where they went, so why run? Tom pulled out a Taser and fired it. The twin probes penetrated the decayed linens and blue sparks raced across the broad chest. The ushabti yanked the wires out and took another step forward.

Dan raised his gun, knowing they'd probably be the last shots he fired. This time the ushabti would finish the job. His legs threatened to collapse as terror swept through him, his body already anticipating the agony of being butchered.

"Ushabti Akil Ahmose! Do not harm them!"

The monster faltered and looked to the left. Dan turned and his worst fears came to life as he saw Stacy and Joanna running toward them.

"No! Get out of here!" He waved them away, heard Tom shouting at them as well. Dan closed his eyes, unable to watch his wife get torn apart like the bodies scattered around the room.

When he heard no screaming, he dared to look and see why.

The two women stood in front of the ushabti, which hadn't moved. Both of them held one arm up as if they were showing off new watches to the mummy.

The ushabti stepped sideways and Stacy moved with it, blocking its

path. Tom lunged at her to pull her away but the ushabti was faster. It reached for her arm but the moment its fingers touched her they burst into flames of pure black. The ebony fire raced across its hand and up its arm. When they reached its shoulder, its entire body exploded into a cloud of dust.

Tom caught Stacy as she fell back, coughing.

"What the hell?" he asked. She smiled through the bits of cloth and ash covering her face.

"Ahmes isn't the only one who can work magic."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Henry Gordon entered the apartment and let out a sigh of relief.

His nightmares were over.

By now, Ahmes was at the warehouse with his relics. As far as Henry cared, the priest could do whatever he wanted with them. Take them back to Egypt, sell them, say a spell and magically transport them back to the Underworld for his gods to ooh and aah over. He wondered what would happen to Ahmes's body when he left this world. Would it disappear like the ushabti? Become a mummy once again? Or just look like any corpse?

It doesn't matter. He'll be out of my life for good.

Henry laughed out loud as he crossed the apartment to the wet bar and poured himself a whiskey. By this time tomorrow, he'd be enjoying a drink by the pool while pretty young women pretended to be interested in something other than his bank account.

Great-grandfather, I hope you're proud.

Henry lifted his glass in a toast to Simon Gordon. He remembered how bitterly his father used to speak about the so-called friends who'd conspired against 'Grandad Simon', how he'd experienced his own bitter rage when his father read him the letters Simon sent home detailing the double-cross. Henry's father had tracked the successes of the Ten Judases, as Simon referred to them, and kept careful note of when and where each artifact had been sold. More than a few had exchanged hands multiple times, often in the black market, but his records had been accurate enough that when it came time for Henry to locate and buy them, he'd been able to obtain the majority of them. At the same time, he'd calculated what the Gordon family fortunes would have been had they owned their own private treasure chest.

And now that money was all Henry's. Well, not all, as he hadn't been able to ask for the full amount, compounded with more than a hundred years' interest. But he'd made more in a few weeks than in the last thirty years, between cash and stocks.

Enough that he'd be able to live like a king until the day he died. And still leave a thriving business behind for his son.

Which reminded him. That was another loose end to tie up before he left. But first, he had to get his travel bag and tell the pilot he'd be at the airport within the hour. The jet he'd hired should already be prepped and ready.

Look at me now, Father. A private jet. Who'd have thought a Gordon could ever afford one?

He went into the bedroom and flicked the light on. After placing the call, he undressed and took a quick shower to wash off the sweat from his exertions earlier. Still wrapped in his towel, he returned to the bedroom to dress.

"Hello, Father."

Henry gasped and his heart stuttered before he recognized that the voice, and the person lying on his bed, didn't belong to the ushabti.

"Peter. Jesus, you scared the hell out of me. What are you doing here?"

"We need to talk."

"Yes, we do," Henry said, regaining his composure. This made things easier. "I know you found the spell and you've been using it. That has to stop. There was a specific reason for what I did, and that reason is complete now. One day I'll explain it all, how your great-grandfather was sent to prison for—"

"I don't give a shit about your reasons." Peter swung his legs over the edge of the bed and sat up. "They don't matter. What matters is having the greatest weapon in the world at your disposal, and what you're going to do with it now."

"I'm not going to do anything. I told you, it's over. I've brokered the deal of a lifetime." Henry eyed his son. He wouldn't put it past the little bastard to have a gun. "We're rich. I mean, really rich. And someday it

will all be yours. All you have to do is finish school, because in a few years you'll be taking over the business. In the meantime—"

"In the meantime, nothing. I knew you'd pussy out. You don't have the guts. You were right about one thing, though, I am taking over the business. Tonight. Either you can sit back and let me, or…well, there is no 'or'." Peter stood up. For the first time, Henry noticed the fury burning in his eyes. It filled him with pride, despite his own annoyance with his son's rebellion. It was the first time the boy had ever showed interest in anything besides partying.

"I wish I could say yes, but you don't know the first thing about running a business. But you'll learn. Starting tomorrow, if you want. I'll arrange for you to attend all the meetings in my stead."

Peter shook his head.

"You still don't get it. You won't be alive tomorrow. Ushabti Akil Ahmose, I need you to kill Henry Gordon."

A hot wind whipped through the bedroom, fluttering the drapes and rippling the bed covers. A churning gray shape formed at the end of the bed. Henry backed up as the cloudy mass grew larger and took on the contours of an enormous person. Its appearance solidified, gray cloth wrappings covering the body, with several loose strips hanging down. The empty black holes where its eyes should be targeted Henry and a wave of dizziness swept over him. When the cavernous mouth opened, he smelled muddy, wet earth and rotting vegetation.

"Henry Gordon."

Henry almost turned and ran but then he remembered the amulet Ahmes had given him.

"Akil Ahmose, you cannot hurt me." He reached into his shirt for the necklace.

Nothing was there.

Henry felt around frantically, slapping his chest and reaching around to the back of his neck.

Nothing.

"Looking for this?" Peter held up the amulet. "I saw it on the bed when I came in."

Terror raced through Henry, but then he smiled as a memory came to him.

The spell. He'd made it so that the ushabti would go after anyone who posed a threat to him.

"Akil Ahmose, Peter Gordon means to harm me."

Sure enough, the ushabti turned toward Peter, whose eyes went wide. His hand trembled but he kept the amulet in view. The ushabti stopped and turned again.

In that moment, Henry knew karma was real.

Great-grandfather, we've both been double-crossed.

Powerful hands grabbed him and lifted him in the air. Fire exploded in his chest and the sounds of his own screams filled his ears. The agony expanded, encompassing his entire body. The world went dark.

And then he stood at the bank of a wide river, his chest burning like someone had placed a hot iron against it.

In the reeds, animals rustled and grunted.

Peter Gordon watched as the ushabti disappeared in a cloud of gray. The pieces of his father lay scattered around the room and gore covered everything. For several minutes all he could do was stand there, his father's blood slowly congealing on his face and clothes, while the brutal scene re-enacted over and over in his brain.

Something chirped on the bed, and he jumped. A text notification on his father's phone. Moving slowly, like coming out of a dream, he picked the phone up and punched in the security code – his mother's birthday – which hadn't changed since before her death.

The plane is ready. The car will be downstairs waiting.

The old man must have had his escape planned. His words came back to Peter.

"We're rich. Really rich."

Rich how? What exactly had been his father's plan? Too late, he realized he should have asked those questions before he called the ushabti.

Peter stared at the phone. Maybe he could still find the answers he needed.

He tapped in a response.

Change of plans. Staying in the city another day or two.

Then he started reading through the emails and texts.



"It's called a cartouche, and it wards off the ushabti."

Stacy kept her voice low as she held out her arm to Tom and Dan. The four of them were seated at a back booth in a diner down the street from Dan's precinct, where they'd spent the past several hours getting grilled by Driscoll and then Captain Green. Dan had caught the most shit for disobeying orders and conducting police business while suspended, but because the gala had been open to the public, they couldn't be charged with anything. When asked about the ushabti, they'd pretended to be as baffled as everyone else. Tom repeated that the giant man had just appeared out of nowhere, while Dan said he'd seen smoke, and that maybe the unknown assailant had used some kind of special effect to escape.

Driscoll actually proposed the idea that the man was some kind of ninja wearing body armor under his costume, and he'd used swords to dismember his victims. The fact that no one had seen any weapons didn't alter his conviction.

When they'd finally been released, along with other witnesses, they'd immediately headed to the diner so they could discuss what happened in private while downing cup after cup of strong coffee.

"How? Where did you find it? Does it work more than once?" Dan rubbed his burning eyes and examined the drawings, identical to the ones on Joanna's arm. He wanted to tell them both how stupid and dangerous it had been to just show up like that, not knowing if the symbols would actually work, but Tom had already said something and received a good tongue lashing from both women.

"In one of the books about Egyptian magic. The high priests of Sokar wore a variety of cartouches, for protection and power. There was a picture of some hieroglyphics from a temple, and in one of them a priest

was holding a tablet with this cartouche on it, and it was driving away an ushabti. It makes sense. There has to be a way to protect oneself if someone sends an ushabti after you, or if you say the spell wrong. A magical fail-safe."

"So, we have to draw this on ourselves each night?"

Joanna nodded, but Tom interjected, a smile on his face.

"I have a better idea."



The moment Ahmes saw the report of Henry Gordon's death, he knew his hope for a safe, secret escape to Egypt had become nothing more than a fantasy.

Every channel and website was proclaiming Gordon as the latest victim of the Ragman. Following so closely after the mayhem at the museum, people were calling for the mayor to resign and the police to do something. When one station mentioned that Gordon had been the Chairman of the Board at the museum and suggested there might be a connection, Ahmes cursed Shai, the god of fate, and his twisted machinations. Whoever had sent the ushabti after Gordon had to be the same person who'd killed the boy in the park and the girl in the nightclub. And that same person presented a very definite danger to Ahmes, since apparently the cartouche he'd given Gordon hadn't protected him from the ushabti.

Which meant Ahmes might not be safe, either.

On top of that, the police would no doubt be looking into Gordon's financial affairs, and it wouldn't take them long to follow the trail of money to the warehouse where the artifacts had been taken.

There was only one chance left for him to get out of the country with the goods before everything ended up confiscated and locked away for years.

The problem was, he had no idea how to contact the people he needed to speak to. And time was running out. When the sun set in eight hours, Akil Ahmose might very well show up to send a failed priest's Ka to the Duat.

He had his suspicions of who the unknown spellcaster must be, but no way to prove them.

Given time, he could hire the right people. Time was the one thing he didn't have to spare, though. And while the police could probably find out quite quickly, he couldn't go to them.

Which only left him one option, an option that put him in almost as much danger as facing the ushabti.

Still, what choice did he have?

Muttering more oaths and hoping all of Shai's paths didn't lead to the same destination, he opened his phone and typed a name into the search bar.

When the number he needed appeared, he said a prayer for divine intervention.

Without it, he feared everything he'd done would be for naught.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Dan's stomach was a roiling pit of lava that kept releasing random coffee-and-pie-flavored bubbles as he and Tom parked across the street from Henry Gordon's apartment building. Somewhere around the fourth cup of coffee at the diner he'd decided to eat something to soak up all the caffeine and acid. Blueberry pie turned out to be a poor choice. The canned filling now rested like a brick in his midsection, and the greasy crust simply added fuel to the fire that burned from his stomach to the back of his throat.

He burped again as they exited the car and downed another couple of antacids. So far, they'd been helpless against the volcano erupting within him, but he kept hoping.

"Dude, you need to take papaya pills," Tom said, while Dan slipped the roll of tablets back into his pocket. "Three or four of them, and bam, problem solved."

"I'll be fine," Dan mumbled, and then groaned as his stomach lurched again at the sight of Chad Driscoll leaving the building. Tom noticed him, too, and they paused by their car until Driscoll and a detective Dan didn't recognize drove away.

"They're not gonna let us in," Tom said. "Driscoll will be expecting us to show up."

"We don't need to get in." Dan nodded at a young officer standing by the steps. "I know that guy. Benjy Shah. His family used to live in my building. He'll talk to us."

Dan led the way across the street. As they approached the police barrier that'd been set up, Shah started to give the usual admonition to stay back and then recognized Dan.

"Mr. Reese! Hi! How are you?"

"Good, Benjy. How're your parents doing?"

"They moved to Florida a couple of years ago. Loving their retirement." Shah lowered his voice. "You shouldn't be here. Detective Driscoll told everyone to let him know if you showed up."

"It's okay, we don't want to go inside. I just want to confirm what the press is saying, that it was the Ragman again."

After glancing around to make sure no one was watching, Shah nodded. "Yeah, it was. Everybody's saying so. He got killed sometime during the night. ME's still up there."

"Anything else?" When Shah hesitated, Dan laid a little guilt on him. "C'mon, Benjy, you've known me since you were a kid. I'm not gonna leak anything you tell me. It's for my own investigation."

"I heard Detective Dehner say something about a warehouse," Shah whispered. "And that they haven't found the boy. Does that help?"

"It sure does. Thanks, Benjy. Tell your parents I said hi."

They crossed the street, Dan's excitement building like an overheated boiler.

"'The boy' has to mean Peter Gordon," Tom said, as soon as they were out of earshot. "Do you think Driscoll has any clue as to what's really happening?"

"No, they probably just want to question him. Hell, we're not even sure he's involved. His father could have sent the ushabti to help his son out, and then Merakhmet double-crossed him."

"What about the warehouse? What does that mean?"

Dan shook his head. "I don't know, but we need to find—"

He stopped as he noticed a piece of paper stuck under the windshield wiper of his car. When he unfolded it, cramped lines of neat script filled the page.

Officer Reese. You are probably wondering, but I did not kill Henry Gordon. I intended to, but someone else did it first. Someone who controls the ushabti, just as Henry did. I do not know who this person is, but they represent a grave danger to all. You must stop them. I know you think me a murderer, but what I did was to right the wrongs done unto me and my god. In 1888, Simon Gordon and his companions murdered me in my temple and robbed it of many artifacts. My failure

to stop them affected my god's standing in the Duat as well as my own. Before my death, I vowed revenge and my fellow priests made sure that my Ka remained with my physical body so that I might someday awaken to complete my task. Through Henry, I was able to locate most of the stolen items and purchase them. Tonight, I depart for Egypt, where I will bring these sacred items to their rightful place, the temple of Sokar. And then I will return to the Duat, where I will reap my rewards for all eternity at the feet of my god.

I do not know who controls the ushabti, but it is someone close to Henry Gordon, someone who found the spell. I believe Henry knew the person's identity but he refused to tell me. His son, perhaps, or a servant. Now Henry has paid the price, and I am certain one of you will be next.

It was never my intention to harm you or those close to you, and I have never used the ushabti against you or yours.

May Osiris favor you.

Ahmes II

"Holy shit." He handed the letter to Tom, whose eyes went wide as he read it.

"Someone close to Gordon? I think that pretty much confirms our theory. It has to be the kid."

"Now we just have to find him before dark."

"And before Driscoll. The police won't know what to do with him. Can you imagine an ushabti loose in the station?"

"Well, he's definitely not here. And we've already tried the other apartment. Either he's not there or he's got the guards in his pocket."

"There might be another way," Tom said, as they got into the car. "We know Henry called his son. I've got a guy who's done work for me in the past. He can track the kid's cell phone down to a single building on a city block."

Dan frowned. "That's illegal."

"Sure is." Tom put his feet up on the dashboard. "One of the advantages of not being a cop anymore. You want to find the bastard and put an end to this or not?"

It pissed him off to admit it, but Dan knew they had no choice.

The police would never believe them, Peter Gordon would never turn himself in, and the killings would keep happening.

"Do it." Dan pulled away from the curb while Tom made the call. The conversation was brief. When Tom put his phone away, Dan asked, "Well?"

"It'll take a couple of hours. In the meantime, we've got to meet Stacy and Joanna. They're probably ready for us by now."

"You really think this plan of hers is going to work?"

Tom took a deep breath. When he answered, he was as serious as Dan had ever seen him.

"I hope so. Otherwise, we're gonna die tonight."



It took Peter Gordon most of the day to work his way through the old man's phone and laptop to decipher what the hell had been going on for the past year.

By the time he did, he had a whole new admiration for his father. And he understood why Henry had never told him about any of it. It was too unbelievable. Even now, after reading the notes and going through the transaction records, he had a hard time grasping the reality of it.

Ancient curses, an Egyptian priest returned from the dead, revenge for shit that happened more than a hundred years ago. It was like the plot to a horror movie.

One thing made perfect sense, though.

Stolen treasure.

From what he'd been able to piece together, his father had used the Egyptian Cultural Museum as a front to buy all the artifacts Simon Gordon and the grandfathers of the dead men had stolen from some temple in Egypt. At the same time, he'd purchased other items on the black market and sold them to fund the purchases he needed to make. He'd also blackmailed the descendants of The Ten, as he referred to them, for way more money than he needed to regain the artifacts. On top of that, he'd scored big in the stock market after each death.

According to the most recent emails and texts, his old man had arranged a getaway to the Cayman Islands and all the funds had been transferred to an offshore account. Which Peter now had access to, thanks to a file with all the account numbers and passwords.

More importantly, the artifacts were currently sitting in a warehouse waiting for the so-called priest to take them back to Egypt.

Artifacts that were worth millions of dollars.

Why should this Ahmes guy get to take them?

His father's words came back to him.

"We're rich."

But now he could be a lot richer.

And if anyone tried to stop him….

He looked at the names of the priest and some cops his father had mentioned. Ahmes Merakhmet. Daniel Reese. Tom Reardon. Chad Driscoll.

"Akil Ahmose might have something to say about that."



Tom's phone went off a little after three p.m.

"This is it," he told the others, who were seated around Dan's kitchen table. He put the phone between them so everyone could see.

"Where is that?" Joanna asked, examining the map on the screen. Earlier, Tom's contact had sent him a link to share the information from his tracking app, so Tom could see the location of Peter Gordon's phone in real time. Since then, they'd been waiting for the app to pinpoint the signal.

Dan groaned. "It's goddamned Staten Island."

"The ports. But why the hell would he be going there?"

"Oh, I think I know." Stacy pulled up some emails on her phone and showed them. "The museum has a warehouse out there. We use it for incoming and outgoing shipments, but also for storage because there isn't enough room in the museum for everything. If a display comes down, it goes there. If we have things waiting to be put on display, they're stored

there. Lately, there's been a lot of stuff moving back and forth because of the new exhibits Merakhmet was working on."

"The artifacts," Joanna said. "He must be keeping them there."

Dan checked the time. "If we're lucky, we can get there before sundown."

Tom stood up.

"What are we waiting for?"



Ahmes watched the dockworkers sealing the last of the cases and preparing them for transport to the assigned storage container, which would be loaded onto the waiting freighter before midnight. He wished he could have departed during the day, but he'd needed to inspect every crate to ensure Gordon hadn't pilfered anything like his cursed ancestor. Once he'd been satisfied everything was there, it had taken hours to arrange for the dockhands to come and do their job, thanks to union rules and the proper greasing of palms.

Now all he needed to do was ensure everything went into the container and watch it get loaded onto the ship. Given the option, he'd have traveled on the vessel to Egypt, but they didn't allow passengers. Instead, he'd be taking a flight first thing in the morning, and then spend the next thirty days waiting for the ship to arrive in Cairo.

One of the workers, a hefty man who appeared to be in charge, spotted him and approached with an electronic tablet.

"Mr. Merhakmot? Need you to sign some documents."

Ahmes frowned at the butchering of his name and considered draining the man of his life force, but there were too many people around to risk it. Not when he was only hours from fulfilling his vow. Instead, he took the stylus and scribbled his name.

He was about to return to his inspection of the work when the man said, "Now we just need Mr. Gordon's signature, and we're all set."

"What?" Ahmes spun around. "I don't understand."

The man shrugged. "It's in the instructions. Nothing leaves without Mr. Gordon's permission."

"But he put me in charge. The property belongs to me."

Another shrug. "Just doing my job, buddy. A contract's a contract, and that's what this one says. You got a problem, take it up with Mr. Gordon."

Once more, Ahmes was tempted to kill the man right there and just sign Gordon's name. But he couldn't, not in public.

"Why don't we go to your office and—"

"That's okay. I'll sign that."

Ahmes and the foreman turned as a young man, a teenager really, approached them, a big smile on his face.

"Who're you?"

"Peter Gordon. I'm authorized to act in my father's place."

The foreman frowned. "I ain't heard nothin' about that. You got proof?"

The Gordon boy's smile grew larger, almost manic, and Ahmes knew with a terrible certainty his suspicions had been correct. The boy had stolen the spell.

"I've got something better. Ushabti Akil Ahmose, Ahmes Merakhmet is a danger to me."

A dry, hot wind sprang up and blew between the stacked crates. Ahmes smelled ancient sand mixed with the odors of the Nile and experienced an almost intoxicating moment of nostalgia. Akil Ahmose took shape before him, its herculean form covered in strips of cloth whose ends flapped in the dying gusts. It stared at him with eyes that were portals to the Duat, and it raised its hands in preparation to attack.

"Ahmes Merakhmet," it intoned.

Ahmes tore open his shirt, exposing the tattoo with the cartouche on it.

"You cannot take me, Akil Ahmose. Return to your master, whose bidding I also do."

The ushabti stopped.

Gordon shouted at it. "Kill him! I order you!"

"What in the fuck is going on?" The foreman backed up a step, gesturing in Gordon's direction with a long crowbar. "Get the hell outta here." The boy's eyes widened and then his whole face tightened with a furious rage. Before Ahmes could say anything, Gordon issued another command.

"Kill anyone who threatens me! Him," he pointed at the foreman, and at the dock workers who'd gathered at the sound of the commotion. "Them. Anybody."

The ushabti charged the foreman, who stood his ground and swung the crowbar. It bounced off the ushabti's shoulder and then the man was screaming as the oversized mummy lifted him in the air and twisted his body so hard the *crack!* of bones breaking filled the spaces between the crates. The ushabti threw the man to one side and headed for the group of workers. A couple of them ran, but the rest barreled forward, eager for a fight.

Moving faster than should have been possible, Akil Ahmose tore limbs from bodies, shattered bones, and flung men left and right. Blood sprayed in all directions and the cries of the injured and dying grew to deafening levels, which attracted more men clad in blue coveralls and orange safety jackets.

Ahmes couldn't help watching the battle, despite knowing there could only be one outcome. A dozen men or a hundred, it didn't matter. Akil Ahmose wouldn't stop until all of them were dead. Only three things could stop an ushabti, and the poor humans knew about none of them.

Several of the newcomers held guns, and they began firing before they got close to the ushabti. Even though he was protected against human weapons, Ahmes ducked behind a crate. A bullet wouldn't kill him but the pain would be unpleasant. At the periphery of his vision, he noticed the Gordon boy do the same. He realized his only chance of escaping with the artifacts was to kill the boy and forge his father's signature. Even if he had to wait for the police to release everything, the paperwork would be in order.

Keeping low, he made his way toward the crate where he'd last seen Gordon.

Halfway there, an amplified voice blared, "Put down your weapons! This is the police!"

"Akil Ahmose, kill the police!" came Gordon's voice from up ahead. Shots rang out from both sides of the warehouse. Over the barrage of gunfire men shouted to take cover and "put the bastard down!"

Then all hell broke loose.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Dan knew they'd arrived too late even before they reached the warehouse.

They were still a mile from the shipyard when the reports started coming in over Dan's police radio. Shots fired, backup requested, possible hostage situation, multiple casualties.

They'd been saved the trouble of trying to find the right building in the maze of three- and four-story structures by the lights splashing vivid red and blue patterns between two warehouses. Dan pulled in behind six police cars parked in haphazard fashion. Gunshots and cries of pain reached them from the building and echoed off the nearby facilities.

"Shit." Tom pulled his gun and adjusted his vest. They'd worn them strictly for protection against conventional weapons. Both of them knew that if Stacy's cartouche didn't work, they'd die terrible deaths at the hands of the ushabti.

"Split up?" Dan asked, indicating the open doors at each end of the structure.

"Fuck that," Tom responded. "We go in together and stick together."

They shared a glance and Dan wished there was time to say everything he was feeling. Sorrow, love, honor; so much more than just friendship. Something in Tom's eyes told him the emotions were mutual. Tom nodded, smiled, and then took off at a run. Dan followed, praying that Osiris had been right and it wasn't his time yet.

The metallic stench of a slaughterhouse greeted them, overlaid with the acrid burnt-oil smell of hot automatic weapons. The deafening roar of multiple weapons firing simultaneously thundered off the walls. Tom pointed ahead and Dan saw several police officers crouched behind large wooden crates. They were shooting at something deeper in the cavernous space, the same direction the screams came from. Dan waved his hand to

the left, indicating they should take up a position to the side of the police.

Crouched down, they made their way to the first row of containers and peeked over the top, then ducked again as a limbless torso bounced off the wood, splattering blood everywhere.

Ushabti. Dan risked a glance. Sure enough, the monster stood about twenty feet away. It held the body of a uniformed cop in one hand and the man's head in the other. Puffs of dust and bits of cloth flew off it as round after round struck the massive body. Unaffected, it dropped the dead man and charged the officers, scattering crates as if they weighed nothing. Packing material spread across the blood-drenched floor and Dan caught a glimpse of something shiny and yellow.

Gold. The artifacts.

Then he dove to the side as crates crashed down around him. An officer ran past, firing over his shoulder. Dan got to his knees and Tom grabbed his arm and helped him up.

"C'mon, we've got to help them." Without waiting for an answer, Tom ran toward where the ushabti was lifting another man off his feet. Dan shouted at him to stop, but Tom ignored him and pushed two officers aside. He stepped right up to the ushabti and fired directly into its head. It dropped the officer, who crawled away with a badly broken arm, and lunged at Tom.

And then stopped.

Although the creature's expression never changed, Dan felt sure it was confused. It stood there, head cocked slightly, while Tom emptied his clip into its face. When he stopped to slam home another magazine, the ushabti darted to one side. Tom moved with it, and it stopped again. Through the ringing in his ears, Dan heard him tell the rest of the officers to get behind him. They obeyed, including Chad Driscoll, who had a bloody cut across his forehead but wore a determined look that Dan had never seen on him before.

Tom fired three more times, right into the ushabti's barrel-shaped chest. Scraps of cloth flew as the rounds passed right through it, and the holes closed up in the time it took to blink.

It stared at Tom and then exploded into a cloud of dust.

Only to appear again behind the gathered officers. It snatched one up and ripped his arm off.

Dan sprinted toward it. Their only hope was to keep the men between them, so that the ushabti couldn't get in back of them. He fired as he ran, knowing it was already too late for the cop as the ushabti tore away his other arm.

As soon as Dan got close, the ushabti dropped the body and backed away. It disappeared again and rematerialized to their left. Tom got in front of it and it vanished.

It reappeared on the right. Dan intercepted it.

Driscoll emptied his pistol. The remaining four men indicated they'd run out of ammunition as well.

Dan motioned for everyone to follow him toward the door. If they could make it to the cars, maybe they could escape without any more lives lost.

A single shot rang out and one of the officers went down, clutching his leg. Dan glanced around and the ushabti swung a melon-sized fist and crushed the injured officer's head. Bone and blood flew in all directions.

Dan tried to split his attention between the ushabti and the giant space of the warehouse, while still moving slowly toward the doors. He bumped into a fallen crate and someone grabbed his wrist. A burning sensation raced up his arm and he dropped his gun. The fire engulfed him, the pain unlike the ushabti's attack but just as agonizing. He fell to his knees and his attacker emerged from behind the crate.

Merakhmet!

The priest grasped his other arm, gripping him with both hands.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot let you stop me."

Dan tried to break free but his muscles refused to obey. He remembered the mummified corpses in the morgue, their life force drained by Merakhmet's magic. That would be him if he didn't get away, but he couldn't move! The room spun around him and a dark mist crept over his vision. Sound grew dim and stretched out, as if he was hearing in slow motion. He tried to shout but his throat closed around the words.

His blood vessels boiled as the priest drew his energy out through them. An angry thought rose as he realized he was about to die.

Osiris, you bastard, you lied.

The face of the god appeared in his mind and then a thundering explosion filled his head.

★ ★ ★

Ahmes stumbled away from the detective as a massive blow struck him in the chest simultaneous to the deafening blast. He hit a crate and slid to the ground, his lungs heaving but unable to get enough air. When he lifted his hands, they were covered in blood.

Shot. I've been shot. Impossible! His protection spell should have stopped any ordinary weapons from hurting him. Only another priest could break the spell. Or….

A god.

Osiris. He knows of my presence here. But how?

In front of him, two men helped the detective to his feet. The same detective, Reese, who'd survived Akil Ahmose. Ahmes had assumed the ushabti was interrupted in his task. But perhaps he'd succeeded in sending the detective's Ka to the Duat.

And Osiris discovered the truth.

All of Ahmes's dreams of eternal happiness drained away like his life blood. Soon he would return to the Duat, not as a hero but as a *khayin,* a traitor who turned his back on the laws of Osiris and the gods for his own purposes. There would be no *Aaru,* no paradise, for him, no reuniting of his Ka and Ba. Instead, as Sokar warned, he would forever suffer tortures at the hands of Sekhmet.

Unless….

There was still one chance to redeem himself. If he could right the wrong he had initiated, then perhaps his heart would not be so heavy with sin and Osiris would be lenient with his punishment.

He had to try.

With the last of his energy, he raised his arm and waved to the

detective. Reese saw him and approached, along with the two other men. Ahmes tried to speak, sucked in air, coughed up blood and foam.

"Gordon. You must—"

A whirling shape appeared between him and Reese. Akil Ahmose took form.

"Ahmes Merakhmet."

The ushabti reached for him. Ahmes pulled open his shirt and found nothing but mangled flesh, the cartouche destroyed by the bullet's entry into his chest.

Ahmes smelled the heady water of the Nile and his head swam as he looked into the depthless gaze of Akil Ahmose. The River of Night threatened to swallow him and he vowed not to scream when the ushabti cast him into the eternal waters.

He didn't succeed.

★ ★ ★

Dan jumped back as the ushabti tore the priest apart like a child playing with a cheap doll. Pins and needles still filled his limbs, as if they'd fallen asleep, but sensation was returning and he no longer needed to lean on Tom for support.

"Jesus fucking Christ." Chad Driscoll wiped blood from his face. "What the hell is that thing?"

At any other time, Dan would've ignored him. But it had been Driscoll who shot Merakhmet and saved Dan's life. He owed the man, now.

"It's called an ushabti," he said, putting himself in front of Driscoll as the monster turned their way. "Long story, let's just say bullets won't hurt it."

"I figured that out. So how do we—" Driscoll stopped as the ushabti disappeared with a pop.

A voice called out, "Driscoll, Reese, Reardon! Kill them all!"

Dan looked around and was stunned to see they were the only three

people left alive. The implications of that hit him just as another *pop!* sounded behind them.

"No!" Dan turned.

"Chad Driscoll."

Driscoll dropped his gun and ran as the ushabti appeared next to him. Dan tried to go after him but his still-weak legs gave out and he stumbled. Tom grabbed his arm and then it was too late. The ushabti caught up in three long strides. It lifted Driscoll in the air with one hand and pressed its other palm against his chest. Driscoll's shirt and flesh smoked and he cried out, his eyes bulging. Then the mummy ripped Driscoll's left arm away. His screaming stopped and his head slumped forward. The ushabti pulled his other limbs off and then his head. Blood splashed the floor and crates.

Finished with Driscoll, the ushabti turned toward Dan and Tom and paused, held at bay by the cartouches on their arms.

Tom gripped Dan's arm.

"We have to leave. We'll figure out a way to stop it, but we can't stay here. C'mon."

Dan was about to agree when movement several yards away caught his attention. A teenage boy stood there, glaring at them. Dan recognized him from the pictures they'd seen on the internet. Peter Gordon, Henry's son. He had a gun in his hand but it wasn't raised.

The words Merakhmet had whispered came back to him.

"Gordon. You must—"

Must what?

Kill him.

It all became clear. There was no way to stop the ushabti. Gordon would keep using it for his sick, twisted reasons. Even if they arrested him, all he'd have to do was call the ushabti and it would kill everyone in the precinct. Or courthouse, or prison. With the ushabti as a weapon, Gordon could literally do whatever he wanted.

The only way to end things for good was to kill him.

Dan took his emergency pistol from its ankle holster.

"What are—?"

Pushing past Tom, he walked toward Gordon, the gun out and aimed.

"Akil Ahmose, kill him!" Gordon pointed at Dan. The ushabti disappeared and then appeared off to the side, but didn't approach Dan.

"Akil Ahmose, I command you to kill him." Gordon's fury drained away and a look of surprised fear replaced it.

"He can't hurt us," Dan said, pointing the gun at Gordon's chest. His hands trembled slightly. *Jesus, am I really going to do this? He's just a damn kid.*

"Fuck you, cop. Maybe he can't, but I can." Gordon's hand swung up and Dan reacted automatically, pulling the trigger twice. An iron fist slammed into his chest and sent him stumbling, unable to breathe. The ushabti loomed in front of him.

Everything went black.

For one terrifying moment, he was sure he'd died and returned to the Duat.

Then Tom's voice reached him through the darkness and unseen hands shook him.

"Dan! Talk to me, buddy."

Something disappeared from his face, a weight he hadn't even been aware of until it vanished Light returned and he blinked. Tom was staring down at him with a worried expression on

"What happened?"

"You did it," Tom said, helping him up into a sitting position. A sharp pain jabbed his rib cage and he winced. Looking down, he saw the back end of a slug sticking out from a hole in his vest.

"I did what, get shot?" He groaned and tried not to move.

"The ushabti. It's gone. Turned into a tornado and disappeared."

Dan glanced around. Pieces of a crate and armfuls of packing material were scattered nearby. He realized some of it must have landed on him.

I didn't die!

Wait….

"Gordon. Is he…?"

"You got him," Tom said. "As soon as he went down, the mummy vanished."

"Damn." Guilt and relief warred inside him. "He was just a kid. I didn't want to do it."

Tom put a hand on Dan's shoulder. "It was the only way. We both know it. Now, let's get the hell out of here before we get blamed for all this."

Gritting his teeth against the stabbing pain in his side, Dan let Tom help him to his feet. He waited while Tom gathered up their guns and then leaned on him as they made their way out to Dan's car. By the time they reached it, he could barely keep his eyes open and walk.

"I think I'm broken," he mumbled, while Tom buckled him in.

Halfway through Tom's response, he let the darkness take him again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The strident screams of the damned enveloped Dan from all sides. The glowing eyes peering through the reeds drew closer and the river lapped at his heels. He was trapped, and the demons of the Duat were finally going to claim what was theirs. Osiris's voice boomed from the darkness.

"You have been judged, Daniel—"

"—Reese? Detective Reese? They're ready for you now."

Dan jumped as his nightmare broke apart, leaving him sweaty and shaking on the cheap plastic bench outside the Review Board's meeting room in police headquarters. The thunderous voice of the God of the Underworld disappeared, replaced by the reedy tones of Lieutenant Avery Kraus, his assigned union rep. Kraus stared at him, his opinion of Dan's mental state plainly visible on his face.

This one's crazy.

"Sorry. I'm fine." Dan ran his hands through his hair. The past couple of weeks had been a living hell. Two broken ribs made sleep nearly impossible even with painkillers, and when he did manage to zonk out for a few hours his dreams were filled with angry gods and voracious demons. Not to mention the ones where Peter Gordon reached for him from a pool of fire, begging him for mercy.

On top of all that had been the uncertainty of his job. Neither Kraus nor Captain Green would give him a clue as to which way the Review Board was leaning, and he'd already begun making alternate plans in case they decided to fire him. Or demote him, something he'd privately decided he'd never accept. He wasn't even sure he wanted to be a cop anymore. The political bullshit and closed-mindedness had almost gotten everyone he loved killed.

The one positive note had been Joanna finding a new job with a private DNA analysis lab. It wasn't her dream job, but at least they had money coming in.

"You sure you're up to this?" Kraus asked.

Dan rubbed his side. It no longer hurt to touch through the bandages, but every movement still felt like a punch in the ribs. The dressings themselves were a constant reminder of the ushabti.

Cloth strips hanging down, the dusty smell, the eyes that looked into the vastness of nowhere and everywhere all at once….

"Yeah." He stood up. The idea of returning to duty brought up so many conflicting emotions. Police work was all he'd ever known, all he ever wanted to do. But during his recuperation, he'd come to see the reality of it. Sixty hours a week and not making a damn difference for a city that seemed to be drowning in crime. And how could he go to work every day knowing what he did about what lay beyond this world? Ordinary problems suddenly seemed insignificant. He thought about Osiris's last words to him. That he'd been set on a different path, and that when the time came, he'd know he owed his life to Osiris. What had the god seen? Had he been referring to the events in the warehouse?

Or was it something else, something yet to happen?

The idea of owing a favor to an eternal being was even more fuel for his nightmares.

When he'd spoken privately to Dr. Fleck, the psychologist had said that perhaps getting back to his normal routine would put an end to the nightmares. Joanna and Tom had told him the same thing, although not in so many words.

But after all he'd been through, how could he ever return to a normal life? How could any of them?

"Yeah," he repeated, and stood up. Might as well get it over with. He looked at the closed doors. Any other time, the dark wood and carved panels would have seemed imposing. But after standing before a god to have your soul judged, the idea of entering that chamber no longer intimidated him.

"Ma'at has set you on a different path than the one Fate intended."

Suddenly, it all became clear, as if Osiris's words turned on a light in the dark. A huge weight disappeared from his shoulders, and to his surprise he no longer gave a shit about the board's decision. He understood the

meaning of Osiris's statement, or at least he thought he did, and it freed him more than anything his psychologist had said.

"Thank you, Osiris," he whispered. With a smile that caused Kraus to frown even more, he strode toward the doors.

He knew what path he had to follow.

★ ★ ★

The moment Dan opened the door to the apartment, Joanna jumped up from the table.

"Well? What happened?"

Tom and Stacy were seated there as well, expectant looks on their faces. He'd texted Joanna earlier, saying the board had dropped the charges and reinstated him, and that he'd give them all the details when he got home. Tom held up a bottle of champagne and raised his eyebrows.

"Yeah, don't keep us in suspense. I want to pop this baby."

Dan gave Joanna a hug, tossed his jacket and the plastic bag he'd been carrying onto a chair, and smiled at them.

"Not only did they offer me my job back, but Captain Green said he'd recommend me for a supervisory detective position as soon as one opens up. Big pay bump, more pension credits."

"Yes!" Joanna raised her fists in the air. "I knew they'd do the smart thing. You're the best detective in the precinct. Why, they should—"

"I turned it down."

"What?" Tom paused in the middle of opening the champagne. Joanna echoed his question.

Dan smiled. "Turned it down. In fact, I told them I was retiring. Went downstairs and put in my papers."

"You're joking," Stacy said.

"I don't think he is," Tom countered, narrowing his eyes.

"Why would you do that?" Joanna looked like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car.

"Thought it was time to try something different." He reached into

the plastic bag he'd brought home, took out some business cards, and placed them on the table. "What do you think?"

Tom picked one up.

"Reardon & Reese, Investigations and Security." Tom's eyebrows shot up. "Are you serious?"

"You better say yes," Dan said. "Otherwise, I'm gonna have to kiss Captain Green's ass all the way down Sixty-Seventh Street."

"Hell, yes!" Tom popped the champagne bottle. Dan winced at the sound, half expecting the ushabti to appear, then forgot all about monsters as Joanna threw herself into his arms.

"This is wonderful!"

Holding his wife, watching his best friend hugging the woman he'd finally found he could settle down with, Dan couldn't agree more.

As Tom poured the champagne, Dan wondered what kinds of cases lay down the path Ma'at had chosen for him.



Ahmes Merakhmet the Second, high priest of the temple of Sokar, entered the grand chamber and bowed before his god. Sokar sat on a magnificent throne of gold and silk. Atop his head sat a conical headpiece, and on the wall behind him the eyes of Horus gazed down upon all.

A seed of hope had sprouted within Ahmes's heart. His journey down the River of Night to Osiris' temple had been as terrible as he expected, and the wrath of Osiris even worse. He'd been judged and found unworthy and sentenced to unending torture forever. But the guards that had led him away took him not to Sekhmet's waiting braziers, but down the concourse of the gods to Sokar's temple. Ahmes took this as a sign that he might yet meet a different fate than endless torment. Perhaps Sokar had interceded on his behalf, bargained for some type of leniency.

Anything to avoid the Twelve Chambers of Hell.

"Forgive me, my god, I—"

Thunder filled the chamber and lightning blew holes in the stone around Ahmes's feet. Sokar leaped from his throne and pointed a green finger at Ahmes.

"I warned you of the consequences should your actions become known! Your foolishness cost me much, priest." Sokar opened his robe and turned, exposing jagged wounds across his back where his great wings had been shorn. "A thousand years it will take them to grow back. A thousand years before I can regain my place at Osiris's side. Because of you."

Ahmes fell to his knees, forehead to the ground.

"My god, I am yours to do with as you wish. My life is in your hands." He closed his eyes, knowing the punishment would be horrific, yet still preferable to anything at Sekhmet's hands.

"It is not just your life I want, priest." Sokar approached him, his obsidian dagger raised. "It is your Ka."

Before Ahmes could rise, Sokar drove the knife into his back and carved down from his neck to the base of his spine. Ahmes cried out as a massive hand reached inside him. Something tore within him, a terrible rending worse than any physical pain he'd ever experienced, even his own death at the hands of the treacherous Simon Gordon. And then a piece of him was gone, leaving an emptiness that somehow burned like fire. Two guards lifted him up to face Sokar standing before him. In his hand the god held a glowing ball of light, with all the colors of the spectrum glittering inside it. While Ahmes watched, Sokar brought the orb to his own chest, where it sank into his flesh and disappeared.

"Not only will you never be reunited with it, but you will spend the rest of time as an empty shell, in servitude to me. No longer are you Ahmes Merakhmet, priest. From this moment forward you are Ushabti Ahmes, and you will do my bidding."

Seven servants rushed forward while the guards held a screaming Ahmes on the ground. Hot coals were poured into the gaping hole in his back, followed by boiling oils and steaming bitumen. The burning liquids filled his veins. His organs burst and his eyeballs melted.

Through the pain, he was dimly aware of his body being wrapped in linens.

Sokar's mocking laughter cut through the darkness and endless pain.

"Welcome to eternity."



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This book is dedicated to:

Daniel Samson
Rhyes van Schaik
My father, Jim
My father-in-law, Andy
My aunt, MaryJane
My uncle, Frank

And all the other family and friends who have left this world for another. I hope they have finished their travels through the Duat and their Akhs live in the sun forever.

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