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HOLLYWOOD PHARAOHS

Hollywood Pharaohs

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

Ancient Egypt

The leader of the royal guard slammed the butt of his spear into the old farmer's jaw and sent him to the ground. The other people in the mob shook angry fists but kept their distance when the phalanx of guards pointed the tips of spears at them, threatening that the next blow would be fatal.

Frustrated, the leader of the guards turned to the man on his left. "Tell the priests to hurry."

The younger man, Nephham, nodded his head and sprinted for the temple. He ran past the row of gods looking down from the gallery on either side of the plaza and took the dirt path that lead to the top of the temple. Already half buried, the entire complex was being sealed away forever.

He reached the skylight above the main chamber and shouted down to the priests, "Seal it now or be sealed inside with her."

An old priest looked up at him. "The rites must be done."

"I don't think the mob cares much for the rites," replied Nephham.

The priest shook his head. "They must understand..."

"They're hungry and their fields are bare." He pointed to the sarcophagus below. "They blame her."

"You took an oath to protect," replied the priest as he pushed two servants to affix a seal.

"And I did." He paused and added, "As well as to her family. And now they're all gone. We're to see that she's left unmolested, then move on."

The old priest climbed the ladder with the help of a servant on the last rungs. He turned and watched the other priests leave the chamber, then motioned for the workers to move the massive stone blocks into place, sealing it forever.

Satisfied that the temple would at least withstand the mob for the night, he turned to Nephham. "It's a shame to rush such things."

"It's a shame to desecrate the names of the innocent."

The priest gave him a long look. "We were all innocent once."

"Even her?"

The priest nodded and walked toward the path that lead down from the mound. "Yes, even her. Poison gets us all in the end. Sometimes it's in a potion. Other times it's in our hearts. Hers was the acid of vanity. A long, slow death that tears you apart from the inside until you're nothing more than a shell."

Nephham cast a glance back at the workers covering the tomb with earth and shook his head. The sooner it was buried and forgotten, the better.

Greek by ancestry, he'd lived in Egypt all his life but thought of it as a dead place where even the ghosts had long vanished, replaced by foreigners like himself play-acting a history buried thousands of years before.

CHAPTER TWO
LA Goddess

\$10 million per breast, or at least that's what one of the snarky Hollywood bloggers said about her asking price. When she breaks the surface of the water I get a free glimpse. The sun is low in the sky, completing the effect of the golden hour, that perfect time for shooting perfume ads and romantic scenes on the beach. Only I can't focus on her. As soon as she emerges, I notice something beyond her flawless breasts and the marble colonnades that line the pool.

I stand up and try to get a look over the hedge in the back of the estate. "Is that Harold Lloyd's old place?"

Her assistant, a Mediterranean-looking young man in a suit that costs more than my car, drops the edge of her bathrobe in the pool as he hands it to her. I think he's upset the Theresa effect isn't working on me.

All the big stars have their way of impressing you with their celebrity. It might be a portrait in their likeness by a famous painter standing in the entrance, although that's kind of hack now. Or they'll use a handful of assistants hovering around them to show you how goddamn busy and important they are.

Older stars have all their awards for you to see and giant posters of the movies they appeared in (at least the good ones). They also insist they're always working on big projects. The more times they stress that, the less likely they are.

For Theresa White, the show is herself. Her mansion is filled with a collection of paintings and sculptures, a nice mixture of traditional pieces and recent works that reflect her art school background. Everything screams that she has taste and that she's classy with a capital 'C.'

I walk around the marble tile surrounding the pool to step onto the grass by the tall hedge. Through a small gap I spot the tall trees and columns that caught my eye. Theresa steps out of the pool and crosses the grass behind me to see what I'm staring at.

"See something interesting?" Her voice is confident. There's a hint of sarcasm.

"Yeah, sorry. Roman World." I step back and let her have a look.

She pushes a leafy hedge aside. The robe is clinging to her wet skin. I can see the outline of her designer swim briefs. I think they're the same ones she's wearing in the billboard over Melrose Avenue.

"Interesting..." her voice trails off.

I explain what I saw. "That's where the robots went berserk and killed all the theme park guests. A kind of slave revolt. I'm not sure if he meant it to be ironic or not."

"Westworld," replies Theresa.

"Yes. They used one of the Lloyd gardens to shoot some of the Rome scenes. I didn't realize your place was this close."

Theresa steps back down from the embankment and turns toward me. "1973. Directed by Michael Crichton. I think it grossed \$4 million. Is it one of your favorite films?" The question is like an adult asking a child if the Spider-Man action figure is his favorite toy.

"Not really. Just a bit of a hobby. Kind of distracting." I follow her back to the couches in the open living room.

"In this town, I imagine so." She gives me a long glance before sitting down in the white leather couch across from me. A table covered with books of Egyptian hieroglyphs lies between us. "I thought you were him when I first saw you. The likeness is incredible."

She's talking about Alex Race, the movie actor with my face. Technically his face, since he's three years older than me. But I still think of it as mine.

I can feel her eyes scrutinizing me, trying to spot the differences. Sitting still, it's kind of hard. We move differently and have very different expressions.

A small smile forms in the corner of her mouth. "I see the difference."

"So do I."

"I'm sure." She points a long, tan arm at the mirror behind her. "You haven't looked at yourself once. I'm sure Alex wouldn't be able to control himself. I'm sure few of us could. We're like vampires that crave our own reflection."

My gaze flickers to the pool and the entrance she just tried to make until I get distracted by the movie location. Theresa raises her eyebrows and flashes her perfect small teeth. "I know. I'm no different."

"I doubt many of them are as self-aware as you are." I try to compliment her for at least being self-aware.

"What's it like having the face of one of the most famous men in the world?" She scoots to the edge of the couch and leans her chin on a fist attentively.

It's her eyes. Forget the flash of cleavage or the clinging wet robe. Her eyes are fierce. Intelligent. Off-balancing. There was nothing condescending in her tone, but her eyes tell another story.

"It's a pain in the ass." I didn't mean to give her my honest answer. It's her damn eyes.

"It must have its advantages." The eyes flash at the suggestion.

"You mean do I ever try to get laid because of it? I'm not that kind of guy. A girl has to be in for the sad reality and not the fantasy. Besides, when someone finds out that I'm not him, no matter how much I've insisted, it's like the scene in The Crying Game where Stephen Rhea finds out he just slept with the dude from Stargate."

"I doubt that, Michael."

She uses my first name informally. I can understand her charm. Attractive and smart, it's easy to see how she can talk her way around a bunch of middle-age producers. She's flirty without being desperate. The topless show is her way of saying she's a sexual being; but the art says she has culture. I don't doubt this. I get the feeling a lot of her taste may come from her immaculately dressed assistant watching me from the corner, but at least she has the sense to hire someone like him. I'd bet anything he's from an Ivy League school and never thought about working in the film industry until he met her.

She waves her assistant over to us. He picks an iPad off the table and sits down on the couch next to me. I can smell his cologne. It's the male counterpart to her designer fragrance.

"Show him the necklace, Jacob."

He taps open a photo album to a photograph of a necklace with long gold rectangles spaced between blue teardrop gems. The gold resembles rays of the sun, while the blue suggests the sky.

I've been told repeatedly my taste in jewelry is on par with the people who make Cracker Jack prizes, but this thing is stunning. It's the kind of art that a snob and cretin can appreciate. The symbolism is obvious. Amid all the glittering gold and blue gems, the wearer of the necklace would be the center of the universe.

The image of the necklace on the screen is faded. The edges have creases. It's a scan of a very old photograph.

"I want that necklace," says Theresa. "It was a gift from a Macedonian general to an Egyptian princess. At least that's what it was in the film."

I don't recognize the necklace or the reference.

"Sands of the Nile. 1954. It was Amanda Gray's last starring role. Hugo Harrison's last production before he got out of the film business entirely and focused on taking over Las Vegas and telecommunications. The film sat on the shelf for two years. It was one of the most expensive productions ever. Only Harrison didn't want anyone to know this."

"And you want the necklace?"

Theresa nods. "Jacob thinks it's one of the most authentic pieces to ever have appeared in a film and may be a genuine necklace that Harrison bought as a gift for Amanda Gray. I'm considering a role in a film about the first Macedonian princess in Egypt. I'd like to have this necklace for the Academy Awards next week, where I'll be presenting." Her hand touches the place between her breasts where the necklace would lie.

I shake my head. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Alex says you used to be a cop. He insists that you're quite resourceful. I want you to find the necklace for me."

"I'm not a gopher. I think you have the wrong guy. Try a private detective." The words are a reaction and not well thought out.

"I wanted to ask you first. Time is very important."

I've been dying to get out from underneath Alex's thumb. Going to work for another crazy celebrity wasn't exactly my escape plan. Not that I have one.

"Do you like living in a guesthouse?"

The words cut like a knife. I've been staying the past few months in a small house in the back of an estate of one of Alex's producer pals.

She holds her hands up apologetically. "I don't mean to offend you. I spent more time sleeping on friends' couches and in my car than I wanted."

Pretty girls like her don't have to do that in this town. Not if they're willing to put up with a rich older boyfriend who's a bit of a bore. I can tell she's different. Theresa isn't the type to suffer fools. Despite her exhibitionist streak, I think the rumors about her conservative mores are probably true.

"No offense taken. It's not all bad. Rent's cheap."

"This is a job where you'd be doing what you were meant to do. Not parading around to fool the paparazzi. I'll pay you \$10,000 up front and another \$25,000 if you find the necklace."

That's a lot of cash. Not exactly fuck-you money, but enough for me to tell Alex 'no' for a few months if he asks me to do something harebrained like stand in for him in a Japanese beer commercial while he gets laid in some Tokyo penthouse.

Theresa can tell I'm thinking it over. "Michael, it would mean a lot to me." There's something sincere in her voice. She's making a request, not ordering around a lesser.

"Why so much? I'm sure there are a hundred private dicks in this town that would do it for a fraction."

"I'm sure there are. But we don't have much time and I don't need them stirring things up. I need this handled quickly and discreetly. Alex says you're the man."

I don't have a choice. "I'll take a look."

Her lips part and reveal her smile. "Great. Can Jacob write you a check? Or would you like cash?"

I'm broke. I've got six hundred dollars shoved under my mattress at home and about thirty bucks in my pocket that I'll end up using to put a half-tank of gas in my beat-up Toyota. I can't tell you how hard it is for me to say what I tell her. But I got pride. "Let me just look into it for a day or so before I take your money."

"That's a kindness, Michael. Alex spoke well of your character."

Alex? I'm surprised to hear he'd say anything positive to a woman like Theresa about me. Unless it's some angle for him to get laid.

Theresa bids me goodbye to take a phone call. Jacob follows me out to my car. He tries hard not to notice the dirty windows and the banged-up side door. It probably gave him a heart attack at the thought of anyone seeing the car parked in the driveway.

"Can I..." He pauses for a moment, trying not to look at the car. "Can we give you some kind of fee for expenses?"

It's his way of giving me a discreet chance to say 'yes' to money away from Theresa.

I shake my head. "I'm not a parasite."

"I wouldn't have let you in the door if I thought you were."

"I appreciate it. I'll let you guys know in a day if I get a good lead."

He watches with a pained expression as I type in his number on my ancient phone. I've had it for years, back before Alex ruined my life.

Jacob steps closer to me. "She understands the value of money. So didn't think she was throwing the money in your face."

"I'm sure." I'm sure the rug I walked on when I stepped inside cost more.

"Just be careful..." His voice trails off.

"Careful? We're only tracking down a necklace. It's not like I'm going up against the Russian mafia."

Jacob gives me a faint smile.

As it would turn out, the Russian mafia has nothing on the Estonians in ingenuity or the Nevada mob in persistence.

CHAPTER THREE

Seamstress

If I hate the fact that I look like Alex Race and have no ambition to be an actor, writer, producer, or any other kind of big shot, people ask me why the hell I live here. It's because I love this town. Not the stars or the Beverly Hills mansions or the gonzo estates out in Malibu. I love people like Jenny. I'm sitting in her Burbank studio watching her fingers thread silver lace through a piece of crushed velvet.

She's one of the thousands of people who breathe life into the movies. When I was a boy back in Tennessee and road my bike to one of the last drive-in theaters in the country to watch films through a chain-link fence, it was people like her I used to wonder about. Who made the sets? Who put the light there? Who made that suit of armor?

Instead of listening to my parents argue, I could sit there and imagine I was behind the scenes watching history being made -- one of a thousand artists whose handiwork will last just as long as any brushstroke from Michelangelo.

"One more second." Jenny has to pause before she calls me 'Alex.' She can tell us apart better than most, seeing how she was married to him for almost a year. Distracted by her work, she has to catch herself. "I'm trying to get a stitching right for an Elizabethan wedding gown. A friend in a museum just dug up some old photos. It looks like a simple crosshatch, but

they did something different so the fabric doesn't bunch when the shoulder moves."

"Nobody will know." It's my usual taunt.

"I will."

Last year's Academy Award for costume design went to a woman who is arthritic and borderline senile. Jenny is the one who did the actual work. The old bird was in over her head and her assistants were in a panic. Jenny stepped in last-minute, did all the drawings, and supervised the work in the evenings when she wasn't working on that cable series that didn't get renewed.

Did she get a word of thanks on the podium? Did the producers ever give her a dime?

Nope.

Did Jenny ever have a negative word to say?

Not a chance.

There's a print on the back wall of the award-winning gown. A simple peasant frock that had hand-stitched daisies around the collar and cuffs. Jenny did those herself, but the poster is signed by the crone who got the Oscar.

She didn't hang it out of irony. She was proud of the dress and happy to help the woman out. I still can't understand why she married Alex, even for as short a period as she did.

Jenny slides the shoulder and sleeve over her arm and flexes the joint. "See?"

"Oh, yeah." I have to grin. It's a mystery to me.

She balls up the cloth and throws it at my face. "You're horrible. If it was the pommel to a sword or a saddle Clint Eastwood parked his ass on, you'd be singing a different song."

"How about this?" I hand her the photo of the necklace Jacob gave me.

"Sands of the Nile. She wants this?" Jenny says 'she' with a touch of sarcasm. Her teeth bite her lip as she scrutinizes the image. "With her breasts and the gown she has picked out, I think it'd make a nice choice. The girl has taste. I'll give her that. But wearing a piece of costume jewelry might be a bit gauche. Although she can pull it off. She lives in Beverly Hills for Christ sake. Only old buzzards and people trying to look rich buy there anymore. She makes it work."

"She's going for that golden-age actress buzz."

"It suits her. Except I don't think Liz Taylor flashed her tits as much as she does."

I suddenly find the stitching extra fascinating and avoid looking at her.

Jenny shakes her head. "You sad man."

"What?"

"She flashed you!"

"She was in the pool. Forgot her top. Wanted to make a big entrance and impress me."

"Did it?"

"They were a nice pair of tits. But I think I pissed her off when I realized the house in back was where they shot the Roman scenes for Westworld and ignored her."

Jenny cracks a smile. "Good. Never let them have the upper hand."

"Them? Listen to you. You were married to one of them and sired one of their brood."

"That reminds me, can you look after Kyle next Saturday?"

"I think you have me confused with your ex-husband."

"He's got to do something and I have to go to Long Beach for a reshoot. Besides, Kyle has been asking about you."

"Yeah, sure."

"He wants to ride the trains at Griffith Park."

"The small ones?"

"Ride them with him. Make an ass of yourself and get some photos in the paper. People will think it's Alex. Kyle will have a blast. Alex never rides the trains."

God bless Jenny and her devious mind. She's not a vindictive woman, not in a nasty way, but she doesn't mind using me to gently toy with Alex.

I don't mind because I'm in love with her. It would never work for a million reasons, so I just keep that to myself.

"Sure thing." Kyle is a cool kid.

Jenny reaches a hand out and touches my cheek. "When do we murder him and have you take his place?"

"I've thought about the first part thousands of times. But I still like the guy."

"Me too. He's not as horrible as he tries to be. Let me ask a friend about this." She takes out her phone and makes a call.

I wander around her studio and look at the different costumes she has in various stages of construction. Since it's after hours, she's the only one here. Working late, she'll go over the work of all the other seamstresses who work for her and make sure everything is authentic where it needs to be and practical where it has to be.

A Confederate captain's uniform is pinned to a mannequin. Almost child-sized, it's for the actor doing that Civil War time-travel picture. Jenny went through the extra effort of making all the ribbons and piping almost a quarter-size smaller to help the star look like a taller man. She has an eye for not just how things appear, but how the people wearing the costumes feel.

She'll get an Oscar sooner or later. Helping the crone out was part of playing the game. People know what she did. When the gossip columnists called around, she kept her mouth shut. That kind of thing isn't forgotten.

After the awards, she got calls from people who knew the real score. But that's not why she did it. She did it because she's a decent person.

"Almost human-sized, isn't it?" Jenny walks over to me.

"Yeah. Nice guy, though."

"The nicest. The fabric is designed to be stain-proof. I hated the way the synthetics looked and the treatments under the lights. I had to ask Dupont for a special formula. Fake blood wipes right off."

She sits on the table across from me. There's a concerned look on her face.

"What?"

Jenny's hand is wrapped around a slip of paper. "I called one of the old queens who keeps track of stuff like that necklace. The buzzard waits to see who's going into a nursing home or who croaked, then goes in to buy up anything with a historical value. He's got half the paste that appeared on Vivien Leigh's body squirreled away in his tiny apartment. Probably parades around at night pretending he's Scarlett O'Hara."

"Does he have the necklace?"

"No. He says officially there's been no mention of it since the movie came out. Probably got thrown into a junk bin and fell apart or got thrown out before the movie even got released."

"Theresa seems to think it's something Harrison had made special for the movie."

"If that's the case, the jeweler who made it would have their name out there. There were only about three at the time in town who could have done that. None of them ever mentioned it."

"Oh."

"Here's the thing. Pierce, the one I talked to, he says he's seen it before. Unofficially. The owner wouldn't say how he got it. Wanted to know the history of the necklace. Pierce didn't know where it came from until I just described it to him. Brilliant, really."

"What?"

"Your new girlfriend. If she gets this, not only does she get to steal the red carpet, I'm sure there will be an LA Times column just on the necklace and a whole Entertainment Weekly sidebar. She'll get as much coverage as the winner. She's smart." She shakes her head.

"So why do you look pissed?"

"I shouldn't give this to you. The owner is deep closet."

"How is that news in this town?"

"He's also Estonian organized crime."

"Oh." I know who she's talking about. Yuri Zoff. He made his money producing online porn. No big deal in this town, except for the rumors that the girls were Eastern European girls sold into sex slavery. Yuri denies it, but he can't hide the fact that his father and uncles are among Interpol's number one suspects. "I was hoping this was going to be easy."

Jenny hands me the paper. "He keeps a collection on the top floor of his mansion in Malibu. Maybe he'll give you a private tour." She winks.

"You mean go as Alex? Not a chance."

"Pierce says there's a party there almost every night. Maybe you can just slip inside and have a look."

"That sounds better."

Jenny hesitates, then hands me the address. "It's a lot of work to go through for a silly piece of paste. I could have George in the next studio over make a copy in a few hours. She'd never know."

"I will."

"Michael, Michael." She gives me a concerned look. "At least take my car. They'll never let you past the guardhouse in your heap." She slips her keys into my pocket before I can stop her.

"Thanks."

"Just be careful. Yuri Zoff may seem harmless, but Pierce says he has a mean streak."

"Mean? I'll just use my charm." I force a grin.

Jenny shakes her head. There's a reason I take Alex's punches while he woos the girls in his pics.

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CHAPTER FOUR

House Party

When the guard at the gatehouse has puffed-up eyes and a nose that looks like it was broken the day before, you should be warned. The fact that he bears more than a passing resemblance to an MMA fighter you saw kick the crap out of a top contender a few months back should be your extra-special warning.

I have a hat and sunglasses on. He waves me through without asking me to roll down the window of Jenny's Mercedes. From the line of cars going up the hill to the mansion, it looks like Yuri isn't too discriminating about the guests tonight.

I find a spot behind a trailer with the name of a motorcycle stunt team emblazoned across the side. I remember something about a crazy group of Filipino stunt riders getting kicked out of a show in Vegas a few days ago, but can't remember the details.

To more perceptive eyes, that would be another warning.

The hike up the hill takes a few minutes. If this were LA proper, there would be valets at the top to park your car. Out here in the wilds of Malibu, people buy houses just so they don't have to deal with the hassle of parking and cops answering to noise complaints.

With the sounds booming from the top of the hill, I'm surprised the Pasadena police aren't driving out here. It sounds like a helluva party. Yuri

even has club lights painting the fog coming from the back of the mansion. At least I hope it's fog and the house isn't on fire.

I light up a cigar as I reach the top of the incline. I'm not much of a smoker, but I find people tend to think of me less as Alex whenever I have it hanging out of my mouth.

A young couple are lying across the hood of a Lamborghini, trying to decide which mouth their tongues belong in. I wonder what his producer father is going to say when he sees the scratches the girl's belt is leaving on the paint. He'll probably ask if she has any friends.

The front yard has a few clusters of people grasping the ever-present red plastic cups you see at every house party where you lock up the good China. I can also smell at least two kinds of grass grown on opposite sides of the planet.

A thick, bald security guard in a black polo shirt is standing at the doorway. He points a stubby finger toward the back of the house when I approach. I'm assuming the house is off-limits tonight. Not a bad idea given the kind of rabble Yuri has around here.

That'll be a problem for me. I'm sure I could tell the guard I'm Alex and he'll let me inside. They're not too afraid someone who makes \$20 million a pic will run off with the silverware -- although in this town, you'd be surprised. I'd rather 'Alex' not make an unauthorized appearance at a sex-trafficking mobster's house party if I can help it. I usually try to keep him out of this kind of trouble. Hell, I had to call him just to make sure he wasn't going to be here.

I pass more crowds of people as I reach the back of the mansion. There's easily a few hundred people. A DJ is on a riser at the far end of the party scratching on a table. Most of the crowd is gathered around watching something.

People are screaming and shouting. I see a few fists waving in the air. Two pasty-faced Estonians in baseball caps are marking bets down as people hand them cash. I push myself in closer to what everyone is looking at and realize how Yuri is paying his bar bill.

What was once an Olympic-size swimming pool that belonged to a bankrupt athlete with an Olympic-size ego is now a drained-out pit. Inside it, three men are fighting. I recognize one of them immediately as a former boxing champion. Another one resembles an NFL linebacker who got dropped when his knee gave out.

Stripped to the waste, wearing only jeans and shoes, they look like they got pulled into the pit. Sitting on the high dive, lording over them and waving a fistful of cash, is Yuri.

With bleach blond hair, he looks like an Eastern European idea of a California surfer. Short and skinny, he has a manic energy as he screams the men on. I'm not sure if he's rooting for anyone in particular or just the spectacle of the thing.

The fighters have hungry looks in their eyes. Two of them will exchange punches. When one falls, the other steps in to try to take on the victor. They all have bloody faces and raw knuckles. I get the feeling they didn't expect to fight when they came to the party.

Either Yuri or one of his people probably threw some cash in their desperate faces. It's sad. At least two of these guys were at the top of their game once. Now they're the backyard amusement for a whack job and his sycophants.

I scan the crowd to see if there's anybody here I should be disgusted with. A woman across the pool looks back at me, then yanks on her friend's arm. I know the signs and turn away before they ask if I'm him.

At the deck in the back of the house, there's a bar set up with two girls in bikinis serving up drinks. A guy in Speedos who looks like he belongs in a porno is handing out beers from a cooler. In back of them is another thick-looking guard standing near the glass doors that lead into the house.

Yuri has the house locked down. I walk around the deck to see if there's another entrance. On the side of the house I spot a catering truck from the barbecue place in Chinatown. A woman in a serving apron carries a tray into a side door.

Well, there's my entrance. Now all I need is a distraction.

Behind the bushes next to me is a box controlling the sprinklers. I flip the hatch open and turn on the ones for the back of the house.

Five seconds later, the assholes around the pool start screaming and shouting like the Wicked Witch from The Wizard of Oz. A security guard comes running out the side door and goes straight past the sprinkler box. The caterer stops to listen to the noise. I step away from the bushes and take off the sunglasses to offer to help her.

"Heck of a party. Let me get that," I tell her.

"Oh, it's not...It's you!" Her eyes light up.

I take the tray from her and walk into the kitchen to set it down. Another aproned woman is stirring a pot over the stove. I put a finger to my lips and give her a wink.

She smiles back at me then returns to her cooking.

I walk through the kitchen and into a dining room. Movie posters in frames are all over the walls. In the living room, there's a fifteen-foot-tall print from the original King Kong over the fireplace. Two thin model-looking girls are stoned on the couch, half asleep.

All the guards seem to be outside right now, trying to figure out what happened. I take the stairs. The second floor is completely deserted except for a few bedrooms with closed doors. I hear a couple young men laughing from behind one of the doors.

I find the stairway to the third floor, where Jenny's friend said this Yuri keeps his collection. Whether that means display cases, a safe, or cardboard boxes, I have no idea.

At the top of the stairs I find out. I almost trip backward when I see the collection.

For a second I think I'm about to be attacked by an angry mob. But it's only a crowd of mannequins. Hundreds of them. I'm frozen in my tracks trying to make sense of it all. Each one is wearing a costume from a movie. Yuri has them posed in different scenes.

Weird.

There's a Marilyn Monroe in a white dress trying to keep a steam grate from blowing it in the air. Dirty Harry has his gun in a punk's face asking him how lucky he feels. Don Corleone sits behind a desk while he makes offers you can't refuse.

I've seen a ton of crazy stuff. This is surreal. It's somewhere between brilliant art project and the basement of The Silence of Lambs. Scratch that. In the corner, Hannibal Lecter is strapped to a dolly staring back at me with red eyes.

These aren't Madame Tussaud wax figures. They're mostly department store mannequins with costumes. I get the impression this is Yuri's toy set. He comes up here and plays with them.

I'm not sure how I feel about that. I've got my own weird little hobby. Theresa saw it today when I geeked out over the Westworld location. But that seems normal compared with the Estonian pornographer play-acting with mannequins in his attic. Who the hell am I to judge.

It's tempting to play the guessing game of what scene I'm looking at as I pass through the figures. I have to remind myself I'm here to find the necklace and let Theresa know if Yuri has it.

I can let her figure out what she wants to do from there. Maybe she can buy him some more dolls or something. Although it looks like he's got plenty.

Assuming Yuri is keeping the necklace in character, I search for period mannequins: togas or some crap like that. I move past a bunch of apes crouching around an invisible monolith and step into a group of Nazi soldiers all facing an empty desk.

Should I be worried that Hitler isn't where he's supposed to be?

I look over my shoulder in case the führer is lurking in the shadows with his Luger.

Convinced that Hitler isn't an immediate threat, I move on. I stop again for a moment and try to figure out who the man in the 1950s gray suit is slapping and why the other person isn't standing there.

Jesus Christ, Yuri. What do you do up here?

Farther in, the light from the hallway doesn't reach as far. I use a flashlight on my keychain to illuminate the figures as I keep searching. A hockey-masked mannequin with a chainsaw almost makes me piss myself when I step past Kirk and Spock doing an embrace I don't think was in any of the movies.

I reach a circle of gods from the original Clash of the Titans and search their necks for the necklace. Nothing. Beyond them is a Terminator on a motorcycle. It's no surprise when I see there's a spot for a young John Connor to sit on the back and hold Arnold tightly. Estonia sounds like a scary place.

Four Ghostbusters have their proton beams aimed at a Leonardo DiCaprio leaning on the edge of a ship's railing. No points for guessing who's missing from his side.

Just beyond them I see a reclining figure on a golden couch. I can feel the hair raise on the back of my neck. It's supposed to be Elizabeth Taylor in Cleopatra, but the details are wrong. The mannequin is too skinny, for starters. But it's the jewelry, the necklace, that's different. This was no gift from Richard Burton.

It's the necklace I've been sent to find. Long gold rays set between blue gems. I've found it amid the freak show.

I fumble with the camera on my phone to take a picture. The flash lights up the faces of Maverick and Goose as they high-five each other -- on the volleyball court in their shorts.

Of course.

Now that I've found it, Theresa and her assistant can figure out how to talk Yuri into giving the necklace up.

Although...it's just a few inches away from me. I'm not even sure if the crazy freak would miss it...

I reach out to touch it, but I don't. I check the photo, then dial the number to Jacob to let him know where the necklace can be found.

As I wait for him to answer, I look over my shoulder and try to remember in what movie I saw the caveman wearing a black polo shirt. He clubs me over the head before I make the connection.

Fade-out.

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CHAPTER FIVE
Gladiator Movies

Fade-in.

My face feels something cold. At first I think it's my own blood. It smells metallic and leathery. I can only see a narrow band of light in front of me. For a moment I'm convinced the blow caused brain damage and I'm now partially blind.

I push myself up from the ground. I'm lying in a puddle of water. My fingers feel something sharp and pull it from the stagnant pool.

A tooth.

Not my own.

The dull noise in my head changes to screaming. The sound is coming from all around. People are yelling at me, but they sound muffled. Besides the brain damage, I'm sure one of Yuri's guards managed to knock out my eardrum. I flick the tooth away and reach my hands up to my head.

They stop when they grasp the helmet.

I'm wearing a metal helmet. Thank god I'm not blind or deaf. My vision is obscured by a narrow slit in the visor. I tilt my head toward the sound of the yelling.

The entire party is above me, looking over the ledge.

I'm in the pool.

I'm in the goddamn pit.

Twenty feet over my head, sitting on his diving board, Yuri is making a speech in his weird Estonian-surfer accent. "When I watch movie and see actors fighting, I often wonder if that is real or not. In porno it's always real. In movie, not so much. You see Alex Race gladiator movie? I wonder if he fight off that many mens on horse. I think it's fake. Tonight. Special treat. We find out."

Oh Christ.

Footsteps on concrete splash behind me. I turn and see the linebacker from earlier in the night holding a wooden plank over his head. He's coming right at me filled with frustration and rage. From the blood on his chest and blue jeans, I don't think the earlier fights went well for him. This is his chance at redemption.

He wants to crack my skull.

There's no time to protest. The board is high over his head and about to come at me in an arc. I tuck and roll to the side and he goes right past me.

Something digs into my shoulder. Christ, I'm wearing loose armor plate. Just like Alex wore in the movie. I guess that's a good thing. I was his double for a lot of those fights, but not the really tricky stuff. I mostly got knocked around while he got to deliver the death blows.

The linebacker realizes he's overshot me. He skids to a stop in the puddle of water and comes at me again. I roll to the side as the board smashes into the concrete near my head. Chips fly up and ping my helmet.

He winces as his elbows take the blunt of the blow. The sound the board makes is bone cracking loudly. The crowd screams at the narrow miss. If he'd connected, I'm sure the hit would have dented the helmet into my brain.

I can tell by the look in the man's eyes he's not enjoying this. But there's no chance of reasoning with him. He's out for blood.

I wrap both hands around the board to stop him from lifting it again. He outweighs me by fifty pounds. I'm not going to beat him in a test of strength.

He brings the heel of his boot up to kick me in the chest. It's what I was hoping he would do. I let go of the board and he stumbles backward. I leap to my feet, grab his raised foot, and raise it above his head.

He loses his balance and high-body-slams into the ground. There's a crunch as his spine snaps a broken beer bottle in the muck. The board falls from his fingers as he lets out a howl of pain.

The mob shrieks. I'm sure it sounded worse than it was. I don't stop to find out. I snatch the board from the ground and swing it back in an arc.

The linebacker holds out his hands. "I give! I give! This shit ain't worth it!" There's fear in his eyes. He looks up at Yuri. "Screw you, asshole!"

Yuri is making a thumbs-down gesture as if he were a Roman emperor calling for the man's death. The crowd is eating it up.

I'm not.

Yuri smiles down at me. The grin fades when he sees what I'm about to do.

I swing the plank back then hurl it at Yuri. He throws his body to the side and almost falls off his perch. One of his body guards jumps flat onto the board and grabs him by the armpit before Yuri falls into the pit.

Someone hands Yuri the plank after he regains his balance. He lifts it above his head. "Dumb move, gladiator!" He swings the board over his head and waves a finger in the air like he's a general mooting to troops.

The crowd screams in delight.

Over the sound of the DJ, there's the sound of a motorcycle engine revving. The mob standing at the far end of the edge of the pool makes a frantic gap and a rider in green body armor on a green bike comes flying through the air.

He lands in the middle of the pool and drives the motorcycle up the side of the far wall, then turns to the side so he can race circles around me.

The Filipino stunt rider pulls a metal baton from his waist and holds it outstretched in his left hand. There's at least ten yards between me and the closest wall. There's no shallow end of the pool. Yuri's bodyguards are standing by the only ladders.

The rider makes a pass and looks right at me. He points the tip of his baton at my head like he's Babe Ruth calling out his homer. There is no pity in his bloodshot eyes. I'm not sure he cares that I'm in here against my will.

Yuri waves his handful of cash and lets out his maniacal laugh again, but keeps a firm grip on the diving board.

The linebacker climbs to his feet and makes a run for the ladder at the far end of the pool. The rider whips his handlebars to the side and takes a shortcut across the pool. The bike goes straight up the opposite side and he flips around in midair. When he lands, he's pointing at the linebacker.

The rider closes on him in seconds. He snaps the baton into the back of the man's thigh. The linebacker's leg folds and he collapses. The crowd

cheers.

It's a weird game. The motorcyclist could have killed him. But that wasn't the goal. He just wanted to incapacitate him and not commit a homicide. At least I hope that's the way this is played.

I get the feeling the rules are a little harsher tonight.

The rider swings his bike into a big arc and drives up the opposite wall and does another one of his flips. The crowd jumps back so no one gets a tire in the face. He lands and brings the path of the bike closer to me.

He passes just a few feet away, toying with me. He goes up the opposite wall and does a flip again. Each time he narrows the distance between us.

There's a loud sound as Yuri tosses the board into a puddle below the diving board. He grins at me and points to the board. It's his sick way of evening the odds.

If I want to get to it, I'll have to make it past the rider.

The rider has only got three or four more laps before he'll be on top of me. I crouch down into a starting position facing the board and count the time between passes. I know the second I start moving he'll turn out of his pattern and head straight at me.

The board is just a ruse to get me moving.

The motorcycle passes me again. I get the feeling he's played this game a few times. The odds are not in my favor.

The only thing I can do is the unexpected. My first urge is to go for the weapon and try to even things out. Yuri knows that. The rider knows that. It's the obvious choice.

I've never been one to take the obvious way.

I bolt forward two steps then stop. The rider only sees the first step and jerks the front of the bike around to run at me from behind; only, I'm facing him when he makes his tight turn.

I sprint toward him and shoot an arm to his right side.

His neck catches in the crook of my arm and he flies off the back of his bike. I choke-slam him into the ground. He's wearing pads, but the fall still cracks the pool. I ignore the roar from the crowd. I kick him hard in the balls. He screams and curls up in the fetal position.

Too weak to resist, I pull his metal baton from his hand and smack him so hard against the side of the helmet I break the plastic. I don't want to kill him -- just stun him enough to lie down.

He holds up his hands and swears something at me in Spanish or Filipino. I let him crawl away to the far end of the pool on his hands and knees. The crowd throws their cups and bottles at him and boos.

Yuri is waving his arms like a maniac and screaming something in Estonian. I can't tell if he's angry or excited. I don't care. I unfasten the helmet and rip it off my head so I can see better.

Crap. I forgot the situation.

The crowd goes ballistic when they see Alex Race in the middle of the backyard death match.

Screw them all and their damn little show. I head toward the ladder closest to Yuri so I can climb up and break his pencil neck. The thickest-looking guard is standing at the top of the ladder.

He shakes his head. "Yuri says you're not done yet."

"Like hell I'm not." I flash the baton at him, fully prepared to shove it up his ass and brain him from inside his skull. I reach for the lowest rung.

The sound of the DJ is interrupted by another engine revving. The crowd goes berserk. I turn around as the other two Filipino stunt riders come flying over the far edge of the pool.

Christ.

They land and head straight at me. I've seen enough trick riding to know what they're planning on doing. They're going to come at me, then break apart and go up the wall behind me and cross paths under Yuri doing a little flip.

At least that's their plan if I let them.

When they're ten feet away, I throw the baton in the face of the rider on my left. He closes his eyes as the metal rod flies into the gap in his helmet.

His motorcycle goes out of control and sends him up the side wall, where he crashes on the lip and falls. The bike lands on top of him. There's a loud cracking sound as it hits him like a femur breaking.

The other rider isn't phased. I raise my hands up to shield my head as he strikes me in the stomach with his baton. He's furious. I just put another one of his brothers in the hospital.

I crumple to the ground. The metal plate absorbed some, but not all. I know his next blow isn't going to be a love tap. This isn't about money anymore. He's out for revenge.

He heads to the far end of the pool to do a flip. I try to catch my breath and crawl over to where his brother is moaning under his motorcycle. I

make it to my own two feet and pull the bike off him.

He looks up at me with wet eyes. He's crying from the pain. I don't have any pity for the man. I take his bike from him and straddle it.

I'm not much of a rider -- certainly not the caliber of any of these guys. It doesn't matter much. I steer the bike toward the other rider and squeeze the throttle.

He sees me playing chicken and revs his engine. His back is arched as he holds his baton in front of him like a lance. We race at each other.

Ten yards before impact, I squeeze the front brake and bring the back wheels into a skid, sending my bike across the pool in a slide.

It's the only good trick I know because it involves falling.

It works.

His front wheel hits my bike and he flies over his handle bars. He lands at the back end of the pool under the diving board, head over heels.

The crowd screams.

I climb on the nearest bike and squeeze the throttle. I point my finger at Yuri, then charge toward the end of the pool where he's hovering. He's in a panic as he sees me heading toward the wall below him.

Yuri starts scrambling toward the end of the diving board. I hop off the bike at the last moment. It keeps going up the back wall and smashes into the underside of the diving board. Yuri loses his footing and catches himself by his fingertips as he falls.

Before his guards can save him, I take a leap to grab him by his ankles and yank him into the pit. He collapses to the ground at my feet. He cowers in fear as I stand over him.

He sees the murder in my eyes.

CHAPTER SIX
Material Girl

Alex has been ringing my phone since I left the party. Word travels fast in this town. A production assistant, an attractive girl with short black hair, ushers me into an express elevator.

"What floor are we going to?" I ask.

She gives me a funny look then presses the 'close' button. Stupid me for not knowing, I guess. Theresa's assistant, Jacob, only told me to meet her at the Wilshire Grand Tower.

The phone rings again. I better deal with Alex before I get to the suite where Theresa's filming a perfume commercial. I can only handle one of these people at a time.

"What?" I ask Alex.

"Are you hurt?"

"Bruised in the chest. A little sore. But that's about it. Thanks for asking."

"What about your face?" he almost sounds genuinely concerned.

"Still as ugly as ever."

"Do I need to put on a Band-Aid or anything? Get a makeup girl to give me a black eye?"

"No. Wait? What do you mean, you?" I ask.

Alex's voice is excited. "Everyone saw the fight on YouTube. TMZ, everyone is all over it. People are asking me if I'm doing publicity for an action pic."

"For crying out loud. That's why you called me? Not because you were worried about me?" Of course. Alex wants to make sure he's got a black eye if I have one, too.

"You looked fine on the video. I just didn't want to screw up and show at Serene or something and have people think it wasn't me earlier."

"It wasn't you, Alex," I explain.

"That's not the point. Listen, next time you do something like this we should really coordinate things better. Maybe get someone with a better camera there. Maybe not have let the Russian asshole off so easily."

"Estonian."

"Whatever," he snaps.

"Goodbye, Alex." I put my phone away and ignore his call back.

The elevator opens and the production assistant escorts me down a hallway filled with lighting gear and film equipment. We pass the open door to a darkened suite where a group of people are huddled over a console covered in monitors. Young men and women dressed in T-shirts and cargo shorts with utility belts and rolls of gaffers tape run back and forth down the hallway answering to calls on their radios.

My minder holds open a door leading to a service corridor. "This way, Mr. Race."

I don't correct her. I just follow her through the back way and step over more cables. The plaster and paint still smell new.

We reach the end of the corridor and go up a flight of stairs. The door at the top is propped open with a sandbag. A strong breeze hits my face when I step through the threshold. I realize why the girl smirked when I asked what floor.

We're standing on the roof of the tallest building in Los Angeles.

At one thousand feet up, the city sparkles all around us. The Santa Monica mountains are to my right. In the distance I can see the ocean and Catalina Island backlit by the glowing horizon.

A helicopter circles overhead with a huge camera sticking out of the missing side door. At the far end of the roof is a helipad and the target for the camera.

Theresa is standing in the middle wearing a short diaphanous blue miniskirt and top lit by a million watts of light from two panels. Towering two stories behind her on the helipad is a neon display for her perfume.

Forget the lights, the city, and the neon, she's somehow the brightest object out here.

She waves me over to where she's standing. A grip dressed in black materializes from thin air to lead me to stairs for the helipad. It's only a few steps up, but the sensation of vertigo is intense when I see the city below.

Theresa can see the reaction on my face. "Just don't jump."

"Don't worry, I've got a strong will to live."

Her delicate mouth makes a frown. "I wouldn't know that by recent events. I hope that wasn't related to the necklace."

Word travels fast. "Only through stupidity on my part."

"It didn't look like you were there voluntarily."

"Not exactly." No need to mention they caught me in an apparent act of burglary.

"Are you going to press charges?"

I scratch my head and mumble "it's complicated."

"How?"

She looks at me with those intense eyes. There's no point in holding back from her. She'd figure it out anyway. "I kind of snuck into his house without permission. I may have turned the sprinklers on the entire party, too."

Theresa shakes her head. "So you just left it like that?"

"Not exactly." I reach into my pocket and pull out the cloth napkin and hand it to her. "That's not my blood."

Theresa hesitates before unfolding the package. Her eyes light up when she opens the folds and sees the necklace. "Oh my!" She throws her arm around the back of my head and gives me a kiss on the cheek. "This is wonderful, Michael!"

I'd be lying if I didn't blush a little. It's not often one of the most beautiful women in the world gives me a kiss because she thinks I'm actually me.

An irritated makeup woman steps in between us to reapply lipstick. She gives me a scowl.

Theresa waves Jacob over from where he was lurking and hands him the bundle. "Our gladiator came through for us. Just like I said."

Jacob peeks inside and gives me a respectful nod. All told, it took less than a day. I don't know if I can accept the full finder's fee. I'll work that out later with Jacob, then go home and put an ice pack on my chest and get drunk. Her reaction alone almost makes the experience in the pit worth it.

Theresa smiles at me. "I knew you were the right choice."

"Thanks. It wasn't that hard." Because, you know, I fight off coked-up stunt riders and Estonian mobsters every day. The words sound stupid as I say them.

"I know you'll find the real one next."

I reply without listening. "I just spoke to a friend and she...Um? The real one?"

Theresa gives me that look everyone gives me when I say something stupid. "Yes." She waves a hand to where Jacob is holding the necklace. "That's paste. A prop."

"Yeah. I know. That's why the little Estonian sadist let me have it. He bought it as part of a collection."

"Yes," replies Theresa. "But that's not the actual one. It's probably what the stand-in wore. No offense."

"None realized. You're saying that's not the real necklace?" I'm still trying to wrap my head around this.

Theresa waves Jacob back over. He slides his iPad out of his man purse and pulls up the photo of the original necklace. Theresa points a manicured finger to one of the blue gems.

"See the sparkle? If you notice the way the light refracts, you can see how it's different than glass or costume jewelry." She traces a reflection on the velvet. "The way the light breaks apart shows the same index of refraction as the actual gemstones. It's physics."

"Yeah, of course." I know a thing or two about spotting fakes. I just assumed the glass in Yuri's necklace was supposed to be glass.

Theresa sees the reaction on my face. "Oh, Michael, you didn't go through all of that for a fake?"

"No. Of course not. That would be stupid." Real stupid. "I'm just tracking down clues." Getting my head bashed in. "You're sure this isn't the real thing?" My bruises suddenly feel more intense.

Theresa shakes her head.

"Really sure?" I'm almost whining.

"Positive. Harrison wouldn't have used a fake for the production. Everything he did had to be real. He imported a herd of five hundred camels for the movie. He even hired authentic Egyptian artists to work on the sets." Her voice is confident.

"Real ancient Egyptian artists? You'd think they would have all died by then..."

Theresa gives me a curt smile. "You know what I mean. My point is that he wouldn't have had the leading lady wear a fake necklace. The love of his life. The one you found was probably from the production. But it's not the necklace. I can't show up in anything else."

"Of course not," I reply. "There's the problem. I did some research and couldn't find any record of the actual necklace in his estate. None of the auctions ever listed it."

"I know. That's why I asked you. It's out there. I know it." She's determined.

"How?"

"It's a gut feeling. It would be wrong if it didn't exist."

I don't have the balls to tell her that it wouldn't serve her little play fantasy if the necklace didn't exist. She's used to getting what she wants, through her charm, sex appeal, and intelligence. Whatever it takes, she gets it. Her willpower may know no limits, but that doesn't mean she can make me conjure up the impossible.

I'm in an unwinable position. If I take her fee to find something I don't think exists, then I'm a fraud, by my own reckoning. If I turn her down, I'm still dead broke and soon-to-be homeless.

"Michael, let us pay you for the necklace you found."

I shake my head. "It's not real."

"Jacob told me you turned down the fee I offered you for looking around. You earned that. I saw the video. God, did you earn that. I didn't even know the replica existed until just now. Of course, Jacob was afraid you'd run off to some prop maker and have them make a fake one."

"I hope you don't think..." The brawl could have been staged and the necklace made by Jenny's friend. Suddenly I feel guilty.

"Of course not. I believe you."

She says she believes me. That's not the same as saying that she and Jacob believe me. Nor is it the same as not even bringing that up at all.

I don't know if she meant it this way, but she's got me in a corner. I just brought her a fake supplied by an Estonian mobster.

To some people, it might look like I was trying to con her out of the finder's fee. But then I should like to point out to some people that if I were really trying to con her, I would have had Yuri sell her the necklace for a lot more than what I'm refusing to take.

Theresa can tell I'm doing the math in head. "Michael, you don't think that I think you were trying to put one over on me?"

"No. Of course not." I shrug and stare at the helicopters doing circles around us. I don't know if they're waiting on us or if they're taking an intentional break. With stars like Alex and Theresa, the only way to tell is when a meek assistant director comes up and asks if they need more time.

Theresa lets the makeup woman touch her up. "For the record, I don't think you're at all capable of carrying on a deception like that."

"Funny. Some might say my whole life is a deception."

"You know what I mean. Find the necklace. I'll pay you double. Name a price. It doesn't matter. Just find it for me."

"Just assume for a moment it doesn't exist," I ask.

"It does. I'll pay you to look. Just give me your time. Pretend you think it's real and do everything you can to find it. You know, act."

"I'm not an actor," I reply.

She gives me a sideways glance as she checks the makeup girl's work in a mirror. "Then what are you?"

I used to be a cop. I get her point.

The meek assistant director steps onto the platform and asks Theresa if she needs anything else. Time for me to go. I excuse myself and step down from the helipad, trying not to think too much about the drop off the side of the building.

If I blow the whole thing off, I'll look suspicious. If I don't find the damn thing, that'll be the same problem. A few hours after she asked me to find the necklace, I pop back up with a fake, presumably asking for my finder's fee.

My guilty conscience makes me feel like crap even when I haven't done anything wrong.

No matter how noble I may have looked in turning down Jacob's offer for an advance, in retrospect, it just looks like I was trying to con them. My only choice is to keep looking.

I have no idea where. My best lead landed me in a gladiator pit in a Malibu backyard where I had to fight for my life as a bunch of coked-up Filipino stunt riders tried to decapitate me.

Resorting back to my neglected cop skills that have since atrophied for my less meaningful ability to role-play as Alex, I have to start at square one: assume the necklace is real and find out at what point it vanished.

The upside is that it can't get any weirder than it has already.
Right?

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Film Club

This city has many layers. A few hours ago I'm standing next to one of the most famous women in the world, literally on top of that world, the next I'm being let in through the back-alley door to a grungy studio that looks like it hasn't had a coat of paint since they invented the talkie.

Suarez, the security guard who let me in, points his flashlight at a cardboard box in the corridor of the hallway. "Found a bunch of screen tests in a closet that had been sealed off." There's the faintest hint of his Mexican accent in his voice. Brown skin, thick mustache with streaks of silver, he's been here for years.

"Anything interesting?"

"On some of them you can hear the producers rating the girls on screwability after they leave."

"So, nothing new," I reply.

"Found a test film of a guy doing a horrible Nicholson impersonation."

"So?"

"Turns out it was him." Suarez takes a key from his belt and unlocks a heavy metal door. "Haven't been in here for months. What are you looking for?"

"Newsreels, press stuff. Anything on Sands of the Nile."

"Was that an Eagle film?"

"They merged with Harrison's company. Took over the lot. Some of it was shot here. Or at least that's what it said on the Internet."

Every lead I tried following turned up empty. The problem with trying to find some things online is when the movie never made the jump to digital, there's not much chance anything else will either.

Suarez is my source for finding out film locations and other bits of historical information that give me a perverse pleasure. I helped get his kid out of some trouble once and he returned the favor with a CD of scanned copies of every single location release going back several decades.

Want to know the apartment complex where Jules Winnfield had his first taste of a Kahuna Burger in Pulp Fiction? I've stood in the actual apartment (not the set) and devoured a Carl's Junior pineapple burger while listening to the soundtrack.

Yeah, weird.

The CD was filled with all sorts of lesser-known gems. There's a certain tree in Pasadena that George McFly fell out of in Back to the Future. I'm not saying I fell out of it, but I've been up it. It's much harder to see in through the second-floor window than they let you believe.

You got your kinks. I got mine. I'm a helluva first date if you like movies and can get over the fact I look like him.

Suarez and I dig through a bunch of boxes and find a row of filing cabinets covered in rust and cobwebs. He flips through the alphabetical ones while I go through the drawers by year. There's a fat folder for Sands of the Nile filled with press clippings and mimeographed releases.

I sit myself down next to a crate filled with faded posters and dig through. The folder is the kind of collection a secretary keeps for the public relations department. There are notes about a story clipped to what actually ran. The kind of thing they'd present their bosses to show what kind of coverage they got for a film. Nothing is organized. It's just all thrown in together.

I see a bunch of stills with the star, Amanda Gray, in her Egyptian princess outfit. A few of them with the necklace. There's nothing I haven't seen so far.

The articles don't have much information either. You can tell it was a troubled project the studio just wanted to be over and done with.

Suarez drops a box at my feet, sending up a cloud of dust that makes me sneeze. "Thanks for that."

"Newsreels from when they made the film."

I pick up a canister and check the date. "These were made two years before the movie finally got released. I need to know what happened afterwards. What they did with all the props. Maybe some accounting books?"

"Okay." Suarez nods and bends over to pick up the box.

On second thought, maybe knowing something more about the movie might not be a bad idea.

"Hold up. You got a screening room we can check these out in?"

Fifteen minutes later, Suarez has the first reel threaded on a projector in a forgotten projection room in the basement. I lift the plastic off a seat so I don't have to sit in fifty years of dust and mildew.

The first reel is a five-minute promo piece talking about the movie. It's the kind of thing they'd run in front of other pictures. We get introductions to all the stars and some behind-the-scenes footage of the sets. I have to say I'm impressed. This was a large production.

"Those statues look big," says Suarez.

The centerpiece is an Egyptian temple complex complete with obelisks, statues, and buildings. The camera does a long panning shot of the desert location. Amanda Gray poses for the camera and embraces a statue of a tall Egyptian pharaoh. The male lead, Rex Thomas, the Macedonian general, straddles a Sphinx he's pretending to race.

In the background, several painters are fixing up the monuments. The narrator goes on about the effort the studio put into creating the most authentic motion picture ever about Egypt.

"Didn't they have a labor strike on this movie?" Suarez asks.

"I think I read something. I don't know."

"Yeah, the plasterers union, I think. They were upset Harrison hired a bunch of Mexicans to come in and build the sets just outside of town."

I have to admire the work. "They did a hell of a job."

"My people know pyramids."

Suarez changes the reel and plays a filmed interview with Gray and Thomas sitting in canvas chairs with the set in back. A huge sphinx looks down on them. Gray's wearing her street clothes, white capris and a blue blouse, but the necklace is on proud display.

I can't help notice the way her hand keeps touching the necklace. It's an affectionate gesture, like you would with a special gift. I have to say it looks a little odd. Movie stars are used to having all sorts of costume pieces on

them and tend not to touch them unless told to, in order to avoid getting fingerprints.

"She sure likes that necklace," says Suarez, agreeing with what I'm thinking.

I haven't told Suarez what I'm looking for just yet. "Yep. She sure does."

I'm beginning to think this isn't some piece of costume jewelry after all. Maybe Theresa was on to something.

Suarez switches reels again. This one is a bunch of outtakes from the movie. Footage that didn't make it into the newsreel. Mostly it's people clowning around. Amanda Gray mugs for a handheld camera then walks over to a tall gentleman in a white hat and plants a kiss on his lips. There's no audio, but you don't need it to understand what just transpired. Her hand goes to her neck again and she smiles at the man.

"Isn't that Hugo Harrison?" Suarez asks.

Yes it is.

"It looks like they're dating."

Yes it does.

"He was the richest man in the world, wasn't he?"

Probably. Rich enough to buy his girlfriend an authentic piece of jewelry to wear in a movie he was producing for her.

I send Theresa a text: **I'm thinking the necklace is real**

A minute later I get a reply: **duh**

"Suarez, do we have any footage of Amanda Gray after the movie was made?"

"We got a library of old videotapes of red carpet appearances. Why?"

"I want to see how long after the movie she had the necklace."

An hour later we're sorting through a pile of ancient video cassettes the size of textbooks and feeding them into a machine large enough to wash my clothes.

Lucky for me, the studio we're in produced half the awards shows from the '70s to the '80s. They kept logs of everyone who appeared so they could find retrospective footage when a star was celebrated or died and needed a tribute.

Our pile of tapes is from all the Amanda Gray appearances after Sands of the Nile. We find her walking a carpet in 1962 with the necklace around her neck. The question on my mind is if it's the real one or the paste I found. By

that time, whatever romance she had with Harrison was long over. She might have worn a fake for nostalgia.

Suarez suggests we watch the tapes in reverse order to find the last time she wore the necklace. While he sorts through them, I email Jenny and ask if she knows how old the collection was before Yuri bought it for his dress-up room. I'd dropped off her car and left her place before she could ask about the brawl. She worries about me too much.

Suarez has a clip on the screen of an older Amanda Gray, in her 50s, sitting at an awards banquet with the necklace on full display. She has an elegant look to her, but there's none of the charm and vibrance from the earlier footage. She almost seems bitter as she watches the show.

Her black dress looks sophisticated and contemporary compared with how everyone else is attired. To her right is a stocky man with a face like a bulldog. He's wearing a pin on his lapel that resembles an Egyptian symbol.

By that time she hadn't acted in years. I couldn't find a report of her ever marrying. By the look of them, I'd assume he was another rich boyfriend. Although he resembles the type that makes money from construction or gambling.

"What year is this from?" I ask.

Suarez checks a label on the box the tape came from. "I don't know, 1987?"

"Are you sure?"

We spend the next half-hour playing a guessing game of who's who from the 1980s. I have Suarez stop the tape when the camera passes by a table where Demi Moore is sitting with Bruce Willis.

Without missing a beat, Suarez blurts out, "1986. That's when they got married. She was married to Freddy Moore before then."

"Heck of a divorce. She got his last name, he got obscurity."

We search through the rest of the archive and can't find another appearance of her or the necklace after. She just vanishes from public life.

Most actors tend to fade away. Either they stop getting calls and invited to events or they just move on to other things. Hollywood has a short memory. One day you're the lovable best friend in a romantic comedy, a year later you're answering phones for a carpet-and-tile business in Bakersfield. Every now and then, someone walks in and says you remind them of somebody. Depending on how you feel about the way your career turned out, you can be happy or sad.

I can relate a little.

Suarez walks me to another part of the building, where they keep financial records. It's pretty clear to me that to find the necklace I'll have to find Amanda Gray. Once I know she has it, I can let Theresa's people work something out. Right now, it's up to me to just confirm that part of the theory.

Suarez flips through the file cabinets while I keep watch for anyone. Technically I'm not supposed to be here. None of the other guards really care what he's up to. Just the same, the fewer people we have to explain things to, the better.

He pulls a pay stub from a folder and hands it to me. It's dated March 1982, for \$80,000.

"What's this for?" There's no invoice number or memo, just her name and address.

Suarez shrugs. "I don't know. Maybe residuals."

"Yeah, but it's an even amount. Residuals usually end in cents. You don't round them. Whatever. It's got an address and phone number on here. Thanks."

Jenny texts back the answer to my question about the date the replica was sold off in the collection: **1984**

Well, that settles that. Theresa was right. There are two necklaces. The fake I found and the necklace on Amanda Gray's neck -- which I'm betting is the real thing. Something tells me from the way she clung to it she never let it out of her sight.

Getting it from her is not going to be easy.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Method Acting

The zombie growls at me as I bounce the tennis ball off his forehead. He's got his green arms wrapped around a buxom blond girl who looks like the last thing she expected when she got into the shower was for the undead to interrupt her session with the loofah sponge. I've never seen the movie. I'm sure Richard, the producer who owns the guesthouse I live in, has a copy somewhere. I don't think it can live up to the hype of the poster. It promises everything: zombies and sex. Hopefully not a combination of the two.

Twelve years ago, Richard was making horror movies with money borrowed from his parents. Inspired by films like the one in the poster, he turned his adolescent fascination into a business by churning out film after cheap film. He'd pay the actresses an extra \$75 to go topless and kept his total cost down to a few thousand dollars.

A studio looking to increase its video catalog came along, bought his company, and offered to let him produce horror films for its in-house brand. A couple hits later and you see his name on \$100 million blockbusters. He still thinks like the guy in his parents' backyard pouring red Karo syrup over the tits of Hooters waitresses: Only spend what you have to and put everything on screen. When in doubt, show some breasts. It's as important of a formula out here as relativity.

The mansion Richard lives in used to be owned by a studio mogul from a million years ago. The bungalow I've been staying in was called "The

Niece's Shack," on the account of all the mogul's nieces who used to live back there. His wife was a catatonic alcoholic and didn't seem to know or care.

Richard's wife, on the other hand, hates me. I know my days here are numbered. At first he thought it would be a fun lark to help Alex out by letting me crash here. He'd come by, we'd drink beer and watch football. Then one day that stopped.

It's probably not a coincidence that happened right after his wife made a pass at me. I politely refused. Who knows what she told him.

Right now I'm not worried about where I'm going to stay next. I'm trying to figure out what Amanda Gray did after Sands of the Nile. Her IMDB page is ghost town after the movie came out. Nothing. From the release of the movie to the awards show banquet some decades later, she just appears to have given up the business.

When I think about the film clip of her and Hugo Harrison canoodling, I can't help but think about a story Alex told me once. He was out on the golf course with a couple A-list actors, including an Academy Award winner you'd recognize immediately. After the seventh hole, the Academy Award winner, known for his method acting, pulls Alex aside and tells him something that still chills Alex to this day.

The Method Actor asks Alex if he can remember most of the movies he'd appeared in. Alex, like Theresa, has a good mind for that kind of thing and starts naming them. Method Actor asks Alex if he ever wondered why there was a six-year gap in the 1980s.

Alex shrugs. Method Actor tells Alex that shortly after he won his Academy Award, he made a comment in the press expressing some opinion that pissed off one of the biggest people in town -- the kind of person who can shut down pictures at other studios. The big shot made it so Method Actor spent almost a decade on the sidelines. No major studio would give him a part. He had to wait until he was forgiven or the people who made the decisions moved on or forgot why they weren't supposed to hire him.

Alex tells Method Actor that's a great story. Method Actor tells Alex it's not a story, it's a warning. He'd heard a studio head mention something Alex had said that angered him. Method Actor couldn't remember what it was, but Alex needed to be careful.

People were watching.

The funny part is that Alex is the most apolitical, un-opinionated person in the world (except about himself). It drives him nuts to think of what he may have said. He spent a week going through interviews trying to figure out where he said something that would have pissed someone off. Like a good A-lister, he made sure to follow the lead of the studio chiefs and make public and generous donations to all the right charities and political organizations. So far, his career has been fine, but to this day, the warning still haunts him.

He once called me from a restaurant bathroom in the middle of an interview to make sure he had the political parties straight for an upcoming election. Alex was deathly afraid he would inadvertently say something positive about a politician he actually met and liked and have it come back to haunt him.

If that's how crazy this town can be, what happens if you're Amanda Gray and you spurn the richest man in the world? Harrison may have sold his studios a few years later, but he still had his fingers in everything, including television. He could destroy a career in one phone call.

As talented as an actress as she was, with the bomb of Sands of the Nile sitting on her shoulders and the possible bad blood with Harrison, Hollywood could find a way to manage without her.

Cruel, but there's another side to these things. I told Alex when he was getting panic attacks about being blacklisted that this town is full of people who feel like outsiders. Every time they turn on the news, there's a politician or critic yelling about how Hollywood is ruining America. It's very easy to slip into an us-versus-them mentality.

Sometimes that can be abused for petty grudges, maybe in the case of Harrison, and other times it's the reaction of a bunch of people who grew up as the odd kid and came to this place for acceptance. The last thing they want is someone they welcomed into their fold and made a star turning on them.

I can speculate all I want about why she vanished, but it ain't going to help me get the necklace. I've been bouncing the tennis ball off the zombie because I'm avoiding things.

The most direct route is to call the number Suarez found for me in the studio archive. Maybe Amanda Gray can tell me herself what happened. Some of these forgotten people are dying to tell their story to anyone who

will listen. Half this town has a tale about how they got screwed over by someone famous. Famous people have them, too. It goes round and round.

I get my nerve up and dial the number. The phone rings and rings. I'm surprised voicemail hasn't picked it up. Finally, I hear the receiver click.

An older woman with an East Coast nasal accent answers. "Osiris Incorporated. How may I help you?"

"Sorry, wrong number."

I hang up and check the phone number again. Right number. Not what I'm expecting. Suarez's handwriting is meticulous. I dial again.

The same woman picks up. She sounds exasperated to have to be answering the phone. "Osiris Incorporated?"

"Hello, I'm sorry. What exactly do you do?"

"Is this a solicitation?"

"No. I'm sorry. I'm trying to get ahold of Amanda Gray. This was the number I was given."

"By whom?"

"Excuse me?"

"Who told you that you could reach her at this number?"

That's odd. It's not a denial. "Er, the studio."

"Well, I'm sorry, I can't help you. All communication must be done through writing."

"But this company is connected to Amanda Gray?"

"Who are you?"

"Just someone who wants to speak with Amanda Gray."

"I have a call on the other line. Please submit your query in writing."

"Um, is there an email address?"

"No."

"Then may I have the address to write to?"

"Fine." She lets out a huffy breath, then gives me a street address in downtown Hollywood.

"So this is the way to communicate with Amanda Gray?"

Click. No answer. Not an affirmative.

Writing a letter is pointless. The office is only a few minutes away, so I decide to drive over there. I do a quick check online for Osiris Incorporated and find the number and address are the same for a company called Brunelli Limited Partners, registered in Nevada.

Well, this is curious.

My cop sense is twitching. I give the zombie a nod and grab the keys to my car.

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CHAPTER NINE
Osiris Inc.

The office is located in a six-story faded yellow building across the street from a Jack in the Box. The directory lists a variety of businesses you'd find in any town, along with ones only possible in Hollywood. There's a talent agency for pets. Which would explain the signs on the front of the building promising sharp punishments for pets that don't mind themselves. The third floor alone has two talent agencies. Both sound like they're nothing more than places to store rape couches: LA Mega Starmakers and International Model Alliance. The fourth floor houses the Lithuanian film commission. Probably a plum job for some politically connected nephew.

The whole building looks like it got stuck in time somewhere before Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon. There's even a free-standing antique ashtray in the lobby next to a faded orange leather chair. Nobody told management smoking indoors is a capital offense in this state.

Osiris is on the sixth floor. I take the elevator and pray they check for rust on the cables at least once a century. It makes an unsettling knocking sound and comes to a stop within a few inches of my floor. I make note of the stairwell location, then knock on the Osiris door.

The woman from the phone calls out from the other side to say the door is open. I step inside and have to touch my cell phone to reassure myself I haven't actually been teleported to 1965.

Wood paneling, ugly oil paintings, shag carpet that has been vacuumed threadbare -- I want to take a photo to prove to anyone who asks that I was actually there. The topper is the woman sitting on the other side of the reception desk.

A heavy-set woman with a violent red beehive hairdo, she looks up from her magazine with an angry expression.

"You're not the Chinese boy."

"How could you tell?"

She ignores my joke. "I've seen you before. Who are you?"

I'm pretty sure Alex's face is on one of the magazines stacked on her desk. "I'm the one who called on the phone about Amanda Gray."

"You? I said writing," her face bunches up into a scowl.

"I know that. It's just that I'm working under a tight time frame."

"Are you the media?" She leans back in her chair as if she suddenly realized I didn't cast a reflection.

"No. No. I'm just trying to track her down for a friend. Are you a management company?"

"We're diversified." Her words are vague.

Besides the ancient décor, I'm struck by the one detail I couldn't put my finger on that's been bugging me. There's no computer on her desk. Just a telephone that could have come from a prop house. It's not even an office phone with extensions. There's only one other door in the reception area. In the other office there's a desk with several cardboard filing boxes stacked on top. A small door inside leads to what I presume is the bathroom.

I'm not sure what this woman's function is, other than to keep people away from Amanda Gray. From her desk, you'd think she was a freelance proofreader for gossip magazines. I can't see anything that looks like actual work.

The one clear way to cut through flacks is to get to the heart of things. "I'm here about a business arrangement."

"You'll have to submit it in writing," she replies.

"It's for Miss Gray."

"Writing." She barks at me.

"So you're saying that you represent Miss Gray?" I'm still trying to be as charming as I can pretend to be.

The woman looks perplexed, as if I caught her in a trap. "I didn't say that."

"You did," I correct her. "If I tell you I want to offer her money and you tell me to submit the proposal in writing, then either you represent her or you're committing fraud by soliciting business under false pretenses." I try to smile at the last part as if it's a friendly joke.

My limited charm has no effect on her. Her nose makes a wrinkle as she thinks things through. "Hold on." She picks up the phone and dials a number. I try to keep a straight face as her thick finger turns the rotary dial. Up until now, I didn't even know those phones still worked. It feels good to see someone with a phone older than mine.

Someone answers on the other end and she has a hushed conversation. I do my best to pretend to ignore her and stare at a horrible painting of an Italian plaza. The thick brush strokes of oil have slopes where dust has collected like powder on a ski hill.

"Here, you can speak to her attorney." She hands me the ancient phone.

"Hello, I'm trying to track down Miss Gray. Who am I speaking with?"

"I'm her attorney," replies an irritated man.

"Yes, your receptionist pointed that out. I was wondering if it would be possible to speak with Miss Gray."

"She doesn't do interviews anymore."

"This isn't an interview. I need to speak to her about a personal matter," I reply.

"What?"

"Well, it wouldn't be personal if I told you?"

"I'm her attorney."

"Yes, of course. That slipped my mind since you last told me. I'm trying to track down the necklace she wore in Sands of the Nile."

There's a pause on the other end. "Necklace? I don't know anything about a necklace."

"Well, maybe she does. Perhaps I could speak with her."

"That's out of the question," he replies in a gruff voice.

"Maybe you've seen the necklace? It's rather Egyptian or Macedonian. It resembles the sun. Long gold rays with blue gems?"

"No. It doesn't ring a bell."

Something about him seems familiar. He has a wise-guy kind of tone to him. "Were you with her at an awards show in the 1980s? Maybe sitting next to her? Wearing an Egyptian pin?"

There's a pause. "No. Put Ethel on the line."

"What's your name again?"

His voice is just below a growl. "Put her on the line."

I hand the phone back to Ethel. The attorney says a few clipped words then hangs up. Ethel glares at me. "Leave or we'll call the police."

"The police? For what?"

"Trespassing." Her hand picks up the receiver while a finger hovers over the dial.

I have a feeling that it's a bluff, but there's no point in pushing her. I lean over and pull an Us magazine from the trash can. "Mind if I take this?"

Before she can protest I head for the door.

When I was on the phone I was close enough to the desk to see something I hadn't noticed before: The address on the magazines weren't for the office. It had a pricier ZIP code than I think Ethel could afford on whatever they pay her to sit there and look scary.

In the stairwell I check the magazine I swiped. Sure enough, the name on the label says 'Amanda Gray.'

At least now I know where she lives.

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CHAPTER TEN

Paparazzi

The waves of the Pacific roll in below on the most famous beachfront in the world. To the north is Zuma Beach, the scenic stretch of sand and water the lifeguards of Baywatch diligently protected when they weren't bending time and space saving lives twenty miles to the south on the much broader Venice Beach and its more urban setting. It's also where the adults playing the teenagers of 90210 relived their adolescence. All the big beach movies were shot there, too.

You could spend a lifetime rattling off the movies and television shows that have been filmed within view of this park. Probably nine out of ten beaches you've ever seen in movies and television are visible from here.

Besides the beaches, in the distance you can see the Santa Monica Pier with its famous amusement park and roller coaster that has been destroyed in a variety of action movies. Spielberg had an overzealous fighter pilot played by John Belushi send the Ferris wheel into the ocean in 1941. Even South Park has destroyed its cartoon equivalent.

My favorite part about this park is what you can't see. The forgotten piece of the past that barely made it into the history books or onto film. A few miles to the south at the northern end of where Santa Monica meets Malibu, there used to be a wharf almost a mile long that stretched out into the ocean in the late 1800s. Trains would drive out to the middle of the sea and offload and take on cargo from the ships that docked there. Huge

warehouses sat on the tip, along with a small city that served the crews. All of it is gone now beneath the waves.

Eventually, after fires and neglect, the wharf lost favor to the Port of Los Angeles to the south, a town formed in the 1500s by Spanish sailors.

All that's left of the pier is a highway marker and some rip currents surfers try to avoid or attack when they pass over the sunken pylons. It's a kind of sunken Atlantis to me. A reminder of how so much history is right below our feet. It's part of that past before movies came to California. Some people would have you believe there was nothing here but orange groves until film companies came out west to dodge Thomas Edison's patent men. We think of California as being new, but Spanish galleons were parked off these waters while pilgrims in the east were still trying to figure out where to build their cabins.

This is lost on my companion as she rests the long lens of her camera on a picnic table just below the baseball fields.

"Come on, you fairy," she growls.

"That's not very politically correct."

"It isn't if you say it. I'm allowed."

DJ scans the hiking trails below the park for her quarry. She'd gotten a tip that a closeted film star was taking long romantic jogs in the hills near here with a not-so-closeted television host. There are four crushed boxes of Virginia Slims in the bushes near us. I can tell she's been here for at least two days.

As tall as me, DJ is a striking amazon of a woman. She's quiet about her past. I've heard she used to be a runway model. She certainly looks it. For some reason or another, she went to the dark side and decided to stalk the people she once aspired to be.

She lights up another cigarette. Dressed in black jeans and a sports coat, she looks like a French cigarette advertisement. "Tell me about this bitch you're looking for again?"

"Amanda Gray."

DJ takes a long drag. "Sands of the Nile. Screwed Hugo Harrison?"

"Yeah."

"\$500."

"What?"

She exhales. "That's what I can get for a photo of her. Not much. But not nothing. If she's still got a hot body and we get her in a bikini, probably a

lot more than that. Old broads like to think they can still turn eyes. Gives them hope."

"She's got to be in her 80s."

DJ shakes her head. "Too depressing, unless she's bedridden with tubes and stuff and being beaten by her husband and there are bruises."

"Uh, she's not married. And that's horrible."

DJ's eyes light up. "Abusive girlfriend? I can sell that."

"No. I'm not selling you anything. I just need help."

"Come on, Faker, if you won't help me out, what do you expect?"

That's her nickname for me: Faker. She's one of the few who picked up on what Alex and I are up to. Wisely, she realized there was more money in having the inside scoop on when Alex or 'Alex' was going to show up and do something interesting. We bought her secrecy when we tipped her off to Alex showing up at a club with a lingerie model who had decided to not wear her product when she stepped out of a limo with Alex. The model wanted literal exposure. Alex wanted some bad-boy PR that didn't involve getting drunk or a fight. DJ got high five figures for the shot. Everybody won. Except for the lingerie company, I guess.

"If you ever need a fallback, Faker, let me get a shot of you in a backseat with some West Hollywood boy toy. We can both retire rich."

"And Alex will kill me."

"I can live with that."

"You're the worst of any of them."

"I'm only a magnifying glass." She pauses. "Plastic surgeons."

"What?"

"Plastic surgeons, old people docs, pharmacies. That's how you stalk an old person. They're always going to the doctor. Find out where she lives and see what doctors are close by. If she's as old as she is, maybe not the plastic surgeon if she's media-shy. Definitely a gerontologist. Old people tend to move to places closer to their doctors."

"She's had the same house for decades, I think. Nice house in Beverly Hills," I reply.

"Probably doesn't do her own shopping. If she has in-home care, you can try following one of the nurses. You can buy them cheap enough if they know it won't get back to them. They know their client's going to die and want an exit bonus. The closer the buzzard gets, especially if she's senile,

she'll make life hell for the nurse. That's when you get them. If they're stopping at the liquor store on the way home, great time to ambush them."

"You're a wretched creature."

DJ gives me sly smile. "I ever tell you how I got back at the New Tattler when they screwed me over on some photos? I knew their star muckraker was digging through the trash of a starlet who just turned 18. They were looking for condoms, any sign of partying."

"I don't need to know this."

DJ ignores me. "I got a pregnant friend to piss all over a bunch of EPTs. I dropped a few in the trash. Did the same a day later. Poor girl almost had to go to the psych ward when she saw the headline about a pregnancy rumor. Her lawyers and the studio brought so much shit down on the Tattler, blacklisted them for a year from any kind of coverage."

"You're pure evil."

"Don't fuck with me."

"I won't. Trust me."

DJ lowers her voice, even though no one is within earshot. "So are you banging Theresa White?"

"What?"

"I know it was you up on the Wilshire when she was doing the perfume shoot. Real Alex was in Burbank trying to nail one of the girls on that new MTV teen soap thing. So what gives?"

"Nothing."

DJ looks at me through squinted eyes. "Little Miss White want a three-way with you and Alex?"

"No. I'm pretty sure not. It was a business thing."

She gives me a knowing look. "Nice. So you're studding yourself out? It's about time. I know a couple gents in Palm Springs that will dress you in silk and pamper your ass. Just let me set it up."

"So now you're a pimp?"

"So that's a yes?"

"It's a no. Please go back to whatever horrible cave you came from."

"Okay. So, Amanda Gray? Theresa has a thing for old coot? Is that it? You're tracking the old broad down for a little May-December action? By May I mean like whatever Moses called 'May.'"

"It's off-topic."

DJ shakes her head. "Quid quo pro. I helped you out."

"You told me to follow her to the doctors or hope her nurse is a lush. That's not helpful. I'm on a time constraint here."

"Time. Like, before next Sunday's Oscars? She want to take Miss Gray as her date?"

"I thought we covered that."

"No, actually, I didn't mean it that way. That'd actually be a classy move. Take some forgotten star and put her on the carpet next to her. Real classy."

"I don't think that's what she has in mind," I reply.

"Good. I'm going to sell that to someone else then. I know a couple rehab screw-ups desperate for a gimmick like that." DJ stubs her cigarette into the ground and stares off into the ocean. "Just let me know first if you get whatever it is you need."

"I'll run it by my hypothetical client who I haven't named. Right now I think the best approach is to just try the front door."

"Papers," replies DJ.

"What?"

"She'll probably have a gate. Tell them you have some studio papers for her to sign. That'll get you in."

"Thanks. I think I can manage."

DJ picks up her camera. "I think the lovers got spooked. Let's go."

"Pardon me?"

"I'm going with you." She taps the huge lens.

"It's very phallic the way you brandish that."

I could try to talk her out of coming, but to be honest, she sees things in a much sleazier way than I do. Which, after the encounter in the Osiris Incorporated office, might be helpful. I could use her eyes.

DJ gives the trail one last look. "They're canceling his boyfriend's show anyway. Nobody will care about them in a week."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Palace

If a tornado ripped through time and managed to snatch up a Roman estate, a Spanish villa, and a handful of Tudor mansions and then dropped them intact in nicely arranged property zones, that's kind of what Beverly Hills, Bel Air, and Holmby Hills would look like. The mixture of different architectural styles stretches the limits of the word 'eclectic.'

DJ snaps photos as we pass by the homes and shares a few snide observations about the artistic merits of each one.

She points down a street as we pass through an intersection. "Ever drive by the Sharon Tate house where Manson's people did their killing?"

"Not intentionally."

"They changed the street address to throw off all the weirdos. The gates are still there," she replies.

"That's nice."

"I thought you were into all that Hollywood history bullshit?"

"Technically, this is Beverly Hills. And I'm not so into the dark stuff."

"How many times you been to the Greystone Mansion?"

She's referring to the most filmed mansion in the world. Its interiors and exteriors have been used in so many movies that it's hard to keep count. Everything from The Big Lebowski to X-Men. The estate was built by the son of a ringleader in the Teapot Dome scandal who ended up getting murdered in the mansion by his male secretary, who then turned the gun on

himself. At least that's the official story. I'm sure the real one is even more sordid.

DJ ignores my non-answer. "What's interesting to me is the stuff that happens here and gets dragged elsewhere. You could make a killing after the Oscars running a car service to drag overdoses to Cedars-Sinai's emergency room. Maybe a cleaning service to wipe up the blood when out-of-town guests suddenly depart."

"You're a cheery person."

We turn down an older street lined with trees that had to have been planted half a century before. The branches block out most of the sun, creating the impression that we're in a kind of tunnel.

DJ flicks her cigarette out the window. "This is old Beverly Hills. Probably find the lima bean farmer's shack in here somewhere."

I almost miss the turn into Amanda Gray's estate and have to back up. There's no street address, and leaves cover the driveway. Fifty feet in, we come to a gate with an electronic buzzer. I push the button and wait two minutes for someone to answer.

DJ fiddles with her camera. I tell her to keep it out of sight.

"Hello?" It's an older man's voice.

"Hi, I've got some papers from the studio for Miss Gray."

"You'll need to speak to her attorney." The response is rehearsed.

"No. These aren't legal papers. We found some documents that I think belong to her. I just want to return them."

"What kind of documents?"

DJ raises an eyebrow and gives me a smug look. She wants to know how I'm going to get myself out of this lie. I reach into my backseat and grab a DVD case.

I make something up. "Actually, it's some archival footage of her. Newsreels, that kind of thing. We were going through our archives. I thought she might like to have them."

"Hold on."

The gate makes an electronic buzz and retracts for me to pull in. The driveway winds for another two hundred feet before turning into a cul-de-sac.

Parked in the middle of the grass is a statue of a sphinx with a woman's face as big as an SUV. The stone looks weathered. A small garden of roses is planted by her feet.

"That's a little weird," says DJ.

The rest of the house is some kind of pseudo-Roman style with tall marble columns in front. The statue seems like an afterthought. They don't seem to match.

"Stay here." I grab the DVD and get out of the car. "Behave."

DJ waves me off and lights another cigarette. "See if you can't get the old broad to come out onto the veranda. Or wheel her out. Whatever."

I ignore her. The front of the house looks reasonably well-maintained. Some houses, often ones owned by older stars, are in a state of disrepair. Property taxes and landscaping fees begin to grow disproportionate to whatever they've managed to put away or the residuals they receive. Things fall apart.

This town is filled with house-poor 'millionaires' who are trapped in mansions they refuse to sell out of pride or because they know they'll never get back what they put into the home. I'm glad to see that Amanda Gray doesn't seem to be suffering.

Halfway up the steps, I almost trip on a bolt sticking out of the concrete. On the nearby bricks there's a thick electric cable that's been snipped. When I reach the top of the stairs, someone opens the door and steps outside.

He's a heavy-set older man who looks like he's in his 70s. His hair is died almost blue-black. Wearing a pair of shorts and a T-shirt with dried paint, he looks like the handyman. He's wearing a gold necklace with an Egyptian symbol.

I hold out my hand. "Hello, I'm Michael Ray. I'm here to see Miss Gray."

The man looks over his shoulder before returning the handshake. "What magazine did you say you're with?" He has a New York accent.

"I'm not with a magazine." I hold up the DVD. "I wanted to bring this to Miss Gray and ask her a few questions about some of the people in the footage, just for archival purposes."

"And you're from Golden Eagle?"

He seems a little more suspicious than I can understand. "Not exactly. I'm doing a favor for a friend there who's putting together some archival documentaries. I'd always wanted to meet Miss Gray, so I offered."

I can feel him searching my face, trying to place where he's seen me before. My Clark Kent glasses throw him a little.

"Have we met before?"

"Small town."

He looks down at the DVD. I explain what's on there. "Mostly footage from the set of Sands of the Nile. Um, could I speak to Miss Gray?"

He's still staring at the DVD. "Really?"

"Yeah," I hold up the DVD as if it were a prize.

"Hold on." He leaves the doorway partially cracked.

I peer inside and make some mental notes. Just past the door is a foyer with several pairs of shoes piled in a corner. Somewhere in the house, small dogs bark over the sound of a television playing a sports show. Part of the stairway leading to the second floor is visible just off to the side. Three doorways on the second-floor balcony are all shut.

The place looks like a hundred other homes in Beverly Hills. Sometimes the maid answers the door, or the owner. When you catch people in the middle of the day, it's a different picture than when they're throwing a party and have all the rented help and do their best to show you how they pretend to live.

An angry voice yells at the dogs to shut up. Loud footsteps echo across the marble floor, followed by a different man. About as old as the first one, he's a little thicker and has a bald head on a bulldog-looking face. He's wearing tennis shorts and a polo shirt. I've seen the watch on his wrist on Rodeo Drive for about \$300,000.

"Who are you?" His voice is gruff and to the point.

"I'm here to speak with Miss Gray."

"She's not expecting visitors. She's not in good health," he replies.

"Are you her husband?"

"No. I'm her attorney."

This is obviously the man I spoke with earlier on the phone. He's also the one who sat next to Amanda Gray at the awards banquet in the video.

"I won't take up much of her time. I just want to speak with her briefly. That's all."

"Sorry. Can't help you." He starts to close the door.

I can tell the man is going to be a wall. He's not letting me talk to her under any circumstances. I have to try a different approach.

I hold up the DVD again. "The DVD is real. I'm not a reporter. I represent a client who is willing to pay money for the necklace."

Recognition flashes in his face. "You're the one who came by the office." His voice grows angry. "If you don't leave, I'll call the police."

"Name a price. My client is wealthy," I explain.

"So am I."

The other man is peeking a head around the corner behind him. He's staring right at me trying to understand why I look so familiar. His expression changes as he makes the Alex connection.

He rushes to the door. "We'll ask her. Just leave us a number. Okay?"

Gray's attorney looks at him like he's about to bite his head off. "Get my gun, Joe, and call the police." He turns back to me. "Leave, now."

The door is slammed in my face as the two begin to argue. I head back to the car. DJ is slunk down in the seat. I can see the huge lens barrel poking out over the window.

"No dice?"

I shake my head and toss the video into the backseat. "It's like the first guy wanted to talk, but the lawyer didn't. He seemed excited when I showed him the DVD."

"Old queens love that Cleopatra crap."

"What?" I look back over my shoulder.

"My poor naive friend, don't you know a lover's quarrel when you see one?"

"Whatever. I guess the three of them aren't the least dysfunctional family in Hollywood."

We pass through the gate and onto the street. The sphinx stares back at me from the rearview mirror. She's taunting me.

I've tried the subtle approach and the direct one. I'm running out of tricks here. My next gambit is to call Osiris Incorporated and throw a number at them after I talk to Theresa.

DJ slides a memory card out of her camera and puts it in my cup holder. "Want my advice? Find out who those two are. If you want to get to Gray, then you need to get something on them. They might not like the idea of a story getting out there on how they're living it up in her mansion while she wastes away in a bedroom forbidden to any visitors. Before you know it, they'll have her all tarted up and sitting at an outdoor table at the Vine just to show how ridiculous the rumors are. It'll be a lot easier to get to her then."

I'm getting nervous whenever I hear the word 'easy.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Station

Detective Eastridge is sitting on the driver's side of a white Rolls-Royce with a smashed window and a crease in the hood that's parked in the middle of the Beverly Hills Police impound lot. The night before, the car wrapped itself around a lamppost two blocks west of Sunset Boulevard.

The apparent driver was a 19-year-old aspiring model. The passenger, another teenage model, was in a coma. The owner, Ali Patel, the 33-year-old son of a Dubai construction magnate, was allegedly home at the time.

Eastridge stares at me through the broken windshield. Blood and hair are still stuck in the cracks. "All right, fancy boy. How do we prove Ali was driving the car?"

I look at the folder in my hands. "That's not why I'm here. Besides, how would I know?"

"You run with these people now. You know their sleazy tricks." He waves a hand at the broken glass on the dashboard. "Isn't this what you do now? Cover their asses?"

"Not like this. I try to keep them from hurting other people."

Eastridge is 50 and too smart for me to bullshit. He's been working high-profile cases in Hollywood for over twenty years with his no-nonsense reputation. Expensive lawyers, promises of favors, and retirement consulting jobs haven't swayed him.

"You wouldn't believe the pressure I'm getting on this." He leans back on the plastic-covered seat and points to the impact point of where the girl's head hit. "Girl in the hospital and I'm getting the State Department asking me if we can wrap this up quickly. I'm subtly being told that Ali has suffered enough over the embarrassment. They don't want to lose an ally in the Middle East because his son's a drunk and paid off a daughter of the Great Satan to take a fall for him so he doesn't do time."

"What did you tell them?"

"Go to hell. If they're worried about Middle Eastern sensibilities and law enforcement, then they're working in the wrong country. So what do you think?"

"You find fingerprints on the seat adjuster?" I ask.

"His were the last pair. Not enough, though. That all you got? You take too many punches in the swimming pool the other day?"

"You mean Alex?"

"Yeah, whatever. Your Estonian pal shipped the Filipinos back home. So I don't think you need to worry about them coming after you."

I hadn't until now.

Eastridge shakes his head. "Can't keep out of trouble? You're hopeless." He grabs the folder from me. "Look at the car. I'll look at this. Tell me how you and your asshole celebrity friends would handle this."

I shake my head. He's a first-rate ball-buster. I'm pretty sure he likes me, but you wouldn't know by the way he talks.

I walk around the car as he thumbs through the photographs of the men from Amanda Gray's house. I know Eastridge has seen everything. He's a better cop than I ever would have been. He just wants a different pair of eyes, so I humor him.

The Rolls is less than a year old. It's the model you see in magazines and television lifestyle shows where they talk about how it's for the wealthiest people in the world or only the most famous celebrities.

The truth of the matter is no A-lister would be caught dead in a beast like this. Like \$200,000 gold-rimmed mobile phones, the real market is for drug dealers and people who didn't earn their money but want to look the way they think rich people should look. It's built for trash -- the wives of Russian mobsters and drunken Dubai trust fund babies.

"Ali had someone drive him home. Probably a cousin or a bodyguard."

"Probably." Eastridge doesn't look up from the folder.

"The girl pretending to be the driver was in the backseat if her friend went through the windshield."

"We have some forensics that show that. But we need more. Ali set her up with a good lawyer. If she keeps her mouth shut, she knows she's going to be set. She was just under the legal limit herself." Eastridge turns to the next photo and lets out a whistle. "Who the hell are you running with?"

"Do you know them?"

He holds up the photo of Amanda Gray's attorney. "Don't you read books? That's Mo Brunelli. He's a mobster."

"He says he's an attorney."

"Yeah. Ever heard of a mob attorney? He lost his license in Nevada thirty years ago. Laid low ever since then. Violent guy. Real nasty reputation."

"What about the other one?"

"Looks like a fatter version of Joseph Anthony Alonzo. Used to be a lounge singer in Vegas. Middle of the road. A connected guy. Why you interested in them?"

"They work for Amanda Gray. I'm trying to track her down. They've taken up residence and won't let anyone in to see her."

"That explains it," he replies

"What?"

Eastridge grins. "We got a call from the woman a few hours ago. She was complaining that Alex Race was stalking her. We wrote it off as wishful thinking. We get a few of those every other day."

"No. That was me. It would all be easier if she just talked to me. Brunelli is shacked up with her. That's where I got the photos."

Eastridge hands the folder back to me. "Makes sense. Mo is probably living off her checkbook. That explains why he dropped out."

I roll it up. "I don't know what there is to live on. Gray hasn't made a picture in fifty years. I don't know what she'd be doing for money now."

"She ever married? Get an inheritance from a dead husband?"

"Nope. The last boyfriend was Hugo Harrison," I answer.

"She certainly goes for the oddballs."

"I think the relationship might be platonic. A friend says Brunelli and Alonzo are probably a couple." I don't mention DJ by name.

"Could be. Brunelli was into entertainment contracts. Wouldn't surprise me if he latched on to Gray. Guys like him are always looking to go

upscale. She's got to be ten years older than him, though. I guess that makes sense if he's gay. Probably not in it for the sex."

I stand in front of the crease in the Rolls and look through the driver's side window. "How many sets of prints you get here?"

Eastridge shrugs. "A couple dozen. Half the valets in this city."

I notice a tiny mist of blood on the airbag. "What's the blood type?"

"Same as Ali. We can't do a DNA test without better evidence. He might flee the country if we can't get a judge to sit on him."

"His father upset?" I ask.

Eastridge nods. "Mad as hell. He's been yelling at us about harassment. The family jet is ready to leave any time if he doesn't like the way things go for his son."

Eastridge steps out of the car. "Wait here. Think of something brilliant while I'm gone."

"Where are you going?"

"I have something you might find useful. We've been sitting on it for a few years. It's a closed case."

He leaves me to the Rolls-Royce, as if by magic I'm going to see something the best forensics people in the world missed. They handle more high-profile DUI's than the entire country. Every alibi, every excuse, they've seen before. You don't screw around when the person you pull over probably has the same lawyer as the president.

Even still, if I want Eastridge to keep helping me, I've got to give him something. The problem is I don't do the kind of things that he assumes I do for Alex. I'd never let him get behind the wheel of a car drunk if I could control it. If he asked me to lie for him to the cops, I'd tell him to go to hell.

I stare at the Rolls-Royce and just blink.

Eastridge comes back a few minutes later with a file box. He drops it at my feet. "This is about six years old. We found it in a car where someone committed suicide. Shot his brains out. A freelancer named Kevin Fleet. No one claimed his body or the car. It was sold at auction years ago. I had them put the file box in a locker."

"Why?"

"In case something ever comes up. It looked like a pretty straightforward suicide. He was manic depressive. Drug problem. His girlfriend broke up with him. The usual. Except..." He kicks the box with his toe and pushes it over to me.

"The suspect?"

"Lots of them," says Eastridge. "Fleet was a stringer for the tabloids. Always digging stuff up. He's got notes in here on a lot of different people. Some interesting stuff."

I lift the box's lid and thumb through the folders. "If he was popped, why didn't they take the box?"

"The box was in the trunk. The release in the front didn't work in the car. If he was popped, they may not have had enough time to grab it. He was found on Doheny. Lots of traffic."

"So why are you giving this to me?"

"One of the folders is on Amanda Gray," he replies. "Maybe it'll help you out."

"Anything worth killing over?"

"On her? No. Nothing worth blackmail either. I can't see any of it published in the LA Times making her or her houseguests bat an eye. Just business stuff if I remember. Take a look. Bring it back."

I pick the box off the ground. Eastridge makes a coughing sound and nods to the Rolls.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing? Come on, Mike, you got to give me something."

I shift the weight of the box to my hip. "You're not thinking devious enough. Did the driver's lawyer offer to do a polygraph with a pre-screened set of questions?"

Eastridge's face changes. "Yeah. In a town full of narcissistic sociopaths, it's not much help. How did you know?"

"Was one of the questions 'Was Ali driving?'" I ask.

Eastridge raises an eyebrow. "We didn't want to do the poly and have her pass because she's been coached and then have to admit it in court."

"You think she's that good of a liar?" I reply. "Maybe there's another reason they were okay with that question."

"What?"

"Because Ali wasn't driving," I explain.

"Come again?"

"Come on, Eastridge," I chastise him. "Put it all together. The girl taking the fall is Ali's girlfriend. She's the one who didn't go through the window and she knows he's good for the money."

"What's your point?"

"Why was she in the backseat? Because that's where Ali was."

"Wait a second. So who the hell was driving?" asks Eastridge.

I raise an eyebrow. It feels good to be doing real cop stuff and not just rich-person gopher errands. "It's a fifteen-hour flight between Dubai and Los Angeles. When exactly did Ali's father get here? Why the hell do you think he really puts up with his fuck-up son and lets him drive a tasteless car like this?"

Eastridge nods his head. "I get it. So the father can party when he comes to town..." He shakes his head. "And the asshole was just here an hour ago with his lawyer screaming at us about anti-Muslim bias."

"I'd call the Burbank airport and have them watch the jet before his father gets away. Put the son against the father. See who folds first."

Eastridge grabs my shoulder. "You see, you do know how to think like them."

I'm pretty sure he meant that as an insult. And here I thought I was thinking like a cop.

He points to the file box. "Maybe you can use your devious mind on those and see something us honest folks don't notice."

"Want to know which Victoria's Secret model I banged last week?" I lie.

"Go to hell."

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN
Location of the Apes

I'm standing on a rock acting out one of the most important scenes from my childhood. Alex's kid, Kyle, is in rapt attention. Only 10, he's smarter than his father. Blond hair, big smile, he looks like the product of two movie stars. Kyle is shy and exceedingly polite. Jenny tells me he reminds her of me more than Alex.

I jump to another rock. "So the General has decided that Caesar has to be killed. He's too powerful. He doesn't like where he's taking the empire."

"And he stood right there, Uncle Mike?" Kyle's eyes are wide open as he sits in the grass watching me.

"Yeah. They shot all the outdoors stuff here. They had sets and all, but that scene took place right here."

I'd already showed him where Tarzan called home, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid rode, and where the Hollywood version of the Korean War was fought on M*A*S*H.

I point out a tree. "So Caesar and him fought. They then climb up there and General Aldo fell out of that tree and died."

"When did they stab him?" asks Kyle.

"Stab who?"

"Caesar."

"They never stabbed him," I explain. "He lead the apes and humans into a new era and brought peace to the Planet of the Apes. Right on this spot."

Kyle shakes his head. "I thought we were talking about Caesar, Caesar."

"No, no. The Roman senate is at a totally different location. Haven't I taught you anything?" I shake my head mockingly.

"Sorry."

"That's okay. I'm here to teach you the important stuff. Let me read my files for a little bit and I'll show you where Spartacus started his revolution."

Kyle looks at a distant hill in the valley then gives me a skeptical eye.
"Spartacus, Spartacus?"

"Yeah, him." I shake my head. "No appreciation for history."

"Sorry, Uncle Mike. Can we also sword fight?"

"Sure. Then we can have a duel in Tombstone," I reply.

"Awesome." Kyle picks up his radio-controlled helicopter and runs to the middle of the field, where I can keep an eye on him.

I showed him all my favorite locations in the park while I tried to think of the angle Brunelli and Gray were working.

Around the time Gray started working on Sands of the Nile, she started her own loan-out corporation, Osiris Inc. It's a typical business arrangement actors have set up. According to Kevin Fleet's files, Brunelli came into the picture a decade later as a partner.

The lawyer who did all the original paperwork for Gray was another mob-connected attorney who dabbled in entertainment contracts. On the surface of things, Gray may have been partnered with the mob from that point forward.

I'm not sure how that sat with Hugo Harrison. He doesn't seem like the kind of guy who would take it lightly if his leading star and girlfriend had asked some East Coast mobsters to be her intermediaries. That alone might have been enough for him to say to hell with it.

Gray may have outmaneuvered herself from a career in Hollywood. Hustlers hate to be hustled. Especially billionaire hustlers.

The part that doesn't make any sense is where the money came from. Fleet's folders show a list of assets, but nothing looks like it's income-earning. In 1962, she bought a piece of property called Crow Ranch, east of Los Angeles, that doesn't appear to do anything other than grow tumbleweed.

Some of the early celebrities vastly increased their fortunes through the growth of California real estate. She only has a handful of properties. Most of them have been sold off for small amounts.

One angle would be if she sold them at a loss to mob-controlled companies and let them take the profit. The only payback for her is if they're doing the deal to launder money and she somehow gets the difference in the back end through another bank account.

None of the deeds look like they're for property worth more than a few hundred thousand dollars. The house in Mammoth and the apartment in New York were sold during the same down period in the real-estate market.

A year later, in 1992, she sold off some jewelry. I went through the list several times for anything that matched the Nile pendant and couldn't find anything even close to it. The lot was diamond rings and a few bracelets.

Nothing stands out and screams suspicious. I don't know what I was hoping to find, but this is just dull. I can see why Eastridge didn't think it was going to be much help.

"What are you reading, Uncle Mike?" Kyle is standing over me.

I hand him the folder. "Boring stuff."

Kyle sits on the grass next to me and starts thumbing through the pages. "Wow. It looks exciting," his voice manages a level of sarcasm only a 10-year-old can accomplish.

"All right, genius. Why don't you take a look while I call someone."

"Mom?" He gives me an odd look.

"No. The ex-girlfriend of the man who collected all those files."

"Oh."

I step out of earshot and dial the number for Fleet's ex-girlfriend. I've avoided talking to her because I don't want to stir up bad memories.

The problem is I can't figure out from the files what Fleet found so interesting in Gray. He has stuff on other celebrities, rumors of involvement in overdoses, suspicions of prostitution, and various dirt that could make a good story.

For Amanda Gray, he's got a file that would put an accountant to sleep.

"Hello?" Her voice has a slight British accent. I remember Fleet was a Brit, too.

"Hello. Sorry to bother you. I'm trying to track down some information on Kevin Fleet."

There's a pause. "He died several years ago." Her voice is cold.

"Yes. I know that and I'm sorry. I just have some questions about his research."

"I don't know anything. I've made that very clear," she replies.

"I haven't said what I'm calling about yet." I think for a moment. "What don't you know anything about?"

"I've told you people before. I don't know what he knew about Amanda Gray. I swear to you. And I don't care to know. It's none of my business." She sounds worn-down.

"I'm sorry. I've never spoken to you before. Who has contacted you?" I try to sound helpful.

"Aren't you from Dynostar?"

Dynostar? "The telecommunications company?"

"Yes. I thought you were them calling again. They called just after Kevin died and again a few months ago. Whoever you are, I don't know anything."

"What about the Nile pendant?" I ask.

"The what?" She sounds genuinely confused.

"A necklace," I explain.

"I don't know anything about the artifacts. I've made that very clear. Goodbye." She hangs up.

I'd call her back if I had better questions. I don't.

I'm trying to understand what Dynostar has to do with any of this or what she meant by artifacts. I pull out my phone and do a search for Dynostar.

It turns out to be a Hugo Harrison company he formed after he got out of the studio business. The assets that didn't go to Eagle Pictures went to Dynostar. At the time it was mostly just a handful of radio stations and repeaters. A decade later he'd turned it into a billion-dollar telecommunications conglomerate.

Rich guys tend to figure out how to do things like that. Meanwhile, I'm thankful Kyle likes one-dollar Ikea hot dogs.

So what's the connection to Amanda Gray? Why would they be calling Fleet's girlfriend fifty years after the fact to ask about 'artifacts'?

If by 'artifact' they meant the necklace, it makes a little sense. But why would they care?

I take one of the other folders from my backpack and start combing through the documents again. I remember seeing something about the dissolution of the studio assets to Eagle Pictures.

I find the contract. I'd ignored it initially because it didn't mention Gray and was drafted a year after Sands of the Nile.

Fleet had underlined a paragraph in the photocopy that explained the division of assets. One sentence stands: Dynostar holdings would retain

ownership of any and all assets personally acquired by Hugo Harrison and loaned to Eagle Pictures for the purposes of production.

The picture is getting a little clearer to me. I know Gray had the necklace long after the fact. If it belonged to the studio it was Harrison's property and now belonged to Dynostar.

She and Brunelli may have sold it off illegally. That could be why he pleads ignorance and why she refuses to talk to me. They know they committed a crime.

I feel better knowing what the hell the motive for all the secrecy could be.

The funny thing is, I don't really care about what amounts to a bunch of ancient contract law. If they could just tell me who they fenced the necklace to, I would leave them alone and let Theresa go buy it from whomever they sold it to.

Kyle hands me the folder looking bored. "Is this lady getting a divorce?"

"What? No. She was never married," I reply.

"Oh. Let's go have a shootout."

"All right." I stop and look at the kid. He never seemed divorce-obsessed before. For most Hollywood kids, it's as natural as marriage. "Hey, Kyle, why did you ask me if she was getting a divorce?"

He points to my backpack. "You pulled all those papers out about things getting sold. That's what mom did when she and Dad got divorced. They sold a bunch of their stuff."

The kid is bright. Probably smarter than me. I still don't know what it all means, but it's something that didn't stand out.

After I show him some of my favorite gunfight locations, I'm going to drop him off at Jenny's and then try one of DJ's tactics.

If I can't get through Brunelli, maybe I should try Alonzo. If I can talk to him and convince him I don't care about the legality of the necklace, maybe he'll open up.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Hired Help

I'm parked down the street from Amanda Gray's mansion. I've been sitting in my car for the last five hours. Part of me pretends I'm acclimating myself to the near future when I'll have to live inside here after I get the boot from my guesthouse.

If I toss a few trash bags full of Big Gulp cups and boxes of books, I might have enough room in the backseat to curl up in the fetal position. The most depressing part is that I've already been mapping out parking lots and back alleys where I can spend the night without worrying about getting harassed. This knowledge is the one upside to my time on the force and my fascination with filming locations.

I try to psych myself up for the experience of spending the night in the same location Harrison Ford found a runaway replicant or parking in back of the hotel where the Ghostbusters took on their first assignment.

The floor of my backseat is filled with soundtracks and notes about all the different movie experiences just waiting for me. Living the dream.

Surrounded by the mansions of some of the wealthiest people in the world, thinking of my own imminent homelessness, you might think I'd be jealous. I'm not.

We all pay our dues. Sometimes that price is integrity. Sometimes the tax is marrying for money instead of love. Sometimes the ticket is for following a dream other than your own.

I left the force to go work for a celebrity. I turned one headache into another. I could go crawling back to Alex and ask him to take me on full time. But I won't. I'd rather live in my car than let him think he owns me or that he's better than me. He can have my face, but not my pride. Okay, not all of it.

Right now my pride is listening to the Jerry Goldsmith score for The Detective, starring Frank Sinatra. The soundtrack is my way of celebrating the irony of ending up doing the exact thing I swore I wouldn't have to do: behave like the sleazy low-lifes I always looked down on as a cop.

A Mercedes pulls out of Gray's driveway and passes me. It's a few years older than the other one I saw in the driveway, so I assume it belongs to Alonzo. Something tells me the alpha dog of the house gets the new model.

I start the ignition and follow him from a respectful distance. I let him make a few turns before taking a side street to catch up. At this time of night, there aren't a lot of places still open. He's not heading for the highway, so my guess is somewhere close.

We reach the edge of Beverly Hills and he pulls into an all-night drugstore. I wait for him to go inside before I follow him. I want to make our encounter seem random if possible.

Alonzo heads to the pharmacy at the back of the store. I stop at the magazine rack and pick up a tabloid. While he waits for a prescription, I look for Alex's name.

I see only two items on him. He's getting sloppy. I can only imagine the stress this is causing him.

While there is such thing as bad publicity, trust me on this, what you don't want is no rumors. If people aren't gossiping about you, they're not thinking about you. If they're not thinking about you, they're not going to go see your movies.

Alonzo gets his little white bag of pills and heads down the aisle. I wait for him to get a few feet away, then look up from my magazine.

"Alonzo!" I greet him like a lost friend.

He looks up from the tile floor, startled. "It's you." He gives me a wary look. "Michael?" He stretches my name out, waiting for me to correct him.

"Small town," I reply.

"Yes." He turns away and starts to leave.

"I have a question for you."

He wants to walk away, but he hesitates.

I keep talking. "I don't care what happened to the necklace. All I need is a name. I'll pay you for it. Under the table. Over the table. Whatever you want. I just need to know who has it now."

Alonzo looks straight into my eyes. "Leave it alone."

"Leave what alone?"

He shakes his head. "It's not worth the trouble."

"The necklace?"

He throws up his hands. "Any of it. Just go away. Trust me."

"I don't understand. It's just a necklace."

"Nothing is simple." He gives a nervous glance over his shoulder then waves me off. "Forget it."

"What about Dynostar?"

He stops in his tracks. "What about them? Never mind." He turns and leaves.

I'd follow him out of the store, but I don't want to make a scene. I wait for him to reach the end of the aisle, then head toward the exit. He pockets his pills and throws the bag for his prescription into the trash before climbing into his car. He gives me a look through the tinted window. Still frustrated, he drives over the curb as he peels out of the parking lot.

I step onto the parking lot and watch his running lights fade away down the street. He didn't seem afraid of me. There was something else there.

I'm pretty sure he thinks I'm Alex, despite me telling him my name is Mike. The way he looked over his shoulder, it felt as if he was afraid of being seen talking to me.

Either Brunelli or Gray has him scared. He pretty much admitted he knew about the necklace and Dynostar got a strange reaction. And I don't know of anybody in this town who wouldn't stop to hear an offer involving money.

There are a million ways he could tell me who they sold the necklace to if he didn't want the finger pointed back at him -- unless the buyer was someone who had him afraid.

The other possibility that dawns on me is she might still have the necklace and not want to give it up.

If Dynostar is the legal owner and has tried to get it back, that means Gray is sitting on stolen property. Maybe that's what Brunelli and Alonzo are trying to protect: Gray's reputation.

If she's as ill as Brunelli wants me to think, putting her through the hassle of a criminal investigation would be an act of cruelty. They could let the

woman die, then 'find' it stuffed into a drawer somewhere.

I'm beginning to feel a little guilty. I could be hounding some woman on her deathbed for a silly little thing she's been living in fear of most of her life. A rich billionaire makes an Indian giver present out of the Nile pendant and has his lawyers hound her into perpetuity. Then comes me, to make things worse.

I'm going to have to tell Theresa this all might be a dead end. Prying the necklace from Gray's fingers could kill the woman. I didn't sign up for that. The last thing I want to do is make the woman's life worse.

If Theresa can't handle that, I don't want to work for her.

I stick my hand in my pocket to grab my phone and touch a receipt for the hot dogs I bought Kyle at the Ikea counter. I toss it into the trash.

My cop instincts flash.

Alonzo threw the prescription bag in there after removing the pills. Prescription...pills...

I shake my head in disgust as I find myself reaching into the trash can to pull out the bag. I've become one of DJ's sleazy friends. I'm Kevin Fleet.

Heck, I'm already almost living out of my car. What's next? Blowing my brains out because I'm sick of seeing how the other half lives and can't sell their dirty laundry?

There's the sound of heels on the sidewalk behind me. I freeze with my arm in the trash can like a raccoon in headlights.

I've been caught in the act.

A girl's voice speaks up from behind me. "You need pills, Alex?"

Crap.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Pharmacist

Startled, I turn around and think I see a vampire. I do a double-take. Her name tag says "Mila." In the fluorescent lights, she appears almost as white as her pharmacist lab coat.

I crumple the bag into a ball and pull it from the waste bin, letting my hand casually fall to the side. Red-faced, I give her a weak smile. "I accidentally threw away my receipt."

Mila raises an eyebrow. The indentation from a piercing is still visible. With short black hair and dark red lipstick, she's wearing goth leggings and platform shoes. In any other town, minus the Halloween makeup, she'd probably be the prettiest. Here she's one of a million.

"Do you need pills?" She repeats the question.

"No. Of course not."

"Are you sure? I can help you out."

I shake my head and wave the crumpled bag. "I just needed this."

"You have a problem pissing?"

"What?" I look down and check the label attached to the bag. It's some kind of bladder medication. "Uh, yeah. No. It's for a friend."

She crooks her finger for me to follow her to the side of the store. I follow her because I still feel guilty.

In a spot between the bright lights, she has a seat on the curb and pats the concrete next to me. She offers me a cigarette but I decline.

"It's my break." She throws a glance over her shoulders. "The cameras can't see us here. It's okay. I won't tell anyone. What do you need, Alex?"

Alex has a lot of friends. I have no way of telling who he knows and who he doesn't. He doesn't currently have a pill addiction. So I don't know if there's any connection to this girl. She could just be overly friendly.

I sit down. "How are you?" It's the most open-ended question I can ask.

"You don't remember me?"

All right, so she knows Alex. "The butterfly tattoo?"

"Dragon. Close enough." She gives me a smile.

Pro tip: If a girl has more than two piercings, it's always a safe bet to pretend to remember a tattoo. They're a deeply personal thing they like to pretend makes them different. Even if you can't guess the tattoo, they'll think you still remembered them. Alex taught me that. Tattoos are always a great conversation starter for people you want to have sex with. She's giving me all the signs. I'm sure she did the same with Alex.

She glances down at the bag in my hand. "You're not going to need that unless you've got some prostate problems."

I notice Alonzo's name is across the top. I was hoping for some insight into Amanda Gray. Her medication could tell me a lot about what kind of illness she has. His, not so much.

I put the bag back in my pocket. "Listen..."

"Mila."

"Yeah, Mila. Listen, I need a favor."

"Anything."

"I don't want you to break any rules or anything."

"I don't care. I like breaking rules." Her voice is low and husky.

"I'm worried about a friend. I think she may be sick. I just don't know how sick. The men who work for her won't tell me."

"What's her name?" she asks.

"Amanda Gray. She'd be in her 80s now. I don't want you to tell me anything you're not supposed to. But have you ever seen her in the store? Maybe in a wheelchair or a walker?"

"What's she look like?"

I show her a photo on my phone from Gray's last public appearance. She shakes her head.

"Maybe she comes by in the day?"

"Could be. Can you wait a few minutes? Gray with an A?"

"Yeah."

Mila holds up her hand and commands me to stay. "Just wait. Don't go anywhere. Promise?"

"Sure."

She runs to the entrance and glances back to make sure I'm not going anywhere. She points a finger at me, telling me to keep put.

I feel a little dirty carrying on the Alex charade. However, I rationalize, Alex was the one who asked me to help Theresa out. I'm pretty sure he really wouldn't care. Although, with him, you never can tell what will set him off.

Mila comes running out of the store a few minutes later and sits next to me. A little closer than casual acquaintances. She pulls a thick stack of folded-up papers from a pocket in her lab coat and hands them to me.

"What's this?"

"I pulled up her prescription history," she replies

"Isn't that illegal?" I'm afraid to touch the documents.

Mila lowers her voice. "I won't tell if you won't. You should see the things my boss looks up. Want to know which actresses always rush in to get the morning-after pill the day after the Oscars?"

"No. I don't."

"Are you sure?" she asks.

"Yes, Mila. Unless it's Amanda Gray." I think for a moment. "Can you look up anyone in the system?"

"Anybody who goes to one of our chains. We can also check the national system for duplicate prescriptions."

I'm a little disturbed at the thought of pharmacists gossiping with one another about who's taking what pills. The amount of information they have on sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancies, and every other medical detail is frightening.

She waves the papers in front of my face. "Well?"

"I can't." I'd be breaking a million laws.

"All right. I need another cigarette." She gets up and walks over to the wall and lights up. Conveniently, she left the records next to me. She looks down at me and smiles.

I guess I've done my due diligence. I hope if anybody were to catch me on a security camera my innocence would seem obvious. I mean, she left them here. What am I supposed to do?

Of course, I know that's ridiculous. I pick up the printouts and start to read anyway.

To no surprise, Amanda Gray has a variety of prescription medications you would expect for an older person. There are arthritis pills, hormone tablets, and a few other medications I recognize as generic treatments for getting old. There are also two different kinds of antidepressants -- one of them in a very high dosage. I see a prescription I'm not familiar with.

"What's Cludrox?"

"A cancer med," replies Mila. "Used to restrict tumors."

"I've never heard of it."

Mila stubs out her cigarette and sits next to me. "It's not used anymore. They stopped making it in the 1990s."

"Oh." I look through the rest of the pages. "I don't see any other cancer drugs here, other than something for nausea. Remission?"

"Maybe. She could have had it removed." Mila takes the papers from me and starts looking at the prescriptions line by line. "I don't see any of the recovery medications they would give her. Maybe a spontaneous remission."

"Good for her. Would she have switched pharmacies?"

"Our records would show that." She hands the papers back to me.

I flip through a few more pages. From what I can tell, Amanda seems to be a typical older person who survived one cancer scare. Mila points out two medications I'd overlooked.

"What are those?"

"Pain pills. Pretty heavy doses. That and the antidepressants are a screwy combination."

"But not uncommon in this town," I reply.

"That's for fucking sure. Positive you don't need anything? We get old people who die and don't pick up their meds..."

"I'm good," I reply.

"Yeah, I'm sure you have your own source."

"Actually..." Something she said just hit me. I flip back through the printouts and check the medications again. "Is this everything for her?"

She nods her head. "Yeah. Everything in our system. Even if she transferred out, it would be on here. Like I said."

I run my finger from the prescriptions to the column showing the date. I hadn't noticed before because it was written as a string of numbers. On

every page I find the same thing. I show this to Mila.

"Yeah. I'm sorry. I thought you already knew that."

"Hold on." I flip back to the beginning. Several of the prescriptions also list Amanda Gray's 24-hour appointment line for her doctor.

I take out my phone and call the number for Gray's general practitioner.

A receptionist answers. "Silverman Clinic. How may I help you?"

"Hello, I'm Anthony Alonzo, I'm calling to reschedule Amanda Gray's checkup."

"Hold on."

Mila gives me a funny look.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Alonzo. I don't show her in our book," replies the receptionist.

"Okay. Let me check with her. Can you find the date of our last appointment?"

"One second." There's a long pause. "I'm sorry, it's not in the system. Are you sure you have the right doctor?"

"My mistake," I apologize and hang up.

I check the printouts one more time just to be sure: Amanda Gray hasn't had a prescription refill since 1993.

Mila assures me her system would show if she had the refill done anywhere else, and Gray's doctor has no record of her visiting or any scheduled appointments in the future.

I shake my head. It was there all along. I was just too dense to see it.

What do you call an 80-year-old woman who no longer needs prescription medication or a doctor?

Dead.

"You know, you're on my list..." Mila interrupts my thinking and gives me a shy smile. She puts a hand on my thigh.

I'm still distracted by the revelation. "List?"

"You know. The list. My boyfriend and I have one each. I live close enough by. He won't be home from work for a while."

"I'm sorry. I...I have to be running. Otherwise." I try to give her a charming grin.

"My car is right there." She points to a Hyundai covered in bumper stickers. She whispers into my ear, "I could just go down on you..."

"Wow. You're a very pretty girl." She is. "And as much as I'd like to take you up on that offer..." Regardless of my code, I'm still adjusting to the idea

Gray is dead. I hold up the papers. "Is she really dead?"

"Yeah. I thought you knew that," she replies.

"No. I didn't."

Mila pulls her phone from a pocket. "How about a photo then?"

"Sure."

I put my head next to her and let her snap the photo. Still distracted, I don't stop her from kissing me straight on the mouth. I drive off without asking her to not put it on my Facebook page.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Scam

Theresa is covered in blood and standing on a mountain of bodies. A battered tank with the turret blown off is on its side next to her. Smoke and burning fires light up the rubble and carnage. Off in the distance, the lights of LA twinkle reassuringly.

"Come on up!" she shouts to me from the top of her impressive pile of kills. A production assistant takes her M-60 assault rifle from her to replace the magazine.

I look down at the ghoul faces staring up at me. The mouths are opened in abject horror. Their pale white skin is charred and flaked with dry blood.

"Are these zombies?" I ask.

"No. Synthoids," she shouts.

"Oh." I try to make my way up the mountain of dead bodies without stepping on the face of the silicone figures. "I thought this movie was shot already."

Theresa takes the gun back from the assistant and flips it into the air before catching it and cocking the bolt back. "We did. This is a reshoot. The producers want a sequel. So they're changing the ending."

I trip on a wet body and fall face-first into the pile of pseudo-death. An avalanche of synthoids descends on me. Theresa lets out a laugh, followed by the rest of the crew.

This is one of those moments when, personally, I don't care about my embarrassment, but I have to save face for Alex.

"Hey! I know her!" I crawl to my feet and pull one of the synthoids from the mound. "Baby! I said I'd call. Don't look at me like that. What other girls? What? He did? Point him out!"

I swing the bloody creature around to face the director sitting in back of a bunch of monitors. "That one? He said he'd make you a star? Now look at you." I shout over to the director. "She wants to know if you're going to pay child support." I grip the back of the neck of the bloody creature and nod its head.

The crew bursts out laughing again. I sit the synthoid back among her ghastly family. The production assistant and makeup girl leave me alone with Theresa on the tower of death when I finally reach her.

"Well played, sir." Theresa gives me smile.

Life in public is often avoiding making Alex look bad. In this case, I turned my clumsy fall into a line item about Alex clowning around on the set visiting a friend. Or at least that's how I hope it will be spun, if anybody cares.

The location for the reshoot is in the parking lot of the Dodgers stadium. Other than the pile of bodies, it's not a full-blown shoot. Just one crew and a half-dozen production vehicles. "I didn't think you were going to do a sequel?"

"I wasn't until they agreed to give me a piece of the back end," Theresa replies.

"Oh." I try to find a place to rest my feet that doesn't involve dislocating a synthoid jaw.

"So where's my necklace?" Theresa sounds playful but I can tell she's serious.

"There's been a few complications."

"What kind?" she raises an eyebrow.

"There's the ownership issue. I think the necklace still belongs to the studio or one of Harrison's companies. Although I'm not sure if they know it. One of them, Dynostar, has been asking around about it. Or at least I think they have. They've inquired into 'artifacts' relating to Sands of the Nile."

"That's not a problem," she says.

"What do you mean?"

"Dynostar owns the video game company I'm doing a voiceover for. Part of my contract is any assets or props they may have relating to Sands of the Nile."

"Really?"

Theresa nods her head. "I bought the rights to the script and everything that goes with it."

"The movie was a flop."

"I got them cheap. So when you find the necklace, don't worry, it's mine. All we need to do now is prove Amanda Gray has it."

"There's the other problem."

"What now?" she asks.

I try to figure out how to say it. Eloquence escapes me. "Gray is probably dead. Has been for over a decade. Her lawyer has been keeping it a secret."

Theresa puts a hand to her mouth. "Dead? Why is it a secret?"

"I don't know. I don't think her Social Security checks will pay for that house. And I don't think she's getting much in the way of residuals. If Brunelli, her lawyer friend, wasn't connected, I'd think maybe it was a way to scam anybody mentioned in her will. Keep the house and everything from going to some dog shelter in Palm Springs."

"Have you told the police?" she asks.

I hesitate. "Sort of..."

"What do you mean, sort of?"

I don't want to involve Theresa any more than I have. "Do you have your microphone on?" Actors often forget they have microphones on them almost their entire workday. Because of this, sound men have some of the best dirt you can imagine.

"No." Theresa lifts up her shirt and flashes me her bra.

"I'd have believed you, but thanks for that." I give her a smile. "I got a look at some medical records. She hasn't had a pill or a doctor visit since the early 1990s."

"Maybe she got better?" Theresa says.

"Nobody gets better like that. Maybe she moved out of the country. There's a slim chance she could be in some retirement community in Mexico. But then why wouldn't her people just say so? That's a more believable story than the one they're spinning."

She shakes her head. "The poor woman. What about the police?"

"I spoke to a friend in the Beverly Hills Police Department. There's not a lot they can do. He's going to drop by unannounced in a day or so to follow up on a complaint they made about me."

Theresa shakes her head. "You're not very discreet."

"I'm doing my best here," I reply.

"So now what?"

"We wait for my friend to check them out. There's not much else to do."

She bites her lip. "We only have four days, Michael. It's too late for me to change my gown. Things are in motion."

"Yeah, well this may have changed into a murder investigation."

"Then I'll go over there myself. I'll bring a blank check."

"These people are killers," I reply.

"Because they want money."

I have to make her understand. "I've offered them money and they turned it down."

"Because they were hiding a murder," replies Theresa. "Now we know. That gives you an advantage."

As she stands there looking pretty holding her play gun on top of the mound of fake bodies, I think she doesn't quite get the real world. "Listen, this isn't like negotiating with a bunch of stuffed shirts for a royalty on every time your face is used on a doll."

Theresa shakes her head. "Michael, it's exactly like that. Who do you think half the people I deal with are? Where do you think most of the foreign financing comes from? People like Yuri and his swimming pool. People like this Brunelli. Once I get done here I'll go over there myself." She pauses. "Don't worry. I'll still pay you your finder's fee."

I hold up my hands. "No. No. I can't let you do that."

"You can't stop me. I want the necklace. If they have it, then we have to make a serious offer. I can sue them later."

She has me trapped. I can't let her storm in there. "Fine. I'll go. Tell me a number to offer them. I'll do it."

"A million."

"A million dollars?" I repeat the number.

"Is there any other kind?" she replies. "Just to give you an incentive. I'll let you keep half of whatever is left over if you get them to take less."

Money aside, the last thing I want to do is get myself in the middle of a negotiation like this. She has me trapped again. I get the feeling her threat

of going over there was just a ruse to get me to go.

I surrender. "Okay. Okay. I'll go there."

"Start low. You'll make more."

"Yeah, I get it. We'll talk about a reasonable fee later." I hesitate that I'm doing it to keep her safe and not for the money.

"Sure." She gives me a wink, telling me she's going to have her way no matter what. "Try not to slip on the synthoids on your way down."

Her warning comes too late. I skid down the mountain and almost crash into her motorcycle parked at the bottom. The crew gives me another round of applause. I return the gesture with the middle finger and a broad smile.

Unfortunately, the next time I come face to face with death it won't be made from latex and silicone.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Storming the Gates

Mo Brunelli sounds pissed on the other side of the intercom. I mention money again and he buzzes me through the ancient gate. I pull into the driveway and see a Cadillac SUV with Nevada plates next to his Mercedes.

He greets me at the door holding a scotch in his hand. Pleased is the last word I'd use to describe his expression.

"Hands up." His words are short and clipped.

"What?" I ask.

"I got to make sure you ain't wearing a wire."

I raise my arms and let him pat me down. It's brisk but shows years of experience when his fingers knead my skin like dough as he probes all the spots a wire might be hidden. Thick hands take my phone out of my pocket and make sure the power is off. He hands it back to me and ushers me into the living room.

"Sit there." He points to a couch and takes the chair opposite of me. "I got the line on you. You ain't who you say you are."

"I've said my name all along. I never said I was anyone else."

Brunelli shakes his head. "Don't be a smart guy. You know what we thought. So you here to blackmail us with some crazy story?"

Because that ain't going to fly. Miss Gray is upstairs sleeping."

"Of course she is. But, no. I'm not here to blackmail you. As I said on the intercom, I'm here to offer you money."

Brunelli waves his hand in the air. "For the necklace you keep talking about. I don't know anything about that. And if I did, it would be stolen property." He looks me dead in the eye.

"I'm not interested in who owns it. Just who has it. If you have it or can get the necklace, I'll pay you a finder's fee. No questions asked. As far as Miss Gray is concerned, that's a matter between you and the police."

Brunelli leans forward in his chair and stabs a finger on the table. His ice cubes rattle in the glass. "So if I don't tell you, you're going to the cops with this bullshit story?"

"No. Not at all. I already went to the police. As I've already explained to you, this isn't blackmail." I pause. "I'm offering you money to help with your potential legal bills."

He shakes his head. "Bullshit. There's an angle here. If you went to the cops, you wouldn't be here. You're just like that limey prick digging up dirt. Making stuff up."

An alarm bell goes off in my head. I try to change the topic. "Name a price."

"For what?"

"Name me a price for the necklace or where to find it. I'll have the money to you in a few hours."

Brunelli squints at me. "Hypothetically, how high you willing to go?"

"A hundred thousand dollars." I'm horrible at negotiating.

Brunelli slides his watch off his wrist and slaps it on the table. "What do you think this set me back?"

"All right, three hundred thousand dollars," I reply.

He shakes his head. "You're not so good at this and you're wasting my time."

"Where's Mr. Alonzo?" I ask.

"What do you care?"

"Maybe he'd want a say in this."

"He's out entertaining company," he replies.

His car is in the driveway next to the out-of-town car. Something doesn't make sense. Brunelli takes a drink from his glass then rolls the cubes around.

"Mr. Brunelli, why don't you name a number? I can take that back to my client and let them decide."

"Hypothetically, if I knew where the necklace was, ten million." He tosses the number out there to see my reaction.

"Ten million dollars?" I ask.

"Is there any other kind? Yes. Ten million to help you find this necklace with a high chance of success of having it in the next twenty-four hours."

I shake my head. "That seems rather ridiculous. I can't even call my client with that number. Can I at least tell them your number is five million?" I need to probe how serious he is about the price. I'm pretty sure Theresa would never go for that amount, but I need a starting point.

Brunelli shakes his head. "You don't know anything about the necklace, do you? It's just some shiny thing to you."

"What don't I know?"

He takes a sip of his drink. "It's real."

"Yes. The gold and gems are real. We already have the duplicate."

He sets his glass down on the table and gives me a smirk. "You dumb schmuck. The necklace isn't something Harrison had made in Europe by some Jew in Holland. It's the real thing. As in actual treasure. It belonged to a real Egyptian queen. The same one Amanda played in that pic. A hundred thousand dollars. I thought you were serious." He throws his hands up.

Real? I feel my stomach twist. If the necklace is an authentic piece of Egyptian treasure, it's worth way more than I thought. Probably more than the ten million Brunelli tossed out. Something like that could go in an auction for even more if the necklace had a legal chain of ownership.

"Can your client go ten million? Ten million for an authentic Egyptian artifact?"

"I'd have to take the number to them. I'd need assurances."

Brunelli can sense the hesitation in my voice. He can tell I don't think there's much chance Theresa will go that high. I get the feeling he doesn't take me serious at all about her.

"How about I let you see the necklace? Touch it. Tell your client it's legit." Brunelli stands up and motions for me to follow him.

"The necklace is here?"

"Come, let me show you." He points me toward the door at the far end of the kitchen.

When you're a cop, you develop a sense. This tells you when something doesn't smell right. Brunelli is a pro, but he's a little too eager. He knows

we're not going to pay him what the necklace is worth. There's no reason to show it to me.

He thinks I'm bluffing. A crook sees everyone else as a crook. In this case he thinks I'm some guy who looks like Alex running around pretending to be him. He sees me as a scam artist.

I walked in here thinking we were going to negotiate. All along he's really been sizing me up. Something is wrong.

There's also the fact that he's trying to get me to follow him to the garage. I'm not an expert on antiquities, but I'm reasonably sure the best place to keep a 3,000-year-old priceless artifact isn't in a coffee can on a shelf in your garage.

"May I use the bathroom first? Wash my hands?"

"There's a john in here," he points to the garage.

Brunelli is standing three feet away from me by the island in the kitchen. There's a block of knives less than a foot from his hand. I'll bet anything he has a gun in his pocket.

"Sure," I reply.

I give him a smile then bolt in the other direction through the living room. I hear him stomping his feet behind me.

I get to the front door and pull on the handle. Someone locked it from the inside with a dead bolt. A shadow passes by the window. One of Brunelli's friends.

Brunelli comes panting around the corner. His hand is going into his pocket. "You ain't going out the front door."

I rush him before he can pull the gun out. My left fist hits him in the jaw. He takes a few steps back and hits the wall.

From the kitchen comes the sound of the door opening as another one of his friends from Nevada comes to see what the commotion is all about. He probably just got done laying plastic all over the floor.

Brunelli slides the pistol out of his pocket and stumbles toward me. With the front door locked, he's blocking my only exit. I sprint up the stairs before he can aim.

I run down the hallway toward the far end of the house. All the doors are closed. I go toward the one that looks like it leads to a master suite and hopefully another way out.

Thank god it's unlocked.

Brunelli clammers up the stairs behind me and shouts to somebody else as I shut the door. The room is dark and lit only by light coming from the large windows.

Frantic, I need a way to keep the door shut. There's a dresser next to the door. I fumble my way around the other side and push it over to act as a barricade. There's a loud crash as the porcelain figurines sitting on top come crashing to the floor.

Brunelli's shoulder smashes into the other side of the door. The frame buckles but doesn't give.

I search the room for another doorway. I yank open one door and find a huge closet filled with dresses and hats. The other door leads to a bathroom with a huge bathtub. The whole room smells like incense and mothballs.

Something clicks in my brain as I realize I'd ignored the obvious when I ran into the room. I turn around and look at the silhouette on the bed in the darkness. There's someone sleeping there.

Brunelli or one of his Nevada friends pounds the butt of his gun against the door. I go to the head of the bed. There's a black-and-white portrait of Amanda Gray and Hugo Harrison on the nightstand. They're on a yacht and holding each other, very much in love.

"Leave Amanda alone!" Brunelli shouts from the other side of the door. "Come out now and we'll let you go."

Amanda. Amanda Gray. I freeze when I look down at the bed.

Despite the commotion, the sleeping woman hasn't stirred. I resist the urge to go look at the spilled dresser for the necklace. The only prize I want right now is my life.

I lean down by her head and whisper, "Miss Gray?"

She doesn't move.

"Miss Gray. Could you help me out? I have a friend that only wanted to borrow the necklace."

I move closer. She's still silent.

The edge of the door starts to chip away as Brunelli hammers the butt of his pistol through the top. The banging stops, then starts up again as he or a helper starts slamming their body into the door.

"Please, Miss Gray." I reach out a hand to touch her on the shoulder. My nose twitches. I realize where the smell is coming from. I haven't heard the woman breathe since I entered the room.

Brunelli shouts again. "Don't go near her! I'll kill you!"

I pick up the hem of the blanket and begin to pull the edge away slowly.
"Miss Gray?" I call her name again, although I'm fairly sure she can't hear me.

When I realize what I've been talking to, I rip the blanket away entirely.
She's not just dead.
She's a goddamned mummy.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mummy Dearest

If you're going to judge me by what I do next, please understand the circumstances. Mo Brunelli would never have let me into the house with a weapon. That much is a certainty. He planned to kill me all along.

When he knew his price was ten times what I was prepared to go for, he understood immediately that neither I nor my client (Theresa) had any clue what the necklace was really worth. Already expecting this and thinking I was out to blackmail him, he had his friends from Nevada drive out to help kill me.

The garage was going to be my death chamber. If I had set foot in there, I'd have gotten a bullet to the head by the man waiting behind the door.

If he was a real pro, he would wrap an arm around my neck and pull the trigger on my temple, as if I blew my own brains out. There are men who specialize in this. For a price, they'll risk a bullet coming out the back of their victim's head and flying just inches away from their own to fake a suicide.

The next step would be to drive my car somewhere up in the hills and drop my body under a tree a mile away, like I popped myself. The next time you hear about a suicide in which they went off to some remote location to do the deed, there's a good chance they had help.

I'm in a room with no weapons. The glass door to the veranda is locked. I can try to break the panes with my fists, but I really don't want to bleed to

death. Brunelli and his friend are about to tear down the door.

So yeah, after seeing if the necklace was on her mummified body, which it wasn't, I pick her up and use her to beat down the glass doors.

She's already dead. Her dry corpse is my only choice. I'm sure there are a hundred other options in the room if I had time to look.

I don't.

Gripping her thin torso and her legs, I slam her skull into the lock. The glass doors bend backward. I slam her again and again. The latch clicks and begins to give.

The door comes crashing down behind me. A thick man with no neck trips over the dresser as he tries to jump through the frame. Brunelli ignores him and climbs over his back like a game of rugby. He waves the pistol toward me.

I spin and hit his arm with the legs of her mummy. The body makes a cracking sound followed by a shower of dust and powder. Brunelli lets out a scream, then starts to spit fragments of bone from his mouth.

"You goddamn monster!" he shouts.

I hit him again with the backstroke. The gun hits the wall, clatters to the floor, and slides under the bed. Brunelli makes a dive to retrieve it. His hitman finally gets his balance and pushes himself up off the ground. I kick him square in the jaw and sprint back to the glass doors.

Using her body like a battering ram, I run full speed into the gap and throw my own weight into the effort. The doors splinter and the glass shatters when they break free from the jam. My momentum keeps me going forward and I trip on the curtains, almost slamming my head into the concrete railing.

Something moves in the bushes below. Another thick-neck hitman steps out of the shadows. He has a gun aimed at the balcony. I don't hesitate. I drop the body on him.

He lets out a scream when he sees the corpse flying at him and falls to the ground. She can't weigh more than fifty pounds. His reaction is more out of surprise than physics. I don't blame him, though. The peeled-back lips, sunken eyes, and missing nose are disturbing.

I throw myself over the railing and land on top of him. The second hitman -- at least I hope it was him and not the mummy -- lets out a loud gasp when the air is knocked from his lungs.

I pick myself up and grab her body again to shield myself as I run across a shallow reflecting pool. Water splashes at my feet as Brunelli takes wild shots from the balcony. His gun makes a little 'pfft' sound from the silencer.

At the end of the pool I leap over a hedge and land in the driveway. A third man is waiting for me by the hood of my car.

Oblivious to the noise coming from inside, he's keeping watch on the street. He's the first hitman I get a good look at. He's older -- maybe not as old as Brunelli, but definitely from a different era. He has close-cropped gray hair and looks as if he spent half his life hauling meat in a packing plant.

I make a run for my car holding the dry corpse in front of me like a shield. The third hitman hears Brunelli shouting and turns around just in time to see her hideous face and lets out a scream. I push him to the ground and he starts clutching his chest.

I'm in my car and stepping on the gas by the time Brunelli and the first hitman reach the front door. In my panic, I almost drive right into the sphinx in the middle of the cul-de-sac.

Too distracted, I jerk the wheel and almost drive into Brunelli's parked Mercedes. I spin the wheel to the other side to avoid the SUV as well. Away from the parked cars and grinning sphinx, I gun the gas and head down the driveway away from the house.

The back of my head is tingling. I know I forgot something. Adrenaline is a crazy thing. It can give you momentary super powers. It can also make you so focused on survival you forget the simple things. Like what you had for breakfast. That you pissed yourself.

...Or that there's a dried-up mummy sitting in your passenger seat staring back at you.

For all of three seconds, I'm afraid I'm going to be charged with kidnapping and murder. In my brief nightmare I imagine Brunelli managing to pin her death on me.

I mean, I do have the body.

The fact that she looks like she's been dead for a lot longer than the last ten minutes reassures me somewhat. I'll be able to explain to the Beverly Hills Police Department everything. Eastridge will understand.

Probably.

Hopefully.

I didn't have a choice. Right?

In my rearview mirror, Brunelli is running after me with two of the other hitmen. It's a pathetic sight. They look like Pamplona bulls with arthritis. I'd slow down and taunt them if I wasn't afraid of their guns.

Relaxed, I turn to the corpse. "Your friends aren't that bright."

Her ghastly face stares back, as if to taunt me.

I crash into the front gate and my car comes to a stop. The acid smell of the airbag stings my nostrils as inertia shoves my head into the head rest. Steam spews from the hood and my engine sputters and dies.

The corpse is still grinning her evil grin.

Brunelli and his pals, as slow as they might be, are going to catch me soon. I kick open my door and climb out. In a moment of panic, I try to drag the body out after me. I'm afraid they'll bury all the evidence.

I pull her upper body. She won't come free. I grab an arm and try to slide her out of the car. She doesn't want to leave. Brunelli's voice shouts from around the curve of the driveway.

Their stomping feet are growing closer.

I give up on my murder evidence and climb to the top of my hood to leap over the buckled fence. When I land, headlights flash through the trees as the SUV comes down the driveway to meet Brunelli and the other men.

They seem set on not letting me get out of the back hills alive. I'm not sure how they're going to get my car out of the way to open the fence, but I don't doubt their determination.

I break out into a run down the rest of the driveway. My best hope is to find a house that will answer a panicked plea for help at this time of night. The fact that I'm not too far away from where Sharon Tate and her friends were murdered by Charles Manson's pals doesn't reassure me.

I reach the street and run toward the nearest house, more than a block away. An engine guns behind me and headlights capture my shadow on the asphalt. I freeze, certain I'm about to be run down like Mad Max's kid.

The rider shouts to me from behind. "Get on if you want to live!"

I want to.

I do.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Hand of Fate

The rider takes me through Beverly Hills at a breakneck speed. We blow past stop signs as if they're polite suggestions. Every speed bump is an excuse to try to get both wheels off the ground.

I hold on tightly and feel even more emasculated by my rescuer when I recognize the designer scent coming from the gap between her helmet and her leather jacket.

At some point in her movie career, Theresa White took a motorcycle stunt riding class. I've done it too, but I don't feel anywhere near as comfortable with my skills as she obviously does.

"I think we're okay!" I try to yell over the wind and engine noise as she takes us up a canyon road.

"Can't be too sure!" she shouts.

"No, really. I'm sure they're not chasing us!"

In defiance, she guns the engine. All I can do is hold on.

Ten minutes later, at the top of a ridge overlooking Los Angeles, she finally comes to a stop. I jump from the back of the bike, swearing off motorized transportation for the rest of my life.

She flips her hair out of the helmet. "Come on. That was better than sex!"

"Then you've been doing it wrong. I could have been killed."

"I know. I saved your life." Her face is flush with excitement.

"No. I mean by you. I think I'd rather take my chances with the goodfellas."

Theresa's lips make a pout. "Oh, come on. I thought you were the reckless one. I saw your little gladiator fight."

"That wasn't voluntary."

"Well, neither was this." She gives me a broad smile. "Are you going to call the cops on them now?"

I shake my head. While holding on for dear life, I thought the situation through. I don't look good any way you look at it. "They were going to kill me."

"I know. I saw them chasing you," she replies.

"Yeah, but did you see a gun? And even if you did, what did you see? Me running away from the mansion after I crashed into the gate. Brunelli will just say he caught me trying to sneak upstairs or something and I tried to get away. I'm sure his pals from Nevada have already gotten rid of the body."

"Oh." She pauses. "I was wondering about the hand."

"Hand?" I realize my fingers have been holding something dry and leathery since I abandoned the car. "Ack!" I drop the hand to the ground.

Theresa walks over and picks it up. She gives it an inspection. "This looks old, Michael."

"I know. She's been dead twenty years."

Theresa gives me an odd look. "So you cut off her hand to test for poison?"

"Uh? Yeah," I lie. "Sort of. She kind of broke apart when I used her as a battering ram."

"Was this before or after they wanted to kill you?" Theresa raises an eyebrow.

"After. I found her in her bed upstairs. I didn't really have a choice."

Theresa gives me the hand back. "I believe you. So now what?"

"I don't know." The poison test sounds like a good idea. "Maybe we see if they can find arsenic or something. If we can show she was poisoned, that might help make the case."

"So we go to the police?"

I hold the hand up and examine the surface in the moonlight. The skin is taught and ancient. It looks more like a prop than an actual human hand. Before I embarrass myself in front of Eastridge, I want to know a little more

-- if she died of natural causes, or even if this is her hand. Maybe Brunelli and Alonzo had some creepy necrophilia thing going on.

"We need to get the thing tested. I'll have to make some calls tomorrow," I say.

Theresa shakes her head and texts something into her phone. "We can't wait that long."

"I don't know what our other options are. I can call the police on them now, but if they've cleaned up everything, all they'll find is my car smashed into the gate. It's not like they're going to take this to the lab tonight."

"Hold on." Theresa looks at her phone. "We got someone at UCLA willing to take a look."

"A friend?"

"No. A Twitter follower. I asked for someone who works in a forensics lab in the area."

"That fast?"

She gives me a wink. "I've got ten million followers. Law of big numbers. Get on the bike. He can meet us at the lab in twenty minutes."

I'm about to insist I drive, but she already has the bike revved and aimed back down the hill.

Eighteen minutes later, Dr. Stein, a gray-haired man with a Van Dyke beard, meets us at the front of his biology lab at UCLA. His face breaks out into boyish grin when he realizes that it wasn't a joke. Theresa White actually wanted his help. He does a double-take when he sees me, thinking he's meeting Alex, too.

My first thought is that he doesn't seem like a typical Theresa White fan. Then I remember that if you're an A-lister, just about everyone is a potential fan.

Theresa thanks the man for meeting us so late. He's ecstatic to help and ushers up to his laboratory. Two grad students are there running different experiments.

He slides on a pair of gloves, takes the hand from me, and holds it up to the light. "So what are we looking for?"

Theresa raises an eyebrow. "Tell him...Alex."

"Toxicology first. We want to see what it would look like if you tested for poisoning."

Stein sets the hand in a large metal tray. "We can start with arsenic. That's the quickest one to look for. Mind if I take a few samples and run a couple

other tests?"

He seems genuinely excited to help us. "Sure. Whatever you want."

"Where did the hand come from?" he asks.

Theresa puts a finger to her lips. "We're moonlighting as grave robbers."

Stein lets out a laugh. "Ah, a mystery." He clips a piece of skin and drops it into a test tube for a lab assistant to test. He drops another sample in a tube, along with a few chemicals, then places it into a centrifuge. Finally, he looks up from his work. "This will take a couple minutes. Any chance I can get a photograph?"

Theresa obliges and poses with the different lab assistants and the professor. They pull me into a few photos as well. She asks them some intelligent questions and they cheerfully explain what their different areas of research are.

I'm impressed with the fact that she doesn't pretend to understand when they describe something she doesn't get. It's the sign of a genuinely intelligent person. Alex would probably be nodding his head and trying to remember some line of dialogue to say from one of the smart characters he's played.

An alarm goes off, and Stein presses the stop button on the centrifuge and removes the test tube. He drops a slip of test paper inside and gives the vial a shake. He holds it under a desk lamp for us to see.

"Notice the brown coloration?" he asks.

Theresa and I lean forward.

"That's what arsenic poisoning looks like."

Theresa high-fives me. "Way to go, Michael."

Stein looks up from the vial to her. "Who is Michael?"

"Just someone we know." Theresa gives me a sly wink. "Pretty neat guy."

One of Stein's assistants hands him a printout to look over. "Give me a second with this?" Stein asks.

I pull Theresa to the side, out of earshot of everyone else. "If we can get some DNA we know belonged to Amanda Gray, we might be in business. Maybe something from a relative?"

"We can find out. Is that enough to go to the police with?" she asks.

"I think so. I can take this to Eastridge and get him to open up a murder investigation."

I know what she's going to say next, so I interrupt her. "...And since you claim you own the property, we might be able to get him to let you have the

necklace if they find it during a search. At least temporarily."

Theresa nods her head. "It's a pity about Amanda Gray. I feel sorry for the woman."

"Me too. Killed by the people closest to her. For what reason, I don't understand."

Stein steps over to where we're standing. "Sorry to interrupt. We've done a few more tests."

"Definitely arsenic?" I ask to be certain.

"Most likely. I can't tell if they died from it, but it's definitely in their body."

"Well that's at least attempted murder. I think that's good enough," I reply.

Stein strokes his beard. "Good enough for what, Alex?"

"To send her killers to prison," I explain.

Stein looks at Theresa then back at me and lets out a dry laugh. "You had me there for a moment."

"What do you mean?" I ask. "You said she was probably murdered."

Stein shakes his head. "That is true. But Alex, if you want to catch her killer, you'll need a time machine." He points to the tray. "The owner of this hand was murdered over two thousand years ago."

"Say that again?" asks Theresa.

"The hand, we did a carbon dating test. Hold on." He reads a printout. "This person died about two thousand six hundred years ago. Give or take fifty years. It's a mummy. I thought you knew that?"

I shrug. "Well, I thought the person was mummified...but not an actual mummy kind of mummy."

Stein shakes his head at my stupidity. He slides the tray with the hand back over to us. "Where exactly did you find this mummy?"

I reply in a meek voice. "Beverly Hills. Tucked away in a bed."

Stein raises an eyebrow and gives a Theresa a concerned look. She holds up her hands. "Strange town. Who knows what's all back in there?"

I stare at the withered hand. I can tell Theresa is thinking the same thing I am. "If this isn't Amanda Gray, then where is she?"

"Yeah, and why is there a 2,000-year-old mummy sleeping in her bed? And more importantly, where the hell is my necklace?" she asks.

"Amanda Gray?" says Stein as he takes the hand back from me.

"Yeah, you know about her?"

He shoots a glance at his lab assistants at the back of the room, then speaks in a low voice. "Only everything."

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CHAPTER TWENTY

The Fan

Dr. Stein's cheeks redden as he nods to Theresa. "It's why I follow you. I always thought you had that golden-age glamour."

Theresa gives him a smile. "You're sweet."

Stein holds the hand close to his chest as he examines it, almost coveting it. "Why did you think this was her hand?"

It seemed obvious at the time to me. "I found the rest of the mummy in her bedroom. I kind of just assumed."

Theresa hops up unto a lab counter. "Why put a mummy in her bed?"

"I don't know," I reply. "There were quite a few portraits on the walls of Amanda Gray. The whole place is like a shrine to her. I thought maybe it was like how old people hold on to a body after they die."

"This Brunelli doesn't seem like the clingy type," says Theresa.

"No. But Alonzo does. Who knows what weird dynamic they have going on there."

Stein interrupts us. "Explain to me again why there was a mummy in Amanda Gray's bed?"

I turn to him. "I don't know. Like I said, I thought the mummy was her."

Stein shakes his head. "A body doesn't look like this after a few decades. This went through ritual mummification. You can still see where the wrappings were and the coloration of the skin. Although, this looks like a

rushed job. The chemicals don't look like the ones you get in more important burials."

"So why put the mummy in her bed? Is it some kind of joke?" asks Theresa.

I shake my head. "These two didn't strike me as the laughing type. I think they took the Egyptian stuff pretty seriously. Alonzo still wears an Egyptian symbol around his neck like a crucifix."

"Why would you put a mummy in your bed?" Theresa repeats the question.

I get a perverse thought. "Because you don't think they're dead?"

Stein pokes a rubber finger at the dried hand. "Hard to make that mistake. Maybe with someone a little more juicy, maybe."

"What about reincarnation?" asks Theresa. "Did they think the mummy was her in a previous life?"

Stein answers, "Maybe if the body were a crocodile. Egyptians believed in a life cycle of coming back as different animals. Not as people." He steps over to a computer and pulls up a webpage. "Or maybe...I'm really only familiar with the chemical side of things. We could talk to one of the historians tomorrow. But...there we go. Egyptians, at least according to Herodotus, believed that you could come back in human form after almost 3,000 years. That's not quite our timeline, but I think it's close enough."

Theresa hops off the counter to see the computer screen. "Close enough for what?"

I start to see it now. "Close enough for them to think the mummy was Amanda Gray in a past life. Close enough for them to think putting her in the bed was the same thing as having her there."

"Yeah, but why?" Theresa asks.

"Because putting a 'juicy' mummy in her bed would stink up the house. Those two seemed the tidy types." I'm reminded of how Alex would work on a role for a movie. He loved to have props to help him focus. Dog tags and a picture of a girl in his pocket if he was playing a soldier. He'd use the smell of grease if he was a race car driver. He'd have a constant hangover if he was a writer.

I explain my theory. "Brunelli and Alonzo want to maintain the illusion she's still alive. If there's a body in the bedroom, one they keep referring to as Amanda, the scam becomes easy after a while. It's like a pet you talk to. They become real. It makes it easier to carry out the lie."

Theresa nods her head. "Okay. So who called the police on you the first time you went to the house? You said a woman reported you."

"Probably the secretary in the office, Ethel. I'd bet anything she's an old friend from their Vegas days they use from time to time to complete the masquerade. At least I hope so."

"Why? You want Amanda to be dead?" Theresa has a cross look on her face.

I shake my head. "No. I don't want 3,000-year-old mummies making phone calls."

"2,500," corrects Stein.

I absentmindedly gesture with the hand, then set it down. "That leaves our two questions. Where's her body and who is this?"

"Well that's easy. Princess Artakama," replies Theresa.

"Artoo-who?"

"Didn't you watch Sands of the Nile?" she asks.

"Not exactly. I was kind of busy chasing after your necklace and getting attacked by coked-out Filipino stunt bikers," I reply defensively.

"Artakama is the princess in Sands of the Nile. She's the one who waits for the Macedonian general who never comes. She dies of a lonely heart." Theresa gives me a frustrated look. "All this time and you've never even seen the film?"

I ignore her question. "So what makes you think this is her? That was a movie."

"Hugo Harrison," she explains. "He was the one who wanted the film to get made. He hired one of the leading Egyptologists of the day to find a story in Egypt to bring to the screen. He literally dug up the story of Artakama."

"Yeah, but how the hell did she end up here? We're a long way from Egypt."

Theresa's voice gets excited. "Don't you get it? Harrison bought up a bunch of Egyptian artifacts to make the movie. He probably smuggled her out of Egypt!"

Stein raises a finger. "I don't want to interrupt, but they never found her temple."

Theresa's smile fades into a frown. "Oh. Well maybe they just thought this was her. It's a good story..."

I'm having trouble keeping track. "Okay. Mind if I use your drawing board?" I pick up a marker. "So we have a mummy that we think Brunelli and friends believe is Gray from a past life." I draw a crude mummy.

"Which you desecrated," adds Theresa.

"Yes. Thank you for that. I will not be sleeping for months. As I was saying, somewhere out there is a necklace that's a genuine Egyptian artifact." I draw a necklace and two stick figures for Brunelli and Alonzo. "And somewhere is the body of Amanda Gray, assuming they didn't cremate her." I add another primitive stick figure.

Stein and Theresa stare back, waiting for me to make any sense. I draw a circle around the necklace and Amanda. "If they revere her like the mummy, the necklace may still be with her. The question is where is she?"

Blank stares. I draw a house on the board. "Is she still in the mansion? Some kind of secret Egyptian room? Or is she somewhere else?" I draw a big question mark.

"She's not in the house," says Theresa.

"Why?" I ask.

"Because they wouldn't put the mummy in the bed. There would be no need to. If she was rotting in the basement, it would be the same thing as having her in her room. It might make things more confusing to have two 'Amandas' under one roof."

"So where is she?"

Theresa shakes her head. "You're the detective. That's what I'm paying you for."

Stein studies the drawing. "I don't mean to interrupt you two, but I think you're missing something here."

"What's that?" asks Theresa.

"The person at the center of all this."

"Who is that?" she asks.

"The man that started everything," replies Stein. "As you said, Harrison Hugo. He's the one responsible for her rise and fall. He's the reason for everything here."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Mogul

Theresa takes a bite of her hamburger. "So you think he killed her?" She wipes away the Thousand Island sauce on her chin with a paper napkin.

We're sitting in an In-N-Out Burger a few blocks from the UCLA campus. A table of college girls point and stare at us from across the restaurant. I try dabbing my fries in ketchup, but they still look like mummy fingers.

"No. Maybe. She may have died of natural causes. Brunelli and Alonzo just don't want to let go of her."

"Because they think she's reincarnated?" asks Theresa.

"That's the part I can't figure out. They're going through a lot of effort to maintain the illusion she's alive. Why? It doesn't help them hold on to the stolen necklace. In fact, as long as she's alive, there's a legal reason to go after Gray. She's the only one who would know where it is."

Theresa puts her burger down and pauses for a moment. "You don't think they melted it down? Just sold it for scrap?"

"No. Brunelli seemed to think it was worth a lot more than just the material value. I'm sure it is. Maybe they could sell it to a private collector or create some other fake trail of acquisition. Something to legitimize it."

Theresa stares off into space. "So where does Harrison figure into all this? Why didn't he ask for the necklace back? He knew she had it."

"I've been wondering about that. He died in the 1970s. He had decades to go get it. Maybe he just didn't want to deal with the drama." Something clicks in my head. "Dynostar. Fleet's girlfriend thought I was with Dynostar. That was Harrison's company after he got out of the film business. They'd been asking about 'artifacts.'"

"Fifty years after the movie?"

"New management? They come in looking for old assets and go back through the books? When did you make your deal with them for the props?" I ask.

"A few months ago. But that was with the parent company."

"They may not know what they owned. At least the people you talked to. Like Oswald Rabbit."

"Oswald?" asks Theresa.

"Here you go getting on my case about not watching Sands of the Nile and you don't know about one of the most famous film stars in history?"

"A rabbit?" she raises an eyebrow.

I explain. "He was Walt Disney's first big cartoon character. A kind of Felix the Cat-type character, but a lucky rabbit. He starred in a ton of cartoons. He came along well before Mickey Mouse."

"What happened to him?"

"Disney got screwed out of ownership. He had a weak contract and Universal Pictures was able to take over the character. They made a few more cartoons, then forgot about him. Disney and Iwerks went on to create Mickey and didn't look back. Almost a century later, the Walt Disney Company goes to make a deal with the new owners of Universal for a talent contract and asks for Oswald back. Universal had no idea what the hell they were talking about and had to go look in their records. They said yes. Disney traded one of their cable broadcasters to NBC-Universal and gets a cartoon character back."

Theresa nods her head. "So someone at Dynostar just realized they may own a priceless artifact?"

"Maybe. But that was a couple years ago. They could have dropped it and that's why they let you have everything, thinking there was nothing there. The person who did the asking might not be working for them anymore. It could just be an accountant looking at a spreadsheet and calling to clarify something. You should ask them."

Theresa steals one of my fries. "I already did when I made the deal. They said they weren't aware of anything."

I try to make sense of it out loud. "So how does this lead back to Harrison? After they broke up, did he just tell his people not to mention Gray to him? Does he let her hold on to the necklace because he doesn't want to deal with her?"

"Under California law, a man is entitled to have an engagement ring returned if the marriage is called off. That might apply to a necklace." Theresa steals another fry.

I push them toward her. "But he didn't ask for it back."

"As far as we know, he may have asked. There was a girl who took a couple producers for a ride. She pawned their engagement rings. She told each one she threw the ring off the pier when they broke up. The story got back to both of them and they called the cops on her. She's doing time for that scam."

"I don't know if Harrison would fall for that."

Theresa shrugs. "Love is a funny thing. Maybe he was too focused on building an empire."

"Could be. So that still leaves the question of where the hell is Amanda Gray?"

"With my necklace," replies Theresa.

"Yeah. With the artifact." Something about the word 'artifact' doesn't sit right. "Hold on. Fleet's girlfriend didn't say 'artifact.' She said 'artifacts,' as in the the plural."

"What other artifacts?"

"Wait a second. We got a mummy. We know there's a necklace. Maybe the necklace and the mummy were a package deal?" I ask.

"Yeah, but you don't call a mummy an 'artifact.' It's a mummy."

I hold out my hands. "So there's more. Maybe that's why Brunelli was extra cagey. Maybe that's why he wanted to kill me. Not just because of the cover-up and the necklace, but because they know something else we're missing."

"Like what?" asks Theresa.

"It all comes back to Harrison. He's the source of everything here. He collected a lot of art and historical pieces. Sands of the Nile came out of his Egyptian phase while he was doing construction there."

Theresa types something into her phone. "Egypt phase?"

"Yeah, he built telephone systems and power grids in other countries. He worked in Egypt until the Suez Crisis. People say he played both sides. It wouldn't surprise me."

She holds up a photo on her phone. "Recognize that?"

It's the sphinx in the middle of Amanda Gray's driveway, except the face is more masculine.

"Where did you find that?" I ask.

"Looks kind of like the one at her mansion." She'd seen the photos from DJ.

"It could be a twin. Where is this?"

"Harrison's house in the hills. Skyhouse, the museum that overlooks the city. He's supposed to have more Egyptian artifacts there." She gives me an impish grin. "Want to go?"

"Sure. But they won't be open for another twelve hours."

Theresa picks her helmet off the seat. "That's not a problem. I can't wait and you don't have a car anymore. You coming?"

I shake my head. "It's a museum. It's got guards and lasers and stuff."

"We're not breaking in. All the big Egyptian stuff is outside. I just want to have a look. Besides, we can't get in trouble."

"Why is that?"

"We're famous," she flashes me her twenty-million-dollar grin. "Well, I am...you at least look the part."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Skyhouse

Theresa bounds up the side of the hill like a gazelle. I try to keep up, but the rocks on the slope follow different rules of gravity for me. The thick branches of the shrubs that hold the soil into the cliff are the only thing keeping me from falling.

"Come on," she shouts back to me. "I thought you did all of Alex's hard stuff."

"Only the things he wants to take credit for," I reply, wiping the sap from the branches onto my jeans.

Harrison's Los Angeles estate, Skyhouse, looms overhead, silhouetted by the dark blue night sky. Just over a ridge behind us, the lights of the city glow. Even from here you can tell Harrison's estate has one of the best views of greater Los Angeles to be had, short of standing on the Hollywood sign.

We left the motorcycle in a hedge just outside the grounds for the parking lot below the tram line to the museum. I got the impression Theresa didn't care if anyone found the bike. It was just another disposable toy that became an inconvenience the moment she no longer needed it. I try not to think about how much a limited edition Italian racing bike is worth. A lot more than a year's rent for me, that's for sure.

Theresa reaches a patch of level ground and waits for me to catch up. "The website said he built this place back in the early '50s. He abandoned it

by the end of the decade and never came back."

"Never?" I ask, trying not to act out of breath.

"Never. Kind of crazy just to leave something like this."

I don't mention her motorcycle at the bottom of the hill.

We freeze when a security guard driving a golf cart passes the other side of the bushes. He's going down the mountain on a roadway that parallels the tram that takes tourists to the top. Theresa waits for my signal before we start walking again.

"How many guards you think they have here?" she asks in a low voice.

I'd been trying to do the math myself. "There was the one at the bottom of the hill at the gate shack. The one who passed us may be a relief. So count on someone coming back up in a few minutes. There will be another watching the back road that leads to the estate. Probably two inside. Maybe another walking the grounds. Does it sound like a horrible idea yet?"

She shakes her head and smiles. "Come on. We're only looking."

I step over a rock. "Then there are the video cameras. I imagine the place is filled with them. We're not going to make it a hundred feet before someone sees us. Our best bet is to stay away from the buildings and close to the trees. Not that it will work."

"Alex doesn't talk that negative," she taunts.

"Alex and you don't live in the same reality I do."

Theresa stops, puts her hands on her hips, and gives me a cross look. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." I bite my tongue and start hiking up a gap between a row of tall hedges. "We're at the lower gardens. If we're lucky, we can get into the Egyptian area without being seen."

"I'm just like any other girl. Whatever."

Theresa catches up and overtakes me without looking back.

I whisper to her, "Just slow down a little. I don't want us stepping on top of a guard taking a sandwich break."

Theresa ignores me and climbs through the gap between two cone-shaped trees. I follow her onto a stone veranda. To our right is a set of steps leading to an upper garden. Below us is a wide view of the city. We both stop to take a look.

Los Angeles, Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Santa Monica, and Venice, all the different cities that form the idea we call LA or Hollywood, lie before

us. Hidden by the mountain is the Valley, where many of the actual studios are located. But it's this view people think of the most.

"Well that's kind of phallic," says Theresa as she notices something behind us.

She's staring at a pillar in the middle of the plaza. An obelisk more than thirty feet tall looms over the lower garden and the entire city.

She grins at me in the moonlight. "Big ego much?"

"I think it's an Egyptian monument."

"In the Egyptian garden, no less. Alex said you were good. I had no idea."

At least she's not still pissed at my earlier comment. I ignore her sarcasm and walk over to the stone pillar. "I mean, I think it's an actual Egyptian monument."

Theresa's face lights up from the glow of her phone as she looks at the obelisk's history. "It say it was a gift from the people of Egypt to Harrison."

"Well that was nice." I kneel down to touch the ground. The area around the obelisk is covered with metal plates. Too hard to see in the moonlight, the metal is dull brown with touches of copper green.

Theresa uses her phone to illuminate the area around where we're standing. The entire base is a distorted map of the world. I remember in college seeing dozens of different ways to display the earth's surface on a flat surface, triangles to circles. This doesn't look like any of them.

Half of California is as big as the rest of the United States. Egypt and the Middle East appear larger than Europe. Russia and Asia are almost footnotes. I walk around the map, trying to make sense of what it represents.

Theresa takes the light away.

"I was using that," I reply.

"Well, I can either watch you stumble around or I can just look it up. Hold on." She types into her phone. "Okay. So he used the obelisk as a kind of sundial. The tip of it would go around the world to all of his different enterprises. That's why everything is distorted. He made this place the center of the world. Like I said, big ego."

"Taking notes?"

Theresa gives me the bird then starts to pace around the map, too. She stops at Egypt and looks up at the monument. "I'd love to know if the shadow lands on places on any special dates."

"I'm sure somebody has made mention of that. Whole books have been written about this place."

"Yeah, but maybe some kind of secret anniversary," she replies.

"And a hidden button you press that reveals a massive underground chamber? This isn't a movie. People don't do that kind of thing in real life."

Theresa steps over to where I'm standing and looks down. "I bet Harrison is the type. He did work for the CIA and he was into all kinds of crazy weird stuff. Nothing would surprise me. I wonder what it looks like from higher up?"

"What?"

"The map. Give me a boost." She places a hand on my shoulder.

"What, so you can sit on my shoulder? Are you serious?" her nails are digging into my shoulder.

"No. Up the obelisk. I want to climb it and look down."

I try to protest. "There's nothing to see. And the obelisk is too sheer to climb." As I say this, I notice finger-sized cracks and how deeply the hieroglyphs are carved into the face.

Theresa pushes me back against the monument and raises a foot in front of my crotch. "I'm going to use something to step on. You decide."

Under protest, I hold my hands out for her to step. She kicks off from my hands and goes over my shoulder. I look up as her ass moves up the monument like a monkey after a coconut.

"Should I get my camera?" I ask.

"Come up," she whispers down. "It's easier than it looks. The letters are worn really deep. Even you could manage."

"Thanks."

Headlights pass below us where the road wraps around the lower garden.

"Someone is coming," I whisper to her.

"Then don't stay down there, idiot."

I reach a hand up and push it between the gap made by the symbol of some Egyptian bird. My other hand pulls on a loaf of bread. My toe slips before catching into a crevice.

"The golf cart stopped. It's up or never," whispers Theresa.

I keep climbing to avoid getting caught in a flashlight. Theresa has already reached the top and moved to the side to give me room.

The spaces in the hieroglyphs are narrower the higher I climb. I have to squeeze my fingers into some of them to hold on. My toes are used mainly

for emotional support as my upper body does most of the work.

I throw my arms around the pinnacle when I finally get to the top. Theresa gives me a smile. I'm too exhausted and can only grunt.

"Just like a clumsy King Kong," she says.

I find my breath. "Let's not talk about how he got down the Empire State Building." I crane my head around to see the map. The light from the golf cart is gone. "Where'd he go?"

"I lied," Theresa grins. "He kept driving. You looked like you needed motivation." Theresa leans past me to get a better glimpse of the map.

"Well?" I ask. "See anything?"

She bites her lip as she tries to make out the features in the dark. "It looks like it does from the ground, only smaller."

I shake my head. "There's a reason for that."

Her perfect face furrows into a frown. "I was hoping for something else. I mean, we could probably find this view online, I guess."

"What were you hoping for? An eclipse? The King of Atlantis?"

She rolls her eyes. "You have no spirit of adventure."

"Adventure gets me into a Malibu death match. Adventure gets me almost whacked in a mobster's garage. Adventure is why I'll be living out of my car."

Theresa turns from the map. "Living where?"

I regret whining about my plight immediately. "An expression. I'm just saying that I take this all very seriously. I know it's a fun game for you, but when I agreed to help, it became a job for me."

She gives me a serious look. "If you need any help..."

"What?" I act confused. "I'm fine."

The light from the flashlight on my face says otherwise. We both freeze.

"What the hell are you doing up there?" shouts a guard below us.

"I was just scoping out a modeling shoot," replies Theresa, as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

"And who might you be?" asks the guard.

"This is Alex Race and I'm Theresa White."

"Never heard of you," he grumbles. "Now come down slowly one at a time."

Theresa gives me a frightened look. I knew this was going to happen all along.

"You know, I just realized something," I whisper.

"What's that?" she asks hopefully.

"If you ever married Alex, your last name would be White-Race. Not very politically correct." I start backing down so she can't kick me.

Theresa stares down at me and shakes her head.

Welcome to my life, sweetheart.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Historian

I'm lying on the ground with my face on the Pacific Ocean. The cold metal engraving celebrating Harrison's historic submarine dive to one of the deepest parts of the world is pressed into the flesh of my cheek. My hands are cuffed behind me, with the boots of one of the security guards inches from my face.

They're a little bit more delicate with Theresa. She's standing off to my side, no handcuffs, showing the security guards her ID. None of them seem overly impressed with who she is and who I look like. They're in the process of trying to decide what to do with us.

Rough hands pull me to my feet and march me toward a building in back of the main house. A guard standing by the door flashes a light in my face and gives me a grin.

"What's wrong with you?" he asks.

"It was her idea," I mutter as I'm shoved inside and pushed into a plastic chair. The handcuffs make it impossible for me to sit down normally. I have to lie on my side so they don't shove into my back.

Theresa sits down next to me. "They're sending for the director of the museum."

"That'll be nice. You can autograph the booking photo for him."

"Oh, relax. We're not going to jail," she insists.

As she says this, two uniformed police officers step through the door. One of them looks down at me and asks the guard, "Want us to load him into the cruiser?"

The guard at the door shakes his head. "We're trying to decide what to do. Waiting on the boss. Looks like he put her up to it."

"I did no such thing," I protest.

One of the cops gives me an angry look. "Hey, easy there, pal. Just because you're in movies doesn't mean you can just lie to us. Especially you of all people."

"I'm not in movies," I mutter to myself. I'm in handcuffs because Alex has a bad-boy reputation. Theresa, Miss Innocence, is sitting free because they can't understand why she would be here. To them it looks like I forced her into some kind of stupid Hollywood douche-bag prank.

Nobody asked for my ID yet. They just assume I'm Alex. I try to remember which one I have showing and which one is hidden away in a secret fold in my wallet. Alex doesn't have mine, thank god. Or else he'd be using it as a get-out-of-jail-free card.

I hear the sound of a can opening and turn my head to see Theresa popping the top to a soda a guard handed her.

"You get a beverage?" I whine. "What the hell."

Theresa shrugs me off and thanks the guard.

The door opens again and a tired-looking man with a salt-and-pepper beard enters. He's wearing sweatpants and a Harvard sweater. From the look of his loafers, it's a good bet he wasn't out running when he got the call.

The guard who caught us points to me. "I found him on top of the obelisk."

"On top?" The director gives me a confused look. "What were you doing up there?"

Theresa is silent. I crane my head off the plastic seat and try to swivel my shoulders to face him. I reply quietly, "Looking for clues."

"Clues to what?" he asks.

Theresa takes a sip of her soda and stares off into space. I can see a wry smile at the corner of her mouth.

"A lost treasure," I mumble.

The director shakes his head. "You climbed a 2,500-year-old ancient monument so you could find a lost treasure? Are you high? What made you think of this?"

My voice is almost inaudible. "The hand from the mummy."

"The hand from the mummy?" he repeats. He turns to Theresa. "Seriously, is he high?"

"No," she shakes her head. "Do you have an office where we can talk about this?" she finishes the question with a smile.

The director thinks this over for a moment and stares back at me. I look like I've been caught after a cross-country police manhunt. Theresa, on the other hand, is sitting there as composed as any perfume ad she's ever been in. She doesn't look like a raving starlet after a bender. She's elegant and innocent.

"All right." The director motions us to his office.

I slip on the floor as I try to get to my feet with the cuffs behind my back. Theresa ignores me and keeps walking. A guard helps me after he and the cops have a giggle.

"You want me to take these off of him?" asks the guard.

The director looks over his shoulder and shrugs. "Yeah, I guess. For now." He turns to a police officer. "If we can't settle this, we'll give you a call?"

"Fair enough," he replies, then leaves us.

Theresa walks ahead and introduces herself to the director as if we were on a private tour of the museum. The director's name is Madden. He laughs at something she says, then gives me a backward glance as I rub my wrists and shakes his head.

He seats us in his office, then leans back in his chair. "This better be good."

I start to speak. "It all started when—"

He waves his hand in the air and cuts me off. "Let me hear from the person who wasn't on top of my obelisk."

Theresa gives him a smile. "Well, I was sort of up there, too."

"What?"

"We were looking into the Amanda Gray murder," says Theresa.

Madden's eyes widen. "Murder?"

"Actually..." I start.

Theresa puts a hand on my leg and squeezes hard. "We think so. We've been in contact with the Beverly Hills Police Department. But things are complicated. I've been tracking down some props that I acquired from

Dynostar." Theresa points to a photograph on the wall of Madden with a group of men in business suits. "Oh, you know Harry and Ted."

Madden turns and looks for a moment. "Of course. Dynostar is one of our biggest contributors. Some of the exhibits here are on loan from them."

"So you can call Ted and he'll verify everything we tell you about the asset acquisition," Theresa explains. "Anyway, we were trying to track down more of Harrison's Egyptian collection."

"Here? After midnight?" asks Madden.

"We're in kind of a hurry," replies Theresa.

"Apparently." He turns to me. "How do you figure into this?"

"Michael is helping me out," Theresa interjects.

"Michael?" asks Madden.

Theresa corrects herself. "A friend. He asked Alex to come along and make sure I didn't get into trouble."

Madden points a finger in my direction. "Him, to keep you out of trouble?"

"Yeah, I know. He's not as bad as you hear," she says as if I wasn't in the room. "Anyway. We're trying to find out about more artifacts. In particular, we're trying to track down a necklace that Harrison gave Amanda Gray. The Sun of the Nile."

Madden nods his head. "Yes. I heard about it. Harrison may have acquired it when he was in Egypt."

Theresa leans in. "Do you know what happened to it?"

Madden shakes his head. "No. Harrison wasn't a nostalgic man. There was no official accounting for anything here when he died. The whole place had just been wrapped in plastic. Picassos, Tiffany lamps, jars of peanut butter. Everything." Madden raises his hand in an exasperated gesture. "We're still cataloging things we find hidden away in the attic."

"But no necklace," replies Theresa.

"No."

"We're sorry for the trouble we caused. If there's anything we can do to make up for it," offers Theresa.

"Oh, don't worry," replies Madden. "You'll get invites to a fundraiser in a few weeks. Your presence will be appreciated. I know my wife will like to know why I had to crawl out of bed at this hour."

"We'll be happy to make contributions, too," says Theresa.

I keep my mouth shut. Yeah, let me just dig into the space between my seat and find some change I wasn't going to use at Del Taco.

Alex is going to love hearing this. He'll probably make me go to the fundraiser in his place out of spite.

Madden taps his fingers on his desk. "Come to think of it, there's something that might be interesting to you." He taps on his keyboard and prints something out. He hands the sheet to Theresa. "We found this stuffed into a drawer along with some old movie posters.

I look over her shoulder. It's a bill of lading. At the top is a name of a shipping company, World Transit. The only item listed is "Sun Nile Project."

He points to the front of the building. "Harrison brought back a couple sphinxes and the obelisk you saw out there on his trip in 1955, as well as most of the artifacts in this museum. We don't have a record of anything coming in after that."

Theresa hands me the paper. "The Sun Nile was the necklace."

Madden nods his head. "Yes. But you don't use a cargo ship for something like that, even in the 1950s."

"What else was in there?" asks Theresa.

"I don't know. You saw the obelisk he used as a lawn ornament. He didn't do anything small. We don't know the full size of the collection."

"Sphinxes. How many were there?" I ask.

Madden turns to me. "Two that we know about. The one in front of Skyhouse."

"We didn't see that one," I reply.

"It was on the website," Theresa corrects me. "We took the back way in..."

"Yes, that's one of them," says Madden.

"And the other one is in Amanda Gray's front yard," I reply.

Madden gives me a confused look. "What? She has one? I thought there were just two."

"I thought the entire Egypt collection was here," I say.

"No. The other one, the 'twin,' is at the old Cairo theater downtown. It sits in the lobby. That's where Harrison kept some of his other artifacts. He built the theater to celebrate the premiere of Sands of the Nile. Of course, that took a little longer than he expected."

Theresa's eyes widen. "The Cairo? You mean there's more artifacts there?"

I know she thinks there's going to be the missing clue we didn't see from the top of the obelisk. I'm not going to be able to talk her out of going.

"A few," replies Madden. "The Cairo was a big project for Harrison. We're in the middle of a restoration on the whole theater."

Madden walks us out to the front of Harrison's mansion. The sphinx with the male face is perched on a pedestal looking beyond the city. The obelisk is slightly off to the left. I stand between the statue and the reflecting pool and stare at the stars and the city.

"It seems a little odd it doesn't line up. Isn't that how they did that in Egypt?" I ask.

Madden shrugs. "Harrison was eccentric. A genius, for sure. Ahead of his time. When he built this place in the 1950s, he made sure you couldn't pinpoint it on an aerial map. The roof is the same color as the ground and blends in from the air. He was worried about Russian missiles photographing him from overhead. That's what got him into satellites eventually. His own paranoia. He built the house before the collection arrived. He'd mix Ming dynasty vases with Mickey Mouse glassware. Not a whole lot of rhyme or reason." There's both frustration and admiration in his voice.

Theresa pulls on my arm. "Let's go to Cairo."

"I hope you're talking about the theater and not the city."

She smiles at Madden and gives me her impish grin. "If that's what it takes. The studio jet could have us there and back in plenty of time for me to get into makeup for the awards."

I pray she's joking.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Cairo

Pro tip: If you want to make your way through Hollywood, you have to really understand the adage about knowing the right people. That often isn't the head of a studio or a big-name star. It's the person who keeps their appointment calendar or manages their address book.

I'll give Alex credit -- he knows the name of every assistant and receptionist from his agent to the studio that makes his pictures. Theresa is the same way. She understands the real information flow in this town. Want to get a rep as an asshole or a bitch? Just be rude to the person answering the phone. Try to make up for it with some obvious syrupy 'Thaaaaank yooooouuu sooooo muuuuuuch,' ingratiation because you think they really are little people with tiny little emotions and you're set with a horrible rep.

Ever see those really juicy items in gossip columns you know are true but can't imagine who would say such a thing? It's the mousy girl from Arizona you just scolded on the phone for not putting you right through to her boss. That's the way it works. Respect these people and you're gold. They are the gatekeepers.

They're how you get things done in the middle of the night.

Theresa is looking up at the sphinx in the lobby of the Cairo theater. A tired-looking assistant, Avram, who works for the theater chain that owns the Cairo is drinking a cup of Dunkin' Donuts coffee and hoping we don't realize he's wearing a pair of mismatched shoes.

When Avram got the call from the assistant to the head of the chain, he wasn't actually expecting to see Theresa White and Alex Race waiting outside on a motorcycle parked on the handprints of a forgotten silent movie star.

"What do you think?" asks Theresa as she gazes up at the sphinx.

"Looks like the one at his estate," I reply.

The entire lobby is filled with gold-colored décor, from the faux bas-relief metal plates showing the various Egyptian gods to the scrollwork and staircases. Under renovation for the last ten years -- the chain's way of saying it doesn't want to spend the money to fix the place up in an era when people prefer to download movies -- the half-deteriorated theater feels like a scene from a post-apocalyptic film.

Theresa throws a leg over the pedestal and climbs on top of the sphinx. Avram doesn't say a word. He's resigned himself to the fact he'll have to entertain a couple of Hollywood nitwits while they play horsey with a piece of Hollywood history.

Theresa slaps the back of the sphinx she's straddling. "You coming up?"

"Why, are we going somewhere?" I reply as I step over the rope.

Glad to be on something she can't possibly drive down Sunset Boulevard at a speed just south of Mach 5, I climb up and sit behind her.

"No funny stuff," she jokes over her shoulder.

"Are you kidding? We've mounted two ancient artifacts in one night."

"Three for you," she replies.

"What?"

"Come on, admit it, you probably threw yourself on top of Amanda Gray when you thought you saw her alone in the dark. Couldn't resist. That's really why they chased you out of there. They burst in and you're trying to get it on with their mummy."

I shake my head. "You have me confused with Alex. He's the one that likes to go after silver-haired Oscar winners."

"I heard that. Does he think it gives him special acting powers?" she asks.

"Hah, maybe. To be perfectly honest, I think he just likes the sex."

Theresa drums her fingers on the sphinx. "You two are worlds apart. It's like twins who went down totally different paths."

"But we're not related."

"Not even a little?" she asks.

I get this question all the time. "Probably distant cousins or something. Who knows. But he'll be out of luck if he plans to harvest me for my organs. I've checked to see if we have different blood types."

"No dice?" she replies.

"Actually, we have the same. But I told him we didn't."

Theresa turns around and gives me a funny look. "You that worried?"

I shake my head. "I never know with you people."

She pulls a strand of hair from her face. "You people? There you go again. We're not that different."

I look away from her. "Who got pushed face-down into the concrete and handcuffed like a rapper with an expired tag?"

"You just looked guilty," she replies.

"Because we were guilty. I used to be a cop. I recognize these things."

Theresa leans forward on the sphinx, resting her chin on top of its head.

"See anything?" she asks.

"A lobby," I mutter.

She swings a leg over the top of the sphinx, bringing her around so she faces me. "Are you going to help or what?"

Her eyes are just inches away from me. They stare right at me. I can smell her. It's a pleasing smell. Even this close, her skin is flawless.

"Yeah. Yeah," I answer her question. "I just don't think it's this easy. I'm not even sure there's anything to be found here."

"Pretend there is. Humor me. Do what you're paid for." The last part doesn't sound like an insult, just a statement of fact as to why I'm here.

I wave off a discussion about money. I'm too tired to pretend I don't need it. I hop down from the statue and take another look at the lobby.

Theresa's a force of nature. Whether or not there's anything to be found here, I at least owe it to her to look. It's not like I have any other leads to chase down. Unless I want to go back to Brunelli and step into his plastic-lined garage.

"Hey Avram, can we go look in the theater?" I ask.

He looks up from his phone. "I'll get the lights."

Theresa leaps down from the sphinx next to me. "What are you thinking?"

"You tell me. You're the exhibitionist. Harrison was a clever guy. A bit of an egomaniac in his own way. If he wanted to say something, he'd probably

put it right in front of our faces." I point to the theater. "My guess is the real show would be in there."

"So now you think he may have dropped some clues?"

I shake my head. "No. Because I don't think he was hiding anything. But I'm willing to humor you. I'll play the game."

"Fair enough."

I hold the door open for her as we enter the theater. Under the plastic sheets there are hundreds of plush, red velvet chairs lined with gold trim. Egyptian gods and pharaohs cover the walls in bas-reliefs. Two stone figures as tall as the ceiling stand guard on either side of the screen.

Above the curtains, a massive gold relief frieze depicting scenes from ancient Egypt stretches a hundred feet across. Theresa and I work our way into the middle of the theater and sit down next to each other.

She throws her long legs over the seat in front of us. "You can see why they called this a palace."

That's for sure. Just the scale of the theater alone was intimidating. Well before stadium seating that put you eye to eye with your favorite stars, this theater had a gradual upward rake that never let you forget that the Hollywood giants really were larger than life as they towered over you.

Avram shouts to us from the projection booth a mile away. "You guys want to see the pre-show?"

Theresa and I turn around and say the same thing. "Pre-show?"

Avram hollers back, "Yeah. Harrison had it created to open up every film. He never used it. It just sat here forever. We replaced all the bulbs and fixed the soundtrack. Want me to play it?"

Theresa and I both shout, "Yes!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Land of the Pharaohs

Theresa leans in and grabs my arm. "This is exciting!"

"When the gumdrops start singing that it's time to go to the lobby, you're going to be very disappointed," I reply.

She punches me on the shoulder.

Avram dims the lights and starts throwing loud, clunky switches we can hear all the way in the middle of the theater.

A voice that sounds a lot like Orson Welles' begins to speak.

"Egypt, land of the pharaohs..."

Spotlights mounted to a rail behind us illuminate the two statues on either side of the screen. Orange lights flicker at their feet as if we were in a temple lit by oil lamps.

"A land of mystery. A land of gods..."

The golden icons of the Egyptian gods on the walls begin to glow. A flickering light makes them appear to shimmer like jewels.

The voice starts a roll call of the major deities.

"Horus: God of the sky." Tiny stars glow around his body.

"Anubis: Watcher of the dead." His green eyes glow in the darkness.

"Set: Maker of storms." A lighting bolt flashes across the relief.

"Thoth: The moon god." Rays of moonlight shine from the eyes and crickets chirp.

"Isis: Goddess of healing." Tiny sparkles flow from her head.

"Osiris: God of the underworld." His mouth opens to reveal a red glow.

"Ra: The sun god." A bright sun appears over Ra's head.

The narrator's deep voice continues. "Egypt, center of the ancient world."

A spotlight illuminates a globe at the far end of the frieze over the proscenium.

"Egypt, the land where storytellers committed their tales to eternity." Different hieroglyphs around the theater begin to light up.

"Egypt, a land of mystery." The lights grow dark.

"A land of wonder." Lights in the floor make the statues and gods look a hundred feet tall.

"A land of magic." Everything fades and the ceiling begins to glow with a thousands stars.

Theresa and I crane our necks to see the whole sky. It's as expressive as any planetarium.

"A land of secrets." The stars dissolve into constellations.

"A legacy that continues to this day." Spotlights illuminate the red curtains in front of the theater. An Egyptian temple painted across the middle splits apart and reveals the screen.

Avram turns the house lights up.

"That was fun," I reply. "How long is the line for the roller coaster?"

Theresa throws a hand over my mouth and shouts to the projection booth. "Play it again!"

I'll admit, I was kind of impressed. It had that overwhelming IMAX kind of awe to it.

We watch the introduction three more times. In each playing we notice different details we hadn't seen before. For every god, the ceiling glowed with their constellation. The hieroglyphs were the titles of ancient Egyptian epic stories. Lights projecting from the eyes of the gods landed on corresponding images across the theater.

Theresa and I point out each little touch and try to figure out what they mean. As far as I can tell, it's really just a dramatic show to play before a movie. While it certainly creates a mood, I didn't get the feeling Harrison had hidden anything in the soundtrack.

She leans forward in her chair and looks at me. "Well?"

"I don't know." I look up at the ceiling. "There could be a million clues here. We'd need an astronomer and an Egyptologist to figure them all out. It could just be a really cool show."

"Avram? One more time?" asks Theresa.

I mouth the words as the narrator calls off the names of the different gods. Theresa keeps looking around for some kind of clue in the presentation. In the dim light I can see her tapping her lip with her finger as she thinks.

The lights come up again. She stands up and starts to pace the aisle. She looks like a character in one of her movies trying to find the killer or the robot that's about to blow up the space station.

"Harrison was a big thinker?" she asks out loud.

"Built the world's biggest submarine. Made the world's fastest car," I offer.

"Not subtle..." she says.

"No. Secretive. But definitely not subtle."

Theresa runs her fingers through her hair as she tries to think. Standing in front of the mural on the red curtains, she looks like an actress on the set of an old movie in front of a painted landscape.

"There's got to be something here," she insists.

"Theresa, life isn't like one of your movies."

"I know that. But sometimes it is." She sees me staring past her shoulder. "What is it? What are you looking at?" She turns around to see what I'm staring at.

I sprint from the aisle toward the front of the theater. "Avram, can you play it again? But can you stop it at a point?"

He pokes his head out of the booth. "Sure. As if my people didn't suffer enough under the Egyptians. Scream when you want me to freeze the mag track."

"What is it?" Theresa asks me. Her eyes are wide, waiting for a big revelation.

"It's nothing." I think.

"Nothing? You act like it's something."

"Maybe something." I don't want to get her hopes up.

The lights darken and the show begins again.

Theresa stands behind me and puts her chin on my shoulder. "What are we looking for?" she whispers.

"Just wait."

The list of gods plays again. We both repeat the names and their occupations. My phone rings in my pocket. Theresa pokes a finger into my

ribs. I turn it to silent.

The stars glow in the ceiling. The narrator starts, "Land of secrets..."

"Freeze it, Avram!" I shout.

The narration slows down as if the speaker became instantly drunk. All the lights remain on in their positions. The constellations shine brightly overhead.

"What does that mean? Are they out of order?" asks Theresa.

"I don't know. But that's not what I'm looking at." I point to a corner of the curtain. "There."

A small circle of light that's about to grow into the circle in the middle of the curtains before it splits is way off to the side. While the center of the curtain shows the Pyramids of Giza, the spot illuminates another temple in the distance.

"What is that?" she asks.

"I don't know. But that disc of light will move to the center in a few seconds."

"What does that mean?"

"It's on a motor. It's supposed to start there. It happens right when the voice says 'secrets.'"

"Do you think that's on purpose?"

I shake my head. "You asked me to play along. I'm playing along." I walk to the front of the theater under the image. "Does that look like anything in Cairo?"

She follows me over. "No. It doesn't look like it's even in the same part of Egypt. Where is it?"

"I don't know. I don't recognize the temple. Not that I would."

Theresa pushes me aside to get a better look. "Wait a second. It's the temple from Sands of the Nile! You see?"

Of course. I remember the layout from the newsreels. The sphinx, the reflecting pool, and two rows of god statues. "Yeah. I see it. Clever. He put the set from the movie right into the curtain."

Theresa's eyes widen. "What if he based it on a real place? Maybe that's where he found the necklace and the mummy?"

"Well, they're not there now. At least the mummy." I walk along the curtain looking at the other details sewn into the fabric. At first glance I thought it was a painted mural. Up close, I can see it's actually a tapestry made from fine threads, unbelievably expensive.

Theresa touches the different monuments and scenes. Pharaohs ride chariots. Kings are being crowned. Queens are betrothed. It looks like all the highlights of Egyptian life distilled into an art deco mural.

"It was a good thought," she offers.

Five minutes ago I would have dismissed the idea of a secret. The intentionality behind the spotlight starting in one place is bothering me. Harrison was a mechanical genius. After he left Hollywood he started designing rockets and satellites. It wouldn't surprise me if the same control system running the little pre-show was the same kind of system controlling NSA satellites and taking photos of the Soviet Union just a few years later.

Theresa drops down into a chair. "Now what?"

"I'm still working here."

"You don't have to. I think you did your best. I'll get some friends to come look at the show tomorrow."

"You mean smarter people," I reply.

"Yeah. Probably."

I wave her off. "Go ride your sphinx. I'm working here."

"You go ride the—"

"Shut up for a second." Something is hammering in my brain. Sphinx. I try to think of the plural of sphinx as I run to one corner of the mural. At the far end I spot one in the corner facing across the curtain toward our temple. Halfway up the screen is another facing the same point. I jog to the other end and find one nestled in the folds, looking at the same spot as well.

I stab my finger at the last sphinx. "Well?"

Theresa shakes her head. "You found a sphinx. Congratulations, you're in an Egyptian-themed theater. And you told me to shut up."

"What theater?"

She shakes her head. "The Cairo."

I point to the center of the mural with the famous pyramid complex. "What's not here? You know, the most famous thing in Cairo next to the big-ass pyramid? The thing Napoleon used for target practice? The thing the Greeks wrote about?"

"The sphinx," she replies.

"Exactly. We have three small ones around the mural. But no big one. Why?"

"He was a racist who hated lions with human faces?"

"He put one in his front lawn." I run to the second sphinx. "They're all looking at the temple from Sands of the Nile. There's a sphinx in the lobby, another one up at Harrison's estate, and one sitting in front of Amanda Gray's house. All of them are at a funny little angle."

Theresa stands up to examine the sphinxes on the curtain. "Are you saying the ones here are looking somewhere?"

"On the mural, they're all looking in one direction. Maybe the real ones are, too. Harrison could have a sarcophagus buried somewhere. Maybe a time capsule."

Theresa's voice rises with excitement. "What about the necklace? What about Amanda Gray?"

"She probably knew. He put one of the clues on her front lawn. It could be a tree with their initials carved in it. A little box with love letters hidden in the bushes in a park. Anything. A shared secret."

"So what do we do?" Theresa asks.

"Find out if they're looking in the same direction."

"If they're not?"

I shrug. "All we need is to triangulate a point. If one has been moved, then we can still find out from the other two what he was pointing to in front of everyone in Hollywood. The secret he hid in plain sight." I point to the screen.

Theresa wraps her arms around me and gives me a hug. "See what happens when you let yourself go, Mike?"

I return a smile as the lights go dark.

We both shout to Avram to turn them back on. He doesn't answer back.

"Think he went home?" asks Theresa.

I place my hand over her mouth and pull her down to the ground when I hear the sound of footsteps at the back of the theater followed by a gun being cocked.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Assassins

A gun fires and the curtain in back of where I was standing makes a soft noise as the bullet rips through. I take my hand off Theresa's mouth. She's a quick study. She knows what's going on.

Hunched over, below the seat backs, I pull her along to the side of the aisle and between a row of seats. Footsteps come from the back of the house to the middle of the auditorium.

I carefully guide her to the other side of the giant pharaoh on the left side of the proscenium. I push her into the crevice in the back. The stone should give her enough protection while I try to figure out how to deal with our assassins.

If they're the same ones from Amanda Gray's mansion, there should be at least three of them. Brunelli is most likely waiting outside keeping watch. The muzzle flash came from the projection booth with Avram. I hope the kid is just knocked out. He doesn't know anything, so there's no point in killing him, but these guys aren't playing by my rules.

The second shooter is in the middle of the theater waiting for us to show ourselves. It's almost total darkness. I moved Theresa as quickly as I could so she could be in a safe place when the gunmen's vision improves in the dark. I don't think the shooter in the booth will take another shot unless he knows he won't hit his pal in the theater.

Right now the darkness is helping us more than them. I think they expected to get me with the first shot.

Taking a guess, the third hitman is probably in the back alley waiting for us to come running out through the emergency exit. It's a simple strategy. Kill the lights, make us go running right into him.

At any moment, the man in the booth is going to flash the lights so his partner can see where we are. They killed the lights in case I was packing a gun.

I'm not.

They've probably assumed this by now.

If I were the second gunman, I'd be crouched down low in the row of seats that runs through the middle of the theater. From there he can keep us pinned down or force us to take one of the exits where his partner will be waiting with a gun just inches from the door frame.

Once they flash the lights, he'll start taking shots if I'm standing up. If not, he'll move from his position and try to get a better angle. If we stay hidden, he'll have to come down to where we are.

He wants to avoid this in case I have a gun. Which I don't, and he'll know for sure in a moment. All I'm doing is prolonging our execution if I sit still.

From their point of view, if I have a gun there are only two options. I can stay where I am and try to shoot it out with the second gunman and open myself up to the shooter in the projection booth to pop me from his vantage point.

Or I can grab Theresa and try to make a run for the exit, where they know they'll be able to get me.

Those are my logical choices.

If I don't have a gun, my options are to keep moving or make a run for the exit.

At least as far as they know.

I'm sure they have a plan to end this quickly. Police will be here in minutes once one of us makes a call. The problem is, if Theresa or I try to make a phone call in the dark theater, the light from the screen will be the same as a laser pointer on our heads.

Unless...

I grab the plastic covering a row of seats and put myself into a sprinting position. They're going to turn the lights on at any moment. Our tiny advantage will be lost.

I whisper to the front of the theater, "Theresa, keep your head low and call the cops."

The light from her phone glows behind the statue. Both gunmen fire in her direction.

Theresa lets out a scream as chips of stone rain down on her. Not wasting the distraction, I grab the plastic sheeting and run up the far aisle toward the second shooter's row.

I ball the plastic up and toss it into the middle of the seats.

The hitman in the projection booth fires two rounds behind me. He fires again then stops as his partner enters the crossfire.

The second gunman fires at the plastic ball, revealing his hiding position. He's crouched down three rows back. He still thinks I'm hiding in the middle of the seats where I tossed the ball.

I need another distraction before they flip on the lights.

"Michael!" shouts Theresa.

The two hitmen fire back at the statue toward her voice. I grab another sheet of plastic and rip it off the seats as I run past.

It's too late for the second hitman to aim his gun at me when I overtake him. I throw the plastic over his body and pin his arms as I tackle him.

We both fall to the ground. The plastic keeps his arms bound while I wrap an arm around his neck and close the seal on the plastic around his face.

He's strong, but I hold tight. My right fist rabbit-punches him in the head. His arms try to flail, but there's nowhere to go. I keep hitting him until he passes out.

His gun makes a metal clank as it falls limp from his hand to the tile floor under the seat. I reach down and grab it from his loose fingers.

"Enzo? You okay?" shouts the man in the projection booth.

I shout back, "Enzo is about ten seconds away from permanent cardiac arrest if you don't give yourself up."

The lights flick on. I grab Enzo's body and roll him over me as a shield. Over his shoulder I can see a head poking out of the projection booth. I fire a shot and the hitman backs inside.

"You can't stay out there forever, kid," he yells at me.

"You can't stay here either. The cops are on their way. Enzo needs a doctor."

"Enzo is going to be all right. You ain't the killing type."

"I'm the angry type," I reply.

I grab Enzo by his belt and pull him up into a sitting position. He makes a moaning sound through a gap in the plastic. He's too heavy for me to lift with one hand. I put the muzzle to the back of his head.

"Stand up, you asshole," I growl.

He reaches a hand out to a seat and tries to lift his bulk. The plastic is still wrapped around his body. I can hear him mumble something.

"I told you he'd be fine," says the man in the projection booth. "You're not a killer."

I keep my head down. "How about we meet in the lobby? Settle this? Maybe come to a financial arrangement?"

"Sure thing."

I push Enzo forward, keeping my body behind him. His partner is still in the projection booth waiting for me to expose myself. I keep low and reach the corridor below the mezzanine.

Out of view of his partner, I whip the butt of the pistol against the back of Enzo's head. He crumples to the ground.

One down. Two to go.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Vantage Point

There's no way in hell these guys will let me buy them off. Even with Theresa's money. They're pros because they can be trusted by the people who hire them. I just needed to make them think I was dumb enough to believe I can buy them.

I wait until I hear the sound of the door to the projection booth shut. Footsteps pound down the hallway overhead. I whisper to Theresa at the front of the theater, "Stay down."

Enzo's partner is running from the projection booth to the stairway that overlooks the lobby. He wants to get a good position to shoot me when I come walking out holding his partner.

That ain't going to happen.

I step back out of the corridor and peek over the edge of the second level to the projection booth. Nobody is looking back at me. This is a good sign.

I put a foot on a plush armrest and stand on the row of seats just under the second level. It takes me two jumps to grab the railing for the balcony row with my right hand.

I tuck the gun into my pants and pull myself up over the ledge to the next level. It's where I'm my most vulnerable.

As soon as I clear the rail I throw myself into the space between the seats and the wall. The plastic covering the chairs makes a crinkling noise.

Nobody shoots at me.

I peek back at Theresa and the statue. She pokes her head out. I wave her back behind. If the third man comes through the exit, I don't want him seeing her.

The first shooter is probably thinking I'm trying to figure out how to make it through the double doors with Enzo without being exposed. He'll give me another minute to decide before he takes up a position in the lobby where he can shoot me as soon as I step through.

I hurry up the aisle to the back wall and climb over the last row of chairs. When the shooter was up there looking down at the theater, he only saw two exits out of there. There were the emergency exits leading to the back alley with his pal and there was the front of the theater.

To a big guy like him, the opening for the projector probably didn't seem like much space for a person to crawl through. There barely is.

I peer inside and see Avram in the corner slumped against the wall. There's a wicked gash on his forehead. It looks like he was struck as soon as he opened the door.

My ass gets stuck halfway in through the window when I try to pull myself inside. The barrel of the gun is shoving into my balls. I have to use my left hand to pull it free.

After some struggle I fall head-first into the projection booth but avoid a concussion. I run for the door and look down the hallway. It's dark but I can see all the way to the second door that leads to the balcony exit.

I run to the far door. There's a spy hole that gives a fish-eye view of the lobby below. The first shooter is still hiding on the second level. Behind the sphinx I see another man crouched down.

I wasn't expecting this. I have to rethink my plan, flimsy as it was already. I could shoot the first gunman from behind pretty easily. I might be able to get a drop on the second one before he realizes where I'm coming from.

The idea of shooting him in the back doesn't bother me too much morally. The hassle of having to explain to the police the circumstances is another matter. It may seem like the most trivial matter in the world in a situation like this, but when you've been a trained police officer, you see the world differently. You're also judged differently.

"Why didn't you just stay in the projection booth" is the first question they'll ask.

The answer is simple. Because I wanted to protect Theresa.

"How could you protect her if you weren't watching the theater?"

For that question I don't have a good answer. I want to rush out of the booth to shoot the other men because I know they're killers and sooner or later they're going to come for me.

In a world where the media frown upon cops who unload their entire clip into a bad guy because they were trained to do so, a vigilante isn't going to get a fair shake.

Right now, Theresa is all that matters. If I shoot the hitmen from here, the man in the alley might come running into the theater and see Theresa. I can't let that happen.

I go back to the projection booth and shut the door. Through the window I can see where Theresa is still hiding. The shadow of her body is visible against the wall in back of her if you know where to look.

Now it comes down to a waiting game: Can the cops get here before the hitmen lose patience and come after us?

I keep my eyes and ears trained on the floor below me. If they decide to come back in here I'll fire without hesitation. As if in answer to my declaration, the door below makes a creaking sound.

From the projection booth I don't have a clear view of the theater behind the middle row. I've put Theresa in a much more vulnerable spot than I should have.

While I debate if I should crawl through the window again, I almost miss something out of the corner of my eye. A hand is slowly opening the emergency exit near the front of the theater -- our alley shooter.

Set back in a small alcove, they'll have a clear view of Theresa if they move to the far wall out of my view.

I see a snub-nosed revolver that hasn't been police-issued this century poke through the gap. I can't make out the holder of the gun. The barrel moves across the theater, then comes to a stop and aims right at me.

The gun fires before I can get my head out of the way.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Defending the Queen

Plaster and splinters of wood rain down on me as I fall behind the wall of the projection booth. Avram makes a moaning sound from the corner and tries standing up.

"Stay down!" I shout.

His eyes open and he looks at me in fear, then crouches down again. I put a finger to my lips and point to the opening above my head. He nods that he understands.

The Cairo is an old-school cinema. Before movie theaters had huge automatic projectors with table-size platters to spool the films, they would use two projectors. While one played, the projectionist would load up the next reel and wait for the cigarette burn mark in the upper corner telling him when it was time to turn on the other projector.

Most theaters never got rid of the second hole when they moved to the newer systems. They'd use the window for slide projectors to show ads before the movie. Later on when digital cinema came about, they'd use the second opening for their video projectors and the first one for film.

I point to the projector near Avram. There's a film on the platter threaded through the sprockets. He gives me a thumbs up. I motion to the control panel over his head that runs the pre-show and hold up five fingers and count them off one by one. He nods that he understands.

From the back of the projection booth to the tiny window it's only eight feet. There's not a lot of runway. Right now it's my only way to get into the theater and between the other gunman and Theresa.

If I poke my head through, he's going to shoot me. I can't see the exit door from where I'm crouched, but I have to assume he's getting ready to make a run for where Theresa is hiding and will probably use some cover fire to keep me pinned down.

The other two gunmen from the lobby are either inside the theater now or covering him from the doorway beneath my feet. I'm in a horrible position. Slightly better when gunman number one had the booth, but not much.

At least I have a gun now and they know it.

I nod to Avram. He reaches up and flips the switch that kills the lights in the theater.

The exit door hiding the other shooter makes a squeak.

"Now," I whisper to Avram.

He turns the switch to the projector. The impossibly bright arc lamp glows inside the metal housing and throws a beam of light onto the front screen. Dust falls from the platter as it spins to life unreeling the film into the projector.

The gunman fires a shot, followed by a thud to the far side of the booth.

I don't wait for him to adjust his aim. Blinded by the light, it won't take him long to correct for the projector. I run toward the gap and throw my hands in front of my body like a high diver. A high diver holding a gun.

The top of the window scrapes my ass as I fly through. I pull my body into a ball and try to roll into my fall like they taught me in the stuntman classes Alex made me take.

I hit the ground and my stolen gun shoves into my kidney as I roll down the aisle. For a moment I think I've shot myself until I remember we used rubber guns when we practiced. They never hurt like the real thing.

The gunman fires a shot toward the balcony. The muzzle flash points out his position between the third and fourth row. I come to a stop at the wall on the second level and fire three shots in his direction. Someone makes a groan.

Below me, footsteps run across the tile as the other hitmen try to get a better position.

I sprint to the far side of the balcony and reach the corner. With one hand on the railing, I leap over and fall to the main floor. My knees buckle as I

land. I collapse to the floor and crawl down the aisle ten yards from where I landed.

The pre-show begins and the lights start to flicker around the room. The hitmen under the mezzanine fire a burst of rounds into Anubis.

Nobody shoots Anubis on my watch. I pop up from my hiding place and fire on the closest shooter. Half hidden by the tunnel, I wing his arm. Blood sprays from his shoulder and he lets out a scream. His companion makes a run toward the middle aisle and hides behind a row of seats.

I fire into the back of the seat where he's hiding. White stuffing flies into the air. I use this opportunity to run to the front of the theater and leap behind the statue with Theresa.

She's crawled up in a ball with her hands around her knees. I hold up a finger to show there's at least one gunman still out there. She nods her head in understanding.

From where we're hidden, the closest exit is halfway up the theater by the middle of the aisle. The second closest is the one the gunman from the alley came through. He's still somewhere in the theater. Maybe wounded, definitely armed.

The injured man in the corridor bolts from his hiding place. Using two hands to brace his gun, he fires at our statue. Pieces of rock break away from the leg of the pharaoh and fall off the pedestal.

I poke my head around the corner and fire back two rounds. My gun makes a sickening sound and the chamber pops open. I'm out of ammo.

"I know what that sound means," taunts a voice from somewhere in the theater.

"You mean the sirens?" It's a bluff, but the police should be here any minute. I hope.

"We got time."

His voice is confident. Brunelli or another man is probably outside listening in on a police scanner and radioing to them how close the cops are. I'm sure they got their exit planned.

The man from the projection booth, the one I'd decided not to shoot from behind, stands up in the middle of the theater and starts walking down the center aisle.

He's dressed in dark slacks with a black jacket and has a military-style crew cut. He has a stocky build and square jaw and looks younger than the men I remember from Gray's estate. I can tell he's a killer.

As he passes the point where I shot the man from the alley, he casts a glance to the side and sees the other man. "We'll patch that up." He returns his attention to me and points his gun at my head.

He fires a shot that sprays dust and rock from the pedestal as I duck back behind. I hear him toss a cartridge and slam another one into his gun.

Theresa's eyes bore into me. We're trapped in a small space with no exit. My gun is useless and we don't have any other weapons.

Overhead, the Orson Welles voice is describing Egypt as a land of mystery. It's about to go dark again for a few seconds as the stars in the ceiling glow and reveal constellations.

A piece of stone falls down on us from above.

"Now what?" asks Theresa.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

God of Vengeance

Three years ago, Alex got it in his head he wanted to make a movie involving parkour, that crazy-style running where you climb and jump like a monkey on crank. He decided I should take the classes before him, from one of the leading experts. My instructor taught me how to do things like jump through small spaces, such as projection booth windows, and how to fall.

Before my teacher fell to his own death trying to make a drunken jump from one side of a drawbridge to another in the middle of the night in Miami, he taught me how to climb narrow spaces and scale things I wouldn't have thought possible. In light of his death, Alex canceled the project and made a romantic comedy instead.

Up until a few minutes ago, I'd considered the whole experience a bit of a waste that only resulted in sprained shoulders and a constant reminder I was getting old.

The gap between the statue we're hiding behind and the wall to our backs is only a few feet. The stone that dropped was from the leg of the statue, weakened by all the gunfire. In a few seconds it might fall. If we're lucky, we won't be crushed.

I pull Theresa's head down next to mine and point to the gap. "Can you climb?"

She nods her head.

"Go!"

Without hesitating she stands up behind the legs and puts one foot on the pedestal and another on the wall. Using her hands to brace herself, she starts moving up the gap with the same grace of climbing the obelisk a few hours earlier.

The statue makes a rumble sound as her weight pushes it away from the wall. I jump from a crouch and push my left foot against the back of the pharaoh's calf and my right on the wall and start climbing up after her.

Theresa is ten feet off the ground, with her arms and legs pushing against both sides to keep her from falling. I reach eye level with her. The pharaoh starts to inch away. She has to re-grip to avoid falling.

"The statue is going to tumble," she whispers.

"Yep. That's why we want to be on it instead of underneath."

The narrator in the pre-show speaks about ancient Egyptian tales and the different panels begin to glow.

Over my shoulder I see the shadow of the last gunman as he approaches our hiding place. His gun is pointed into our corner, ready to fire as soon as he sees one of us poking our heads out. He still doesn't know we've climbed the statue.

I kick at the back leg of the pharaoh. He wobbles but refuses to fall. Theresa gives me an expectant look. Her fingernails are dug in tight to the tapestry on the back wall. It's beginning to rip.

I whisper to her, "Higher. We need more leverage."

She's about to protest the height but understands the situation. She raises a knee and kicks off the statue's butt, bringing her feet to my eye level.

I follow her and feel the statue sway even farther away then come back to a resting position on its heels. I extend my thigh as far as I can and try to do a power split in mid-air. The statue wobbles but remains upright.

Theresa taps on my shoulder then regrips the tapestry. "On three?"

I nod.

She whispers the countdown. We both push as hard as we can when she reaches one. The pharaoh leans farther forward than it has before. I feel it begin to give, then it comes rocking back toward us, almost crushing my shoulders.

"Now!" shouts Theresa.

She had been expecting the wobble toward us. At the closest point we push again and add to the momentum. The statue falls away from us. We

keep pushing until our hands and feet can't reach the stone anymore.

I lose my grip and fall down. I cover my head in the space behind the pedestal.

The statue collapses into the theater, making a loud thunderclap that almost deafens me.

The pedestal shakes from the impact. I can hear the sounds of metal seats being crushed and falling pieces hitting the tile floor. Someone shouts "Goddamn it!" and makes a groaning sound.

Bulls-eye.

The pre-show track begins the final reveal of Egyptian secrets. I search through the dust for Theresa. She didn't land near me. I jump onto the pedestal to see if she somehow got trapped by the pharaoh.

I see the last hitman crawling from under the seats. His head is covered in blood. He looks like he was in the middle of a grenade blast.

"Theresa!" I shout.

"Here!" she replies.

I turn around as she jumps from the wall. She'd managed to survive the fall by clinging to the tapestry with her fingers. She lands in a crouch next to me on the pedestal.

I grab her hand and run for the emergency exit.

When we reach the door I let go of her hand and kick it open with my foot. I roll into the alley in case another shooter is still waiting for us.

It's empty except for piles of trash and the smell of bum piss. I motion for Theresa to follow me.

At the end of the dark brick canyon the street appears empty. Sirens wail in the distance. The motorcycle is still where we left it. I give it a hesitant look. It could be watched.

"Give me your keys," I whisper.

She hands them to me without asking. I make a run for the bike and start it up. I leave a huge black skid mark on the sidewalk when I spin it toward her direction. She runs from the alley and hops on the back.

In the rearview mirror, a black SUV parked half a block back turns on its lights and pulls out when we blow through the stoplight.

Theresa tightens her grip around me as I squeeze the throttle and try to race away from our pursuer.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The Plot

Our photo is taken three more times by traffic light cameras before the SUV does a U-turn and sends a pickup truck delivering bundles of newspapers into a metal rollup door.

"I think we lost them!" shouts Theresa.

Three LAPD squad cars fly past us toward the theater, oblivious to how fast we're going. I slow down once we get to a more trafficked street and start to obey the speed limit, but keep a careful watch in my rearview mirror.

"Now what?" asks Theresa.

I pull us into a bus lane and idle the engine. "Text Avram. Make sure he's okay."

Theresa types into her phone. I pull mine out and call a friend who works for the LAPD.

"He says the police are there," she replies.

"At least he's safe." I scan the street around us. I'm sure they stopped following us, but I don't want to stay out in the open. "Let's go."

She climbs on the back of the bike. "Where?"

"I'd rather we ID'd the guys that tried to kill us at the police station than go back there. We don't know who'll be watching."

A few minutes later I pull us up onto the front steps of the LAPD and park the bike on the sidewalk. My contact, Ray Winston, a detective with

homicide, is waiting for us outside. He shakes his head at my parking job. Dark skin, perfectly trimmed mustache, wearing a silk tie and creased slacks, he looks like the center of calm.

"Did you get them all?" I ask.

Winston shakes his head. "All I heard on the radio is they found a scared kid in the projection booth with a concussion."

"What?" Theresa is livid. "We dropped a statue on one of them. Michael suffocated another in plastic."

Winston gives me a glance. "I'll pretend I didn't hear that." He ushers us inside.

I turn to Theresa. "Let's just stick to the part where they tried to kill us?"

"Yeah. Sorry. But what happened?" she asks.

"They cleaned up. The SUV turned around and they crawled out of there before the police arrived. These guys were professional."

"Damn it." She keeps close to me in the hallway as we follow Winston.

I know how she feels. These guys weren't just goons who broke the thumbs of Reno card counters. They were hitmen who acted like an assassination squad. The only thing that worked in our favor was they thought it would be a quick job and didn't know the layout of the theater as they should have.

We spend an hour giving our account of what happened in separate rooms to the different detectives. I tell Theresa to keep her answers short and stick to the facts. Winston keeps a watch on her to avoid making things more complicated.

After we give our statements, they sit us both in front of mug shot computers and have us try to identify the assailants.

Theresa never got as good of a look as I did at 'Enzo' or the buzz-cut military-looking killer. The gun I took from Enzo came back with a partial field print from an 'Enzo Gauthier,' a contractor who lives in Henderson, Nevada.

His biggest client is a firm connected to a union boss who got busted for bribing school board officials for building contracts. Enzo was a suspect in a number of bribery and extortion cases, but never convicted.

Not wasting time, Winston woke up a contact in the Las Vegas FBI office with an informant who said he was involved in a number of mob murders. While I'm always suspicious of anything that comes out of a snitch's mouth, none of that would surprise me.

After we've gone through all the paperwork, Winston sits down with Theresa and me in a conference room with two other detectives.

"Why?" he asks matter-of-factly.

"Brunelli and company killed Amanda Gray. They're hiding the fact they did that and don't want anyone to know they have some jewelry she took from Hugo Harrison," I explain.

Winston makes a note. "We spoke to Beverly Hills PD. They went over there and talked to Brunelli. He said you'd been there earlier and got angry and drove your car into the gate."

I nod my head. "That's what I'd say. What about Alonzo?"

"He wasn't there. Neither were the hitmen you said you saw."

"What about the mummy?" I ask.

Winston checks his notes. "No mummy. Brunelli told them Gray was living in a retirement home in Mexico and was in ill health. Although she might be available via phone."

"Want to bet his receptionist is taking a car to Tijuana right now?" I reply.

"Probably." Winston points to a white-haired detective. "Ridley has something you should hear. We think we know why he dropped down real hard on you."

Detective Ridley slides a folder over to me and Theresa. It's a contract between Golden Eagle and Amanda Gray.

Ridley taps his finger on the folder. "I'll spare you the legalese. Harrison made a deal with Gray to star in Golden Eagle pictures. He offered her a lifetime contract. Pay or play. Even if she never made another movie. They still had to pay her \$600,000 a year with pay bumps. Now it's about \$4 million every year."

"But the studio went bankrupt," replies Theresa.

Ridley shakes his head. "They dissolved into two parties. Dynostar and the new Eagle Pictures. They created a third company to pay out loans, lines of credit, leases. They just pushed her into a margin there. Each paying a percentage. For Dynostar, it's a rounding error. For the new Eagle Pictures, their share just got put into ongoing developing project budgets. A few percent of every billion-dollar-grossing movie that 'loses' money goes to her."

Theresa flips through the pages of the contract. "So she dies twenty years ago, but Brunelli keeps it a secret because he doesn't want to give up the golden goose?"

Winston nods his head. "Exactly. You two come poking around asking about a necklace and wanting to speak to her. But you don't give up. Brunelli realizes Michael isn't Alex and figures he can make him disappear. Probably thinks this is some kind of blackmail plot." He points to Theresa. "You go along for the joyride and they find you both in the theater. Only they don't know you're you. Otherwise, I think they would have backed off. Killing you would bring more attention than some actor's double. By the look of things, the way they cleaned up, if they had killed you, there probably wouldn't have been a body behind. Just some bloodstains."

It makes sense on the surface. A few things still bother me. "Now what?"

Winston replies, "We try to nail Brunelli and track down Alonzo. It'll be hard to pin things on him if he wasn't at the theater. But now that we're reasonably sure Amanda Gray is dead, we can open up a fraud case. Maybe a wrongful death. We'll get him. It'll take some time. In the meantime, we're going to try to track down his assets. He could have a few hundred millions squirreled away by now."

"What about the men who tried to kill us?" asks Theresa.

Winston turns to her. "We'll find them. I think they're going to be far from here by now. You don't have anything on them now. But still keep out of trouble. We can put a marked car in front of your houses. Other than that, it's a matter of waiting. Brunelli stepped on his dick big time. I think he's going to want to lay low."

Winston and the other detectives leave us as they go coordinate with other departments and start surveillance on Brunelli.

Theresa swivels her chair around to face me. "What do you think?"

"I think it's true. It explains a lot."

"But not everything," she replies.

"No. It doesn't."

"We still don't know where her body is or the necklace," Theresa says.

I throw up my hands. "She could be stuffed into a trunk in the back of a junker in Tahoe. The necklace in a safety deposit box in Zurich."

Winston walks back into the conference room and asks us to follow him. We cross the walkway to the morgue and a woman in scrubs ushers us into a room where a body is under a sheet. She pulls back the cloth to reveal the face.

"Can you ID this man?" asks Winston.

I nod my head. It's Alonzo.

"Was he at the theater?" he asks.

"I never saw him there," I reply.

Winston has the examiner cover the body back up and walks us into the hallway. "I just needed to check your story."

"What happened?" I ask. There was no bullet wound.

"He died of what looks like an intentional overdose about two hours ago up near Griffith Park. No suicide note. We're trying to track down any calls he may have made."

Calls...

I pull my phone from my pocket. I still haven't checked the call I silenced when we were watching the Cairo pre-show. I pull up the caller ID and show Winston the number. "Is this his?"

"Yep."

There's a message from Alonzo on my voicemail. He called me before he killed himself.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

High Priest

Winston has a cable plugged into my phone so he can record the message as we play it through a loudspeaker. Ridley and two other detectives are sitting across from Theresa and me in the conference room. After everyone is ready, Winston presses play.

Alonzo's breath is halting and his speech is slower than I remembered.

"Michael, you need to get out of town. Mo knows you're not dropping it...I heard about what happened at the house. And I don't condone any of that...none of it. She wouldn't have either. Mo knows this. But he won't listen. Not to me anymore. He's still angry with me because I wouldn't tell him where she's hidden. But that's what she wanted. She never trusted him. She wanted to be put in her special place. She was afraid when she died we'd forget her...how could I? I love her. Mo loved her, too. I'm going to be with her soon. Not how I planned...but spiritually at least. I'd go to her, but...but the men Mo brought in might follow me. So I can't go out there. I can't let Mo find it. I can't let him find her."

Alonzo lets out a painful sigh.

"You need to go away. He'll kill you. He's done it before. He'll do it again. He's not all bad. There's good in him. He really tried to take care of her. We loved her. After, after what Harrison did to her. I just can't be a part of this anymore. I know you're a good person...I just can't be a part of this. They're coming for you. Just go away. Forget everything...don't try—"

His words are cut off as the message runs out of time.

Winston plays the recording back and makes a few more notes. "This was made about an hour before he died, according to preliminary toxicology. Obviously he knew Brunelli was sending his men out to get you. Why did Alonzo warn you?"

I stare at the table. "I don't know. He didn't strike me as much of a hard ass as Brunelli. He might not have had it in his heart."

"What does he mean by go to her?" asks Winston.

"We think there may be something connected to the clue we thought Harrison left. Maybe a grave. I don't know," I reply.

Ridley slides a printout across the table to Theresa and me of an aerial view of the desert. "This is where your lions line up. I pulled it from our own maps. Better resolution than Google."

There's nothing there. Just a wide plot of ground.

Ridley leans in and draws a circle around the center. "The noses don't line up perfectly. This area is bigger than twenty football fields. We could spend a century looking for a grave. It's what we call a dead end. Not to mention the fact that it's on leased federal land."

I push the photo to Theresa. She bites her lip as she examines the terrain. "Nothing there?" she asks.

Ridley points out a few items. "We can make out tire tracks and read the labels on beer cans with these photos. A burial plot would show up more obviously here than if you were out there on foot."

Theresa sets the photo down. "So where is she? She has to be somewhere."

Winston replies, "You know who Brunelli is connected with. There are a thousand bodies in unmarked graves between here and Las Vegas. She could be anywhere. You heard Alonzo. She could even be ashes in the wind by now."

"The Egyptians didn't believe in cremation. I don't think Alonzo would do that to her," replies Theresa.

"They're not Egyptians," says Winston.

"I think they're a bit Egypt-obsessed," I correct. "Alonzo especially. Mo may have gone along with it, but I think Amanda Gray believed she was the reincarnation of the character she played. Artakama. Somewhere, I bet you there's a sarcophagus with her inside along with the necklace."

Winston holds up the aerial photograph. "Maybe so. But that doesn't connect her back to your theory on Harrison. Even if there was one buried out here, we'd never find it. Her location died with Alonzo. The way he wanted it to be."

"So that's it?" I ask.

"We'll keep our options open. It's not critical to the case for the moment. Like I said earlier, we probably got enough to get him on fraud. With Alonzo's recording, we might get attempted murder. If we can match some of the blood at the theater to a suspect, we might get the guys that tried to kill you, too."

Theresa shakes her head. I understand how frustrated she's feeling. She just doesn't understand how you have to look at things when you're a cop. Police work isn't about getting the bad guys for the things you know they did, it's arresting them for the things you can prove and a DA can prosecute. It's why Capone did time for tax evasion and Martha Stewart got popped for lying to investigators.

"Do you need rides home?" asks Winston.

"No. I'll have a driver come pick us up," replies Theresa.

"I could use a ride. My car is totaled and I live in the opposite direction from her," I reply.

"You're coming with me," say Theresa. "You can't go back to your guesthouse if Alex's friends are still there. My place is more secure. I already have security people there."

"It's okay. They're out of town."

She puts a hand on my arm. "Michael, please. I'd feel safer if you were at my place."

I shake my head. "Safer? I almost got you killed. There's a hit team running around Los Angeles trying to murder me."

"They tried to shoot me, too," she replies.

"Yeah, but I don't think they know who you are." Or maybe they do now. I don't want to scare her.

She won't take 'no' for an answer. "It's either my place or I go to your guesthouse. I'm sure I have better beer in my fridge."

Winston and Ridley give me a funny look. They can't understand why I'm resisting a slumber party invitation from Maxim's Sexiest Woman in the Universe. They don't know how crazy these people can be. Or maybe they do.

Although, come to think of it, a good foreign beer sounds great right now.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Hot Tub

Theresa is sitting across from me in the hot tub with her head on a cushion and sipping a beer. Her breasts float just above the surface of the bubbling water. I try to ignore them and continue the same chaste conversation we had in the kitchen before we both pointed out how much our muscles hurt and ended up out here waiting for the sun to come up.

She takes a sip of her beer. "If they don't get them, I'll hire some guys to find them. I'm not worried. Maybe some ex-SEALS." She seems more pissed now than frightened by the altercation in the theater.

As a celebrity, she's used to getting hundreds of threats a week. But this was different. These weren't just some random nut jobs off their meds. These were professional killers.

"If you need any help, let me know." The last thing I want her to do is hire a bunch of bogus 'security consultants' that either bilk her for her money or go do something stupid and throw her name around.

"Who were you talking to earlier?" she asks.

While she'd gone off to change into something less decent, I'd made a phone call. I tried to keep it discreet, but apparently failed. "A friend in Vegas. He works the casinos. I asked him to poke around and find out what kind of contracts these guys are under."

We left the police station with the belief that since we'd gone to the cops there was no more point in Brunelli keeping after me, but we should still be

cautious. By the time I got to Theresa's place, I started having second thoughts.

"So?" she asks.

"What?"

"What did your friend tell you?"

I wave a hand in the air. "He's going to look around. Get back in a few hours when the town wakes up."

Theresa tilts her head toward me. "So are you worried?"

"Nah. These guys are pros. They had their chance. They're probably long gone. Brunelli too. He cleared out of the mansion."

"So we can keep looking?" she asks.

I almost spit out my beer. "Looking? You mean for the necklace?"

Theresa slides over to me and grabs my forearm. She's got a sly smile on her face. "You said they're long gone. So we don't have to stick around here. We've still got two days to find the necklace."

"I said I 'think' they're gone," I reply.

She raises her eyebrows. "I've got guns. Lots of them."

"This isn't a movie. These people almost killed us."

"Yeah. I know. But I can't let them get away with it," she replies.

I shake my head. "We found out Brunelli hid the death of a famous celebrity, his partner is dead, and he's on the run. I don't know if that's what I call getting away with it. Besides, we reached a dead end."

"I'm not giving up." Theresa climbs out of the hot tub and starts walking toward the west wing of her mansion.

"Where are you going?"

She throws a silk bathrobe over her body and calls back to me. "To watch Sands of the Nile again. Maybe there's a clue."

I grab a towel and find her sitting in her private screening room. Although it's hard to call something 'private' when it seats one hundred people.

She's curled up in an overstuffed red velvet chair, soaking the cushion with her wet body. She points for me to sit next to her then presses a button on a remote.

The curtains part and a pristine digital copy of Sands of the Nile begins to play. The opening prologue starts with scrolled letters explaining the turmoil in Egypt as constant civil war and battles with the Greeks had left them ripe for foreign takeover.

Theresa points to the screen as I notice it, too.

In the corner of the title card is the same image of the city that's painted onto the curtain at the Cairo: Sphinxes in the other three corners all gaze upon the image.

She pauses the movie. "Well?"

"I don't know," I reply.

"Your cop friends said the sphinxes weren't looking at anything other than empty desert. But the ones in the theater and the ones here are staring right at the temple." She scoots close to me.

"It could just be a motif."

She makes an unconvinced expression then turns back to the movie and presses play.

The camera pans up from the sand as the messenger for the Macedonian general abandons his dead horse and keeps walking half-dead across the desert until he collapses at the gates of the princess's palace.

Theresa pauses on a wide shot of the palace complex and gets out of her chair to examine the screen. Long walls surround the complex. Beyond them, a giant sphinx looms overhead and obelisks stand to either side.

She waves a hand around the image. "By this point they'd had over a hundred years of Greek influence. The complex was really a hybrid of Egyptian and Greek styles. Kind of a Disney version of ancient Egypt. Harrison's researchers worked hard to get the details just right. Although some critics complained he'd just made it all up. I don't think so. He was crazy about details."

She sits down and lets the movie play. Out of the corner of my eye I watch as her mouth quietly recites all the lines to the movie.

It's not a bad movie. In fact, I can't understand why it wasn't more popular. It has all the great elements of a period romance. If anything, I'd have to say the princess, Artakama, comes across as a little more simplistic than other leading lady characters. Amanda Gray plays her with a kind of innocence, but there's an intelligence behind her eyes.

Halfway through the film she becomes a little more strident. The angles are more noir and the film takes on a darker tone as you realize the Macedonian general who proposed to her via messenger is never going to come to her palace and probably died in a war in lower Egypt. This comes after the princess's cruel mother dies and curses her so that she will die old and alone.

I can't analyze a movie like Alex can in his own idiot savant way, but I can tell when there's a tone shift because the director or the producer got different ideas during the production. Sands of the Nile had that feeling. It's like there's another movie inside of there, but never revealed.

One of the hard parts about doing biopics is that real life never plays out as nicely as a movie. A friend of Alex's turned down a flick about a wrongfully convicted boxer when he saw the man's punched-up girlfriend at a supermarket. He had second thoughts about the wrongfulness of the conviction and the character of the man. Another actor who didn't have those compunctions went on to play the role for critical acclaim. As a former cop, these kinds of things get to you.

Crime biopics glorify guys you know are bad. I've seen more than one felon strutting on the red carpet talking about redemption who I know an hour before was snorting lines off an underage hooker with the producers and the star who played him.

Watching Sands of the Nile, I'm trying to figure out if the dark turn is really about Amanda Gray's relationship with Harrison or just part of the story. The history books have almost nothing to say about the real Artakama she was based upon. She comes from that period of Ptolemaic Egypt when everyone had the same name and sisters were marrying brothers. There were no straight lines or objective witnesses. Historians spend their lifetime trying to straighten out the timelines of who was who.

Theresa turns to me as the end credits roll. "Harrison destroyed all the costumes and weapons from the movie and everything else afterward. He didn't want them showing up in any other films. He even designed the catapults and siege machines himself. The monument you saw them building? Historians credit Harrison for figuring out some of the actual methods the Egyptians used to build their temples."

"The man was dedicated," I reply.

Theresa rolls the video back to the final shot of the film. Princess Artakama, as played by Amanda Gray, old and unmarried, is sealed into her sarcophagus with the necklace around her neck and lowered into her tomb, still waiting for her prince to come. Her servants weep and throw themselves on the tomb in despair, knowing her groom will never arrive.

Theresa wipes at the corner of her eye. "I wonder if she's still out there, waiting in the tomb?"

I think she means Artakama.

She plays the end again. The camera pulls back from the hole in the ground as workers push stone blocks in place. The shot continues and reveals the vast complex in the middle of the Egyptian desert. The lush green gardens from the beginning of the film have now withered away as the waters of the Nile retreat.

"Freeze it!" I bolt out of my chair and run to the screen.

"What?" asks Theresa as she fumbles with the remote.

I hit the screen a little too hard with my hand. "That's not Egypt."

"No. Of course not. It's a set. They shot that in California. Forty miles east of here," she replies.

"I know. But this is the same place the sphinxes were looking. Harrison pointed them towards the location."

Theresa looks at me funny. "The location the satellite photos showed was empty and too big to find a body."

I point to the sarcophagus in the ground. "Maybe not too big to hide something the size of a car? We might find a mound out there. After they cleared the sets, maybe Harrison left something?"

Theresa jumps out of her seat and hugs me. "Yes! Let's go!"

"Now?" I ask.

She's already left the room to throw on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Desert

Theresa's 1928 Mercedes roadster kicks up a trail of dust as we race into the sun rising over the mountains to the east of Los Angeles. We left Interstate 15 a half-hour ago and have been following a road that's nothing more than a groove cut in the dry earth. The pristine paint job of the car is caked in brown dirt.

There were a dozen more practical cars in her garage, but she insisted I drive the black roadster. Anything is better than being on the back of her motorcycle at this point. She loads the magazine to a Glock and slams it into place. Without asking, she shoves it into my waistband.

"Easy!" I shout over the wind.

She ignores me and checks her own gun a second time. I give her a nervous look.

"You've had live fire training?" I ask.

Theresa ignores my question.

The terrain is filled with waves of low-lying hills like wrinkles in a blanket. Too tall to see over, the road twists and vanishes around their curves like a snaking river. The only constant is the sun and mountains in the distance.

The ancient odometer shows we've only gone ten miles since we left the highway. We haven't passed a sign of civilization since then, no electrical towers or highway markers.

Theresa shields her phone with her hand to look at the screen. "I'm not getting a signal out here."

"Of course not." I pick up a printout of the map we brought along and check to make sure we're still headed in the right direction. We're not that far away from Death Valley. People still get lost and die there all the time.

Theresa puts her phone away and finally relaxes for the first moment since we left the mansion. "Harrison leased the land from the Army. It used to be a bombing range. Then he used it for his studio."

I give the open ground around the road a suspicious look. "A bombing range?"

"I'm sure it's safe now."

I point to the empty desert around us. "That'd explain the shopping malls and condominiums."

We're only a few miles away from the point on the map where the sphinxes are pointing. I slow the car down so I can keep a lookout for anything that stands out. I still don't have any idea what that could be.

Theresa squints her eyes in the sun and studies the rolling hills. "Looks different from the ground. On the map everything looked so flat." She points to a passing hill. "You could fit a sarcophagus in any one of those."

I'd been thinking the same thing but decided it was better for her to realize that for herself. "We'll get to the 'X' and have a look around."

"Good thing I brought the shovels and the GPS." She points her thumb over her shoulder at the space behind the bucket seats.

"How many holes you plan on having me dig?"

"We'll see." Theresa gives me a smile.

I turn the roadster into a bend and go around a flat-topped hill. A few hundred feet in front of us, a chain-link fence blocks the road. Running from one hill to another, with no way around it save a long hike, it divides this valley.

Beyond the fence is another series of low hills. As we grow closer it's apparent the road comes to an end just a few hundred yards after the fence.

I stop the car a few feet away from an ancient padlock and get out. The fence is rusted and bent in places where the occasional high winds managed to send rocks and dried trees into it. I haven't seen a tree for twenty miles, so I can only guess from how far away they had to come blowing.

Theresa stands beside me and regards the lock. "Well?"

"I guess this counts as a 'Do not enter' sign." I step closer to the fence and peer through to the other side. It's no different than where we're standing. I can't understand what the fence would be guarding, other than a property line.

The fence shudders as Theresa uses a pick axe to try to break the lock off the gate. I catch the handle as she brings it back for another swing.

"Hold on there!" I pull the pick away from her.

"What?"

"This is private property. We can't go breaking in. That's a punishable offense."

She gives me an incredulous look. "The studio leased this property. It's not like they're going to punish us. Besides, no one has been here for a million years."

I bend down and look at the lock on the fence. "This lock is a lot newer than the fence."

"Alonzo probably put it there." Theresa decides. "And technically he'd be trespassing if he did that. Also, it would be in the act of hiding stolen property that belonged to me. Now stand back." She pulls the gun from her back waistband.

"Hold it! That'll ricochet."

She points to the pick. "Then take the damn lock off."

Her logic is twisted, but she has a point about the studio. If it's their property still, they aren't going to raise a fuss. "Fine." I move her out of the way and bring the axe down on the lock. The mechanism snaps after two strikes.

I pull the car through while she replaces the broken lock on the gate. I'm not sure what point there is to doing that since anybody who comes out this far has a purpose. They'll know the lock is broken when they try to unlock it. Unless the only person who knew about this location was Alonzo.

We take the car the remaining hundred yards and park it where the road ends. A dozen hills surround the area. The tallest one is about fifteen feet high. Theresa runs up the nearest one to get a better vantage point. I follow her up the dry mound.

At the top of hill we can see several miles in either direction. More hills. A hundred yards to the east, the hills give way to a broad rectangular expanse of nothing. It's just a wide flat with a few weeds sticking out of the ground.

Theresa pulls the map from her pocket and spins around. She puts it away, then looks back to the empty landscape. She turns to me. "Well?"

"What?"

"What do you think?" she asks.

"If we were hoping for something to mark the spot, we're out of luck. The sphinxes lined up close, but not exactly. If there is something, and I mean 'if,' it could be anywhere."

"Damn."

I see the frustration in her eyes. Her hands are on her hips. She looks a bit defeated.

"Although," I add. "If Alonzo did come here, he had to know where to go. There would be some kind of marker. Something on the ground or some way for him to know where the grave would be located. Let's go back to the car and start looking from there."

Theresa nods her head and follows me down to the base of the hill. I start walking in a spiral search pattern with my eyes on the ground. I'm skeptical that there's anything out here, but I know I need to give it my best shot.

Theresa keeps fifty feet away from me as she follows. We cover the ground around the road, then move to a gap between two hills. Other than rocks and dry bushes, there's nothing that stands out.

I keep a careful look on where we came from so we don't get lost ourselves. Theresa kicks a rock into the air and shrugs. I feel for her. Caught up in her enthusiasm, I was hoping we'd find something out here like a camouflaged sphinx or some kind of marker.

I check my watch and try to decide how much time we should spend on the search before going back. Probably the only way I'll get her out of here is if I let her look for a few more hours. There's no way I can pull her out of here unwilling. Especially since she's armed.

I try to think of a story I can tell her. Like the first time I did a missing person's hunt in a field. I look at the ground and study the rocks. Some of them look like crushed rock hauled from miles away.

"What's that?" asks Theresa.

"What's what?" I reply.

"The building ten feet in front of you."

I follow her arm to the small structure standing right in my path. I'd been so focused on the ground I didn't even bother to look up.

"Oh, this. I was heading right here," I lie.

Not quite as tall as a man, it looks like a shrunken outhouse. The wood slats of the structure have been stripped by the sandpaper winds. A small door on the front of the shack has a faded painted sign. I wipe away the dirt from the metal.

PUMP STATION #109

"Huh. I guess it's a pump station," I reply.

Theresa squints and shoots me a stupid look. She grabs the door handle and gives it a turn. It doesn't open. "Let's get the axe."

I protest. "Hold on. This is government property."

"Is it? How do you know? Just because it says 'Pump Station'?" She waves me off then heads back to the car. "I'll do it myself."

I brush the dirt off the top of the door. Carved figures are visible just below the edge of the door. I run back to catch up with Theresa.

"You're not stopping me," she says over her shoulder.

"I'm not. I'm helping you."

"What?" She stops in her tracks.

"You read hieroglyphs?"

"Some. Why?" she asks.

I point to the shack. "You figure out what those say while I go get the pick axe."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Underworld

Theresa has a grin on her face when I return with the pick axe. She's obviously discovered something interesting about the hieroglyphs above the door.

Already I feel nervous. "What?"

"I'm still learning, but I think I grasp the basics enough." She points to the symbols. "It's a gateway to the underworld."

"Awesome," I groan. "You mean entrance to hell?"

"No. The Egyptians looked at that differently than we did. Everyone went there. Good or bad. Royal or peasant."

"Oh. That's a relief," I say sarcastically. "I'm glad to hear that an abandoned pump house on the outskirts of Los Angeles isn't actually a portal to hell."

"Well, probably not."

I raise the axe to hit the lock on the door. "Uh, Theresa, you might want to step back."

Excited to see what was behind the door, she was hovering right behind my shoulder. I pause for a moment. "You realize this is too small to hold a sarcophagus?"

"But big enough for a shriveled-up skeleton."

"Uh, yeah." I give her a glance.

Her eyes are wide open. What she really meant to say was big enough for her necklace. At this point I have no idea what's behind the door. The hieroglyphs were an encouraging sight. They suggest that Harrison may actually have placed the sphinxes where he did intentionally. But for what?

I strike the axe down on the doorknob and send it flying. One more hit and the door buckles from the frame. As soon as I set the pick axe down, Theresa's fingers reach for the edge of the door to swing it open.

"Hold on a second." I search for a reason. "There could be a coyote in there."

She gives me an incredulous look. "A coyote with a key?"

"Well, maybe bats. Just stand back. Okay?"

Theresa takes a fews steps away from the door. I slip the end of the pick axe between the edge and pry the door open. A cloud of dust is kicked up by the bottom as it slides across the ground.

Theresa is behind me holding the shovel in a defensive position, ready to strike at anything that walks or flaps out of there.

We both stare into the darkness, trying to discern anything. Sunlight shines through the gaps in the slats in the back of the shack.

As our eyes adjust, we can see that it's empty. No Amanda Gray mummy. No necklace. Not even a pump.

"Well, boo," says Theresa.

I place my hand on the edge of the door frame and turn back to her. "Even I was thinking there could be something." I set my pick on the inside of the door so I can grab my flashlight.

Only it doesn't hit the ground. The handle slips from my grasp and falls. It clatters against something hard then falls again and again.

Theresa rushes to the door frame and we stare at the black floor of the shack. Below us, the pick axe continues to make a clattering sound as it keeps bouncing into the dark.

The floor isn't a floor. Pitch black, hidden by the bright sun streaking through the gaps in the shack's boards, it's a stairway. From the echo my axe is making, a very, very long stairway.

Theresa squeezes my arm. "You know what this means?"

"One of us almost got a broken neck?"

She aims her flashlight at the bottom of the shack. A faint outline of steps is visible. They recede far beyond the range of the light.

She steps into the shack. I grab her arm. "Hold on."

"What?" she turns to me. "Coyote-bats?"

"No." I pan my light around the steps. "I don't know, booby traps."

"I thought that didn't happen in real life?"

I kneel down and shield my eyes from the light to try to get an idea how far down the steps go. "That was before."

"When you just thought Harrison was crazy," she replies.

"Now I know he's crazy. What kind of weirdo builds a stairway into the floor of the desert?"

"Someone who wants to hide an ancient sarcophagus." Theresa is like a kid at Christmas.

"Or a bomb shelter. Or maybe some secret 1950s lab."

Theresa shines her light in my face. "Are you afraid of zombies, Michael?" She turns back to the dark stairs. "Do you think he hid some cursed mummies down there? Need me to protect you?"

I shrug her hand off my arm. "I'm going down first. If any...secret lasers or something melt my face, run for help."

Theresa already has her phone out to take a photo. "Smile. I want the 'before' shot."

I give her a weak grin then take my first step into the hidden stairs. The corridor is just a little wider than my shoulders. It reminds me of the kind they show on the History Channel going into the heart of the pyramids.

The steps appear to be concrete painted black. There's no railing. I have to keep one hand on the light and another on the wall to avoid tripping on anything hidden in the darkness.

Theresa is a step behind me. She pokes her head next to mine. "I bet he painted it black so it would look like you were entering the underworld. Maybe you're supposed to do this by candlelight or in the dark. Ooh! Maybe there's a mirror at the bottom that reflects the moon through here at certain times of the year!"

"Maybe I slip on some gravel and break my spine?" I grumble back to her.

Obviously, she's excited. I am too. But I'm also cautious enough to know this isn't some Disneyland ride. Harrison, or whoever, put a lot of effort into these steps. He obviously had a purpose.

Theresa's moon theory actually makes some sense. Putting a coffin at the bottom of a long chamber like this in some celestial configuration might just be kooky enough for a man like him. So would face-melting lasers.

It would also make a great bomb shelter. The flat expanse we saw from the hill would make a good emergency runway. I remember from the Skyhouse tour that Harrison used one of the service roads as his own runway. If the Commies had attacked, he could have been here in under a half-hour.

I stop to take a look at how far we've come. Theresa bumps into me and knocks me onto the next step. I hadn't realized she'd been holding on to my waistband.

"Sorry," she says.

I look over her shoulder at the tiny square of light. We've traveled at least a hundred feet. I try to do the math in my head.

"Five stories," replies Theresa as she interrupts my thinking.

I turn the flashlight back into the darkness below. "It'd be a heck of a joke if it kept going and ended in a dead end."

"There's something down there. I know it," she replies.

"Yeah, but what? Amanda Gray? A secret atomic-shelter bachelor pad with a century supply of Tang and a bunch of Playboys from the 1950s?"

Ten yards farther down we find the pick axe's final resting spot. I pick it up and hold it in my free hand like a weapon. At the edge of the flashlight the steps come to an end.

"Is that the bottom?" asks Theresa.

"That or a pit filled with skeletons of overly curious starlets."

She pokes a finger into my ribs. The light behind us is now a tiny little speck. I step forward and feel her pull back on my waistband.

"Want to turn back?"

"No," she insists.

She doesn't make a joke this time. I can tell she's starting to get a little nervous. That's good. We're in an impossible place that shouldn't exist. We have no real idea what's down here.

She needs to take this a little more seriously.

As we get close to the landing I can see the stairs end in a room larger than the width of the corridor. The light fades into darkness on either side. The room could be even larger, or Harrison used more black paint to hide its true size.

We reach the bottom of the steps. Theresa is just inches behind me. I can feel her breath on my neck. Our flashlights scan the floor for a stone coffin or anything else.

There's nothing.

We aim our lights in different directions to illuminate the walls. The beams fade into the darkness. I point mine toward the ceiling and see nothing.

"What was that?" asks Theresa.

"What?"

She reaches over my shoulder and points her light above the floor and into the space beyond. A massive face gazes down on us.

"Holy crap," I say.

"No shit," she replies.

We're not in a small chamber.

We're in a massive cavern.

At the front of the cavern is a fifty-foot-tall sphinx guarding what lies beyond.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The Complex

The beams from our flashlights reach out into the darkness like paintbrushes and reveal stone monuments, square temples, and long rows of columns lined up on either side of a plaza with a dried-up reflecting pool in the center.

The cavern, manmade by the look of the concrete blocks in back of us, is as large as a football field and tall enough for the sphinx that stands over us, two obelisks, and a pair of stone pharaohs at the far end guarding the entrance to the main temple.

"It's the set for the movie," replies Theresa, once she's found breath in her lungs.

I aim my light toward the ceiling. Faint metal rafters support a metal roof. This must have been the flat plain we saw beyond the hills. The entire structure is buried beneath the desert.

"I thought the set was out in the open," says Theresa.

"It was. At least on the behind-the-scenes footage." I turn my light toward a far wall. "He must have built up the walls then covered it over like a hangar. It's the kind of thing his construction company did for the military. They built bunkers for the Air Force in the sides of hills."

We walk around the sphinx and into the plaza. Between the rows of columns on either side stand statues of the ancient Egyptian gods, each one twice as tall as a man, made from what looks like smooth rock.

Horus' eyes peer down at us from above his beak. I feel the hair on the nape of my neck rise at his fierce expression. Theresa's hand grabs the back of my elbow.

As we walk along the overhang, our flashlights reveal the other gods Harrison selected for the pre-show in the Cairo Theater. The statues are museum-quality replicas. Painted in the Egyptian style, the detail goes far beyond anything you usually see on a movie set.

Theresa reaches out her hand and rubs the gold skirt of Anubis. "It feels like stamped gold foil." She flashes her light down the gallery of statues. Golden mirrors reflect back the light. "He must have spent hundreds of thousands on them alone."

On the other side of the plaza I can make out another row of statues, each one as ornate and detailed as the ones we've inspected so far. I remember them as background from the movie. They were the kind of prop I expected to be made from papier-mâché, painted to look real from a few feet away.

Using the wooden handle of the pick axe, I gently knock on the leg of Thoth. I can feel the firm stone reverberate in my fingers.

Theresa's hand reaches out and touches the back of the calf and caresses the statue. "It feels hand-carved. Not even poured from a mold."

I tap the pick handle to a column. It makes a reassuring thud. I give a nervous glance to the stone roof over the corridor and gently pull Theresa toward the stone ledge around the reflecting pool.

Underneath a layer of dirt, a mosaic of tiles lies partially hidden. Theresa sweeps away a section with her bare hands. When the dust settles, brightly colored tiles are revealed. In contrast to the somber Egyptian statues, these look almost sprightly.

Theresa leans over the edge to get a better look. "This is the Greek Macedonian influence. Artakama's ancestors were all Greek. They adopted many of the local customs when her great-grandfather, Ptolemy, became pharaoh, but they brought in some of their own artists to enhance the Egyptian styles."

I kick the stone by my foot. Solid rock. I kneel down to run my hand across, trying to feel the pattern of concrete. Theresa scratches it with her fingernail.

"Probably carved from rock, too," she replies. "It could be concrete, but I get the feeling Harrison didn't want to do anything half-assed."

I spin my light around the complex. Every square inch is a museum-quality detail. At the far end the main temple, a long rectangle with a tall, narrow door, looms. Two smaller temples sit on either side, most likely places to give offerings. I remember something from the movie about one being for Apollo and another to Aphrodite.

Theresa shines her light on the entrance to the temple. "What do you suppose we'll find inside there?"

"I guess that all depends on why he decided to go through all this trouble."

We head toward the temple and inspect the gods on the other side of the pool. The shadows they cast on the wall behind them as our lights pass over gives them an eerie animated effect. Some of them have jewels for eyes that reflect back light like a wild animal lurking in the woods.

"Harrison must have had extensive photographic records to recreate this temple," says Theresa. "Architectural drawings, too. I know he had a number of Egyptologists working for him in Egypt. I guess that's what they were doing. Of course, the odd thing is, the movie was supposed to be based on the historical Artakama, or at least this one and her temple."

"What's odd about that?" I ask.

"Remember? There was no temple. At least it was never found." She pans her light from side to side. "This was all an educated guess. Pretty accurate, based on what we know now. He got some details right we didn't even realize until quite recently."

I stop us halfway down the plaza and walk up to a statue of Set. Theresa follows behind me.

"What is it?"

I hand her my flashlight and lean the pick axe across the base. Using my hands to clutch his arms, I pull myself up the statue and climb so I'm almost eye to eye with it.

"Can you move the light around a little?" I ask

Theresa raises the flashlight. The tiny gem placed in the pupil reflects a wispy red cloud on the chest. I hop back down.

Theresa looks to me for an explanation.

I take my flashlight back and pick up the axe. "Well, I know why he covered the whole complex and hid it from everyone."

Theresa raises an eyebrow. "Why?"

"This ain't a movie set."

"Of course it is. It was the set for Sands of the Nile."

"Yes," I reply. "What I mean is, this is the actual temple of Artakama. That's why nobody can find it. Harrison swiped it right out of Egypt in the middle of their war. Probably cut some deal with Nasser or the guy before him."

Theresa gazes up at the statue. "The gem was real?"

"It's not glass." I light up the faces of a handful of other statues. "Everything here is real. Maybe patched back together. But mostly the genuine article. Harrison wouldn't go through all this trouble for a fake."

"Why did he bury it?"

"He may have had permission to take it or not. But I'm not so sure how that would have sat with the Egyptian people. He used it for his movie then covered it over. A whole Egyptian temple smuggled out of the desert. That was the cargo receipt Madden showed us."

Theresa's mouth begins to open to say something, then freezes. I hear the same sound she does: footsteps and a distant squeaking coming from the long set of stairs.

"Kill your light," I whisper as I turn off my own.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Thieves in the Night

With our lights off, we're in complete darkness. I shove mine back into my pocket and use my free hand to take Theresa's arm. I guide her into the space behind the statues and pull her toward the main temple.

It's pitch black, so I have to use my hand still holding the pick axe to feel the wall to our side. I have a reasonably good mental map of the plaza, but no way of gauging distances with any accuracy.

With her dancer's grace, Theresa is so quiet behind me that the only way I can tell she's there is from her grasp.

We reach the end of the corridor with the statues when my hand bumps into the side wall. I freeze for a moment so we can listen. The footsteps grow louder, as does the squeaking.

The giant sphinx is blocking our view of the stairs from where we're standing, concealing the glow from their flashlights. The echos make it hard to tell how close they are to the bottom. They could be halfway down or about to emerge.

The steps and the squeaking are out of sync. It sounds like there's more than one person coming down the stairs. If I had to make one guess who it is, it's not a friendly party.

Somehow, Brunelli and his hitmen found the temple. Alonzo had said he kept the location a secret from him. But that could have only been a matter of time before he figured out where.

I forgot to ask Winston if Alonzo's GPS was still in his car when they found him. That would be the first place I would have looked.

"What's that squeaking?" asks Theresa inches from my ear.

"I don't know. Equipment or something."

The steps change pitch as Brunelli and his men exit the stairs and walk onto the floor of the plaza. The narrow echos from the long corridor are replaced by the sound of footsteps reverberating in the chamber.

If their reaction is anything like ours, they're probably gawking at the giant sphinx guarding the front of the temple. In a minute or so they're going to walk around and start shining their flashlights at the plaza and the statues.

Remembering what happened the last time Theresa and I were cornered by them, I decide we should move to a safer position.

The end of the row of statues was about one hundred feet from the entrance to the temple. Between here and there was the Aphrodite shrine. That should give us some cover if we go around the back.

I pull Theresa's hand and guide her around the corner and toward the shrine. To avoid walking right into a stone wall, I use my arm as a shield in front of my body.

Tens steps in, I feel something smack my funny bone. Theresa collides with me and lets out a small groan. We both turn back to the sphinx.

Two flashlight beams splash out from the other side of the monument as they survey the surroundings.

I pull Theresa around the far side of the small temple. We crouch down near the corner and stare back at the front of the plaza. The two beams of light emerge from opposite ends of the base of the sphinx and start sweeping the plaza. The lights don't stay for very long in any one place. It's the kind of pattern you use when you're trying to find where someone is hiding.

"Can you make it to the entrance of the temple?" I whisper to Theresa.

"Yes."

"Wait for me to say when."

"What are you going to do?" she asks.

"Cover you."

I wait for the flashlights to turn back toward the front of the plaza then slap her on the back. Her footsteps fade away almost as soon as she leaves my side. One of the lights flashes back toward the statues. Another beam

reveals the opposite side and starts drifting toward the front of the main temple.

The light hits the Aphrodite temple and I duck my head back around the side. The light continues to sweep around the plaza. I don't hear gunshots or frantic footsteps, so I assume Theresa made it into the front of the temple.

My goal was really just to get her out of firing range. Brunelli and the hitmen aren't in a take-prisoners kind of mood. I know the only way out of here is going to be through them.

They saw the car outside. They know we're in here hiding. From where I'm crouching, I think I might be able to take one of them out with my gun, but not the other.

The two of them are out in the open, even though I might be armed. This tells me they probably have body armor on.

They split up and take positions behind the columns on either side of the plaza. One of them shines his light at the statue in front of the other one across the plaza. The other man's light runs around the column and takes position behind the next column.

They're using a sweep pattern. Each one covers for the other as they move down the plaza. It's a very time-consuming way to try to clear the area, but from where they're looking, I have a bit of an advantage. I could be hiding behind Anubis, just waiting to pick one of them off.

By covering each other this way, they minimize the potential for a sniper. After their fiasco in the theater, they're not taking any chances with me.

I get a flash of one of the hitmen in his partner's light as he runs around the other side of a column. He's packing an Uzi.

They have automatic weapons now. This is not good.

With those and the body armor, they're prepared for a firefight they expect to win.

The second man crosses around a column. It's Brunelli. He's packing an Uzi, too. I can spot the outline of a vest under his sweater. For a big guy, he moves with precision as he takes up his next position.

I could try to pick one of them off from here, but I'll end up revealing my position. It's also what they're expecting me to do.

For the first time I realize I haven't heard the squeaking sound we heard coming down the stairs. Brunelli and his hitman are as silent as ghosts when they move from position to position.

There's a third man.

I can only see where they splash their flashlights. Neither one is wearing night vision, but I have to assume the third man could be watching the chamber with goggles. If it were me, I'd have my third guy in a safe spot with a high-powered rifle, waiting to pick anybody off.

He didn't react when Theresa ran for the entrance, so either he can't see the whole cavern with his night vision or he's relying on me to show myself.

Neither situation is encouraging. The sweeping back-and-forth action feels a lot like they're trying to flush me out from a hiding spot and catch me when I'm out in the open.

My choices are limited. I can wait for them to reach me. Or I can make a run for the temple entrance and retreat to a slightly more defendable position.

I stand up and back away from the Aphrodite temple, keeping it between me and the hit squad. In the darkness I twirl the pick axe like Thor's hammer and throw it as hard as I can into the plaza.

I don't wait for it to fall to start running.

Ten yards from my hiding position my spidey sense flashes and I duck to my left, narrowly avoiding one of the huge statues standing guard. I have to use my hands to stop my forward motion.

The metal pick axe slams into the ground on the other side of the plaza and skids into a column.

Every flashlight turns toward the impact, followed by a barrage of bullets.

The muzzle flashes strobe-light the back end of the cavern and make a deafening racket. I throw myself into where I remember the doorway being.

Theresa's hands reach out and pull me inside as bullets strafe the stone blocks by my head.

Since they clearly know I'm here now, I turn my flashlight on so Theresa and I can find our way deeper into the temple.

The gunfire confirmed two things: They were waiting for me to make a stupid move like I did and the heavy rounds I heard tell me there is a third shooter with a high-powered rifle.

If I'd tried to stay back there and pick them off, I never would have stood a chance.

The narrow corridor in front of us doesn't look much more promising. Theresa takes the lead and guides us through the passages while I cover our backs.

The gloomy figures on the walls who look down on us as we go deeper remind me of one more depressing thought: We're trapped in a place for dead things.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

A Dead Place

Brunelli and his other shooter probably took positions outside the entrance once they saw me make my mad dash. The sniper is likely still guarding the entrance near the sphinx. The squeaking noise had to be with him. If anything, I'd bet he was the man whose leg I broke in the scuffle. The noise is from a mechanical brace.

Their next move is to decide how quickly they want to proceed inside the temple. Their automatic weapons give them an advantage, but they won't be able to take turns firing on me from a wide-open space. They've also lost the cover their sniper provided. Although, I'll bet anything if I set foot outside the entrance without Brunelli, the sniper will drop me where I stand.

Theresa guides me around another bend into what looks like a sitting room. Two wooden benches lie on either side of the chamber. I flip them over and pull them in front of the entrance to the next corridor.

To Brunelli and the shooter, they'll look like a barricade I could shoot at them from behind. I'll know how far behind they are when they open fire and turn the priceless relics into splinters.

I finish setting a bench on top of the other and follow Theresa. She's stopped in the middle of the passage and is reading a hieroglyph with her flashlight.

"Really?" I ask.

"Sorry." She darts down the corridor.

"Where are we going?" I whisper.

"The antechamber outside the crypt. At least I think it's this way."

I follow her gut instincts as she takes us deeper into the tomb. Every dozen feet I notice small holes in the stone ceiling about as thick as a man's leg. After the third one I realize they're conduits Harrison cut into the temple to lower cables down for all the movie lights.

Unlike a real set, where you can just pull a wall away when you need to, he had to figure out how to have a whole crew function inside an actual temple.

It seems like such a ridiculous complication for a detail nobody would ever appreciate. But I get the idea this is a lifelong theme for him. He built an entire Egyptian complex outside LA and only hinted at it. Was it one big joke to him?

Theresa pauses to look at another hieroglyph. The sound of Uzis firing into the benches is enough encouragement for her to keep going.

She gives the corridor behind us a nervous glance but says nothing.

Brunelli didn't waste any time following me inside the temple. He must have decided my impulse would be to go as far in as possible.

All things considered, Theresa is dealing with the fact that we're about to be murdered quite well. Part of me suspects she still doesn't think they'd really kill her. If the gunfire that almost hit me isn't a big clue, I don't know what is.

She rounds one more corner and takes us into a large room. Four narrow columns support the ceiling, but other than them, there's nothing else here. Not even an exit.

"Dead end," says Theresa.

"Dead end?" I whisper back at her as I take position behind the wall toward the entrance. I grab her shoulder and pull her away from the firing zone.

She gets behind me. It's a small show of solidarity since a column would offer a modicum of more hiding space and a much stronger shield than my soft tissue.

I hear her cock her gun behind me. Footsteps and low voices echo from the corridors we just came through.

"Why are they here?" she asks in a hushed voice.

"Probably to get the necklace. Without his bank accounts, he'll need whatever kind of assets he can get his hands on to go on the run."

Theresa moves away from me and retreats to the far end of the room. I guess she had second thoughts about being so close. Actually, it's better this way.

My one hope here is the predictability of Brunelli. I think I know the kind of search pattern they're going to use to clear the room until one of them fires off a round of ammo blindly into a passage, destroying that theory. They're just aiming their weapons into rooms and spraying them with bullets now.

It's a sloppy way to clear a chamber, but it doesn't help me much.

I shoot a glance behind me to tell Theresa to stay low. She's already crouched down into a ball cowering by the wall.

"You won't be able to shoot at them like that," I reply.

"I know. I'm looking for the secret passage."

"What?" I ask over my shoulder.

"In the movie, there's a chamber the priests use to exit after they prepare the body for burial."

Footsteps echo down the hall. I reach my gun around and fire it without looking. Someone shouts and fires back a round. I hear him shuffle as he goes back around the corner after he's laid down his cover fire.

"You'll never make it back here, Brunelli," I yell.

There's no reply. He's not going to reply to my taunt. He just wants me dead.

Theresa makes a groan behind me. Her fingers are half buried into a crevice as she tries to pull a large stone free. She waves me over.

I point to the entrance with my gun. She brings hers to bear from a crouched position and moves away from the block.

I tuck my gun into my waistband and slide the block out of its recess. The gap between the edges is so small I doubt I'd ever have gotten my thick fingers in there like she managed.

It comes free, revealing a two-foot-wide tunnel into darkness. I grab Theresa by the arm and pull her inside. She slips into the darkness like a cat.

I back up into the tunnel while keeping my eyes on the entrance. For good measure, I fire a round at the wall just beyond the passage.

Theresa comes crawling back to me with her gun an inch from my cheek, thinking Brunelli or the hitman has entered the room. I jerk a thumb back into the tunnel. She crawls back into the darkness.

Pulling the block back in behind us is another challenge. There's not enough space around the sides to pull it flush. Slightly tapered, it was never intended to be closed from this direction.

I feel the back for a slot or some kind of handle. There's nothing. If I leave it as is, we're not going to buy ourselves much time. Brunelli will just fire his Uzi into the tunnel and shoot us while we crawl away.

I get a flash of inspiration and slip off my belt. Holding one end in each hand, I lasso it over the block and use it to pull the stone back into place.

The edges slide back into place. I have to yank my belt free, but manage to pull it back into the tunnel. That will give us an extra minute or so. I toss it around my shoulders and follow Theresa into the tunnel.

Our heads collide like coconuts when I smack right into her.

"Clever," she replies.

"I didn't know you were right there."

"I meant the thing with the belt," she replies.

"Oh. Yeah. We're probably going to live at least another two minutes because I was in Mensa when I was a kid."

"Really? You?" she asks.

"Why do you sound so surprised?"

"No reason."

Theresa turns back into the tunnel and crawls in the opposite direction. I try to keep up with her as she glides through the passage.

The sound of the gunfire reverberates through the tunnel as Brunelli and the hitman spray their rounds into the room before entering.

The big question on my mind is how many times did Brunelli watch Sands of the Nile and will he find the secret passage as quickly as Theresa?

"I know why Harrison changed the tone of the picture," says Theresa, as if we were just chatting about the movie in her living room.

"Well, at least we can die knowing that."

Theresa ignores me. "In the movie, Artakama's jealous mother dies while she waits for her general. But some of these hieroglyphs have been repainted."

"By Harrison?"

"No. I mean in her time. Every time you see Artakama's name, it's been written over another name. Cleopatra III. She was a great aunt to the famous Cleopatra."

"That's nice." I give her a gentle nudge to keep her moving.

"You don't understand. This burial temple was built for Cleopatra."

"So how did Artakama get it?" I ask.

"Artakama was Cleopatra." Theresa stops and faces me. My flashlight casts deep shadows on her face. She looks more distraught than when the guns first started firing.

I put a hand on her shoulder. "What are you saying?"

"When the general sent the proposal to Cleopatra's daughter, she got jealous and had her murdered. She then pretended to be Artakama, her own daughter, so she could marry the general when he came."

"Why?"

"Jealously. Love. Take your pick. Cleopatra thought with the alliance of the general she could overthrow her brothers and take over the entire kingdom. When the proposal arrived for her daughter, she killed her and pretended to be her." Theresa's voice sounds hurt.

"That's horrible."

She keeps crawling into the passage. "I'd always thought some things didn't add up. Cleopatra was only 14 when she had her daughter. Her husband, actually an uncle, died a year later. She was still young when the necklace and the proposal arrived."

We reach the end of the tunnel. Theresa stands up and moves away from the exit. I stop and listen to the sounds from the antechamber. There's a faint echo, like metal hitting stone.

"Looks like they found your pick axe," says Theresa.

"I needed a distraction," I offer weakly.

I stand up and straighten my crooked back. My spine makes a popping sound. Theresa looks up at me and shakes her head.

"Motorcycle injury," I lie.

She pats me on the shoulder and turns to explore our new chamber.

I flash my light into the room and come to a stop. "Now that you've explained the mystery of the third-act tone change, can you tell me why there are three sarcophaguses in this crypt instead of one?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The Third Coffin

The sound of my pick axe striking stone echoes down the secret passage. More distant than the last one, it sounds as if Brunelli and his hitman are striking the walls of the antechamber in random places.

Theresa raises an eyebrow. "Maybe he didn't pay attention to the movie as much as he should?"

"I wouldn't count on him not finding it. Is there some other passage out of here?"

Theresa turns her flashlight upward. "They sealed this tomb from above."

The ceiling is made of solid blocks with long stone crosspieces holding the structure in place. The stones all appear to be the same color. I can't tell where the entrance would have been. Presumably in the center. I hop onto the nearest coffin to have a closer look.

"Hey!" Theresa grabs the back of my calf. "Aren't we going to look in these first?" She waves her flashlight at the coffins.

"I was kind of thinking of survival first."

"This is what they're after."

A much more distant ping from the antechamber carries down the passage.

I hop down from the stone coffin. Brunelli could come through the tunnel at any moment, but it might not be a bad idea to have a bargaining chip.

Theresa points to the sarcophagus closest to the secret passage. Dull gray, it's void of any ornamentations. It looks like the kind of thing a bomb disposal team might use to explode a package bomb. The coffin seems almost out of place in the middle of an Egyptian burial chamber.

Theresa sets her light down on the lid and starts to push. I do the same while keeping a careful eye on the entrance.

At first, the lid doesn't want to budge. Theresa makes a frustrated look on her face and digs her heels into the ground. I slide toward her end so we can push from the same point and swivel the lid to the side instead of sending it crashing to the ground.

I feel the stone start to vibrate under my fingers as it begins to slide free. I throw my back into the effort and the lid slides open, revealing the interior.

The empty interior.

Theresa grabs her flashlight and crawls almost completely under the lid. Her muffled voice calls back. "Empty." She pulls her body back out after vanishing halfway inside. "I always wanted to be a magician's assistant," she explains.

The next coffin is the smallest of the two. Like the first one, it's devoid of any decoration. Theresa bites her lip and raises an eyebrow.

I know what she's thinking: This is a child's coffin.

The lid is small enough for me to manage on my own. I push the stone aside while Theresa holds the light over my shoulder.

When the first few inches are revealed, the sarcophagus appears empty. I exhale a breath of relief, then stop when the lid moves back another inch and a small cloth bundle pokes out from underneath.

Wrapped in muslin, the bundle is no bigger than a football. I turn to Theresa. She shakes her head.

The bundle could be anything, but the sinking feeling in my stomach tells me what I fear. I shield her view of the bundle as I carefully unwrap the fabric, being as careful as I can.

The taught skin on the large skull tells me everything I want to know. I wrap the dead infant back in the cloth and push the stone lid over its coffin.

Theresa waits for me to tell her what I found. I can only shake my head. She gives me a sad look.

We turn to the final coffin. Repeating how we opened the first one, we move the lid to the side and find an adult-size body wrapped in muslin like the infant.

I pull the wrappings away before Theresa has a chance. It's best if only one of us touches the dead things in here.

The cloth unwinds around the head. Silver hair pokes out from a parchment-colored skull. The face is sunken, but the cheekbones are unmistakable. It's Amanda Gray.

Underneath the wrappings, the withered neck gives way to a magnificent sight. Brilliant gold and deep blue gems. The Nile necklace.

Theresa gasps behind me. I move aside so she can have a closer look.

"It's wonderful," she replies. She holds her light over the gems. "Stunning."

I put my head into the passage to listen for Brunelli. My ears are assaulted by the sound of the pick axe hitting the stone door. They'll be through here any moment.

I run over to Amanda Gray's coffin and push Theresa aside to shut the lid. "Get into the empty one!"

"What?" she asks.

"They're coming through any moment. I need you inside there. He's probably going to just start shooting into the passage. Bullets can ricochet anywhere in here." I pull her by the elbow toward the first coffin.

"I want to stay out here with you," she replies.

"Trust me. Just get in. I don't want to have to worry about hitting you when I shoot back."

Theresa is about to protest when the sound of stones breaking echoes in the passage. She tries to think of something to say, but I just guide her into the coffin.

She looks up at me as I shut the lid. "Now what?"

"I'll think of something." I hope.

I push the lid closed then turn off my flashlight.

The large stone slab breaks free and hits the floor of the passage. They've found the way in. I check the magazine on my gun and make sure it's cocked before I take position behind Theresa's coffin. I have to feel my way around in the dark.

Brunelli's voice echoes down the passage. "There's no place to go, Mike." I keep quiet and low to the ground.

He continues, "So you thought you'd slip in here and steal the necklace for yourself? Maybe we can make a deal."

There's no way his deal doesn't end with me getting a bullet in my head.

On the upside, he thinks I double-crossed Theresa and came alone. If I can keep them away from her coffin, maybe, just maybe, I can keep her alive. Or at least alive long enough for her to suffocate inside of there.

This is a horrible plan.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

#604

I visualize Brunelli and his man sitting on the other side of the passage thinking about what to do next. He can unload a few magazines from his Uzi and hope to hit something, but that would be futile and a waste of ammo. I just told Theresa that to get her out of the way.

Neither he nor his hitman wants to come down that passage, knowing I can just unload into the narrow space at any point. Strategically, I have the upper hand. At least as far as a defendable position counts as the upper hand.

"How long you plan on staying in there, Mike?" Brunelli shouts to me.

I keep silent.

"2247 Hyatt Avenue," he says. "Does that mean anything to you? That's the address of Alex's ex-wife, isn't it? I understand you're very fond of her. Are you willing to wait in here long enough for me to send someone to her home? One of my men can make it there in an hour. Is that what it's going to be?"

Damn it.

I didn't think about that possibility.

Brunelli is not messing around. This isn't an empty threat.

"Will she be picking up the boy from school? Will we make it a two-for-one? Which one do I have to kill to prove to you I'm serious?" Brunelli says.

"None of them," I shout back, breaking my silence. "Don't kill anyone. The necklace is yours."

"That's very reasonable, Mike. We need to know you're not going to shoot at us. I want you to throw your gun into the passage and then lay down in front of the opening with your hands behind your back."

I could kick myself for not taking Theresa's gun before shoving her into the coffin. Unarmed, out in the open, I'll be lying there for Brunelli to shoot me execution style.

"How do I know you won't just kill me?" I ask.

"We're not bargaining for your life anymore, are we Mike?"

"Good point," I reply.

I turn my flashlight on and toss it into the corner so it will give me some light. I pop the magazine out of my gun, slip it into my pocket and discharge the bullet from the chamber. If they've run out of ammo, I'm not going to let them use my own gun to kill me.

I crouch by the opening to the passage. Brunelli has a flashlight resting on the ground aimed back toward me. He wants to keep me as blind as possible.

"What's with the other two coffins?" I ask.

"Isn't it obvious?" he replies. "This was going to be Amanda and Harrison's eternal resting place."

"And the third one?"

"Let's just say the parentage of the miscarried child was a cause for disagreement between the two of them."

I kneel down in front of the light. "Harrison sounds like a real piece of work."

Brunelli is talkative because he wants to keep me off-guard and cooperative. "They both were. I loved Amanda like my own sister, but you have no idea what life with her could be like. No reward is great enough."

The longer I can keep him talking, there's a slim chance he might not kill me. "Alonzo felt differently," I reply.

"Let's not talk about him. Toss the gun into the passage and lay on your stomach. Move an inch and we're going to shoot. Understand?"

"Yes." I toss the gun into the tunnel a few feet beyond my reach and lie down. I brace myself for a gunshot.

"Just hold still, Mike," says Brunelli.

When I was about 10 years old, my mother bought me a sound-effects CD set. I used to play through different files when I went to bed and imagine movies in my head. There were dozens of different aircraft sounds (the 200s). I could play an Apache helicopter sound (#222) and see it fly over a city in my mind. A lion's roar (#123) made a great monster scream. I could make buildings collapse (#430) and then open fire from the Apache with a variety of automatic weapons (the 500s). For the final blow, the stroke that would take out the hideous creature that was attacking my neighborhood, I'd use something from the 600s. Bazookas (#613), missiles (#607), mortars (#611), or one of my favorites: #604.

#604 was several sounds compiled together to create a certain kind of effect. It was sound theater. When I was a little older and thought about how they made the sound clip, I developed an even deeper appreciation for the magic of cinema.

When I was 12 I figured out, or at least mostly, how they made #604. I could break each wave down in my head and parse all of the different elements. I no longer heard the sound they wanted me to hear, but saw the man in the studio making the sound-effect library.

The first sound was metal on metal, like two measuring cups rubbing against each other.

The next sound was hand gripping a rubber glove around a pipe. It's the sound you hear whenever someone grabs something metal in a movie.

Then came the tiny sound of a hairpin being sprung. It's almost a bell-like tone.

The hairpin is dropped onto a piece of tile elevated by four wooden blocks so you can hear the sound from underneath.

There's a metal spring sound. I found a clamp in my father's garage that could make the same sound when you let go of the release.

This was followed by thick canvas being crumpled. The sound of cloth moving.

If you take a microphone and swing it through the air, you can create something like the sound of a baseball being thrown. This is what followed the canvas.

The second-to-last sound was a metal can hitting concrete and rolling.

The final sound for #604 was made from overlaying an echoed explosion with the sound of gravel falling on broken glass.

All it took for me was the sound of my father's clamp releasing to know I had to get out of the way.

I was hearing sound #604: Exploding Grenade.

I bound into the air and jump over Theresa's coffin. My hands are already over my head when I hear the sound of metal rolling through the small passage. All I can do is cover my ears and make myself into as small a target as I possibly can.

Before the explosion hits, my frantic brain wonders why a #604 Grenade and not a #533 Uzi?

Boom.

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CHAPTER FORTY

Raiders

Ever see a professional wrestler smack another wrestler with an aluminum chair on the back? Imagine that times ten and a white flash you can see through your eyelids. The best part is the feeling that you've been punched in both eardrums.

That's what a stun grenade feels like. If it had been a fragmentation grenade and not a "non-lethal," I'd probably be dead given the close quarters. Although a stun grenade wasn't intended for use in a small room like this, I'm not sure how much closer to dead I've just come.

In cop training we try all the non-lethals you see used on violent suspects on ourselves. Next time you see a police officer spray an angry rioter with tear gas, remember the cop has been sprayed with it point-blank himself after taking an oath to protect the public.

I've been in a shoot house, a bunch of cinder blocks arranged like a home, and had a stun grenade go off twenty feet away from me. I had earplugs, a gas mask, and body armor on at the time. There was also no roof to confine the concussion.

This is nothing like that experience. I consider myself fully stunned.

The sound was so loud my inner ear is bouncing around like a racquet ball. Pulling myself to my feet feels like trying to balance on soap.

A beam of light emerges from the passage way, followed by a hulking figure. It's one of the hitmen from the Cairo. He points his Uzi at my head

and says something.

I can't hear a word he's saying. The explosion was so powerful, bits of stone are falling from the ceiling. Theresa's coffin looks like it moved a few inches across the floor.

The hitman waves his gun at me and points to the back wall. I don't protest. I point to my ears and move away.

He keeps me covered so Brunelli can climb through. He squeezes his bulk out of the tunnel and gives me an angry look as he stands up painfully. He dusts his hands off then points to Amanda Gray's coffin.

I think he wants me to open the lid. The only reason I'm still alive and not full of bullets is because he wants to make sure I didn't already take the necklace and ditch it somewhere. Once he has it, that little detail won't be working in my favor anymore.

I place my hands on the lid and try pushing. I'm still having trouble standing up straight. My foot slips and I almost clip my chin on the lid.

The hitman kicks me in the ribs, but I can barely feel it. I stand up and try pushing the lid again. My knuckles are white from the excursion. I'm really trying hard to push the lid to the side. I don't see much point in prolonging my death. The sooner they kill me and get out of here, the better Theresa's chances.

Brunelli yells something at Squarejaw -- that's what I think when I look at the hitman. Squarejaw lowers his Uzi on the strap and stands next to me. He gives me an evil look then starts to push.

The lid slides to the side and reveals Amanda Gray's hastily rewrapped mummy. Technically, a dried corpse and not a properly prepared mummy.

Squarejaw clamps a heavy hand on my shoulder and pulls me away. He shoves the barrel of his gun into the pit of my back. I try to decide if I should hold a breath or exhale, not sure which one will let me die faster.

Brunelli rips away the wrappings and tosses them aside. He gives me another angry look then pulls away more of them. He mouths something I can't understand.

Squarejaw shoves the Uzi into my spleen and pushes me over to the coffin to look.

The necklace is gone.

I try not to flinch and look at Theresa's hiding place. Her little act of kleptomania is the only thing keeping me alive.

Unfortunately, it also means Brunelli is going to have a reason to open her coffin.

He points to the body. I shrug. Squarejaw's ham hands rifle across my body and reach into spaces reserved for my doctor. He grabs me around the neck and shoves the Uzi into my back.

Brunelli looks at the smaller coffin. I shake my head. He pushes the lid aside himself, while Squarejaw holds me.

Using as much care as a hyperactive child at Christmas, Brunelli unwraps the muslin around the infant.

"You're sick," I say to him. Only I think it comes out as a yell because I can't hear my own voice.

Squarejaw tightens the vice grip on my neck. Brunelli looks up from the infant corpse and shakes his head. All eyes turn to the last coffin: Theresa's hiding place.

I'm pretty sure I could elbow Squarejaw in the testicles and make it as far as the passage. Then the two of them could take turns firing into my defenseless body as I make a futile escape.

He's not going to let me take his gun away from him either. When he set it aside to move the lid, I could tell he was waiting for me to make a go for it, almost begging for the chance to get rid of me.

Brunelli points to the last coffin. Squarejaw shoves me at the lid and kicks me in the ass out of spite. The good part is my body is no longer numb and I can actually feel sensations other than pain.

I can almost make out what Brunelli is saying when he yells at me to open the other coffin. I stumble and play up the fact I'm still weak. The more I can stall them, the better chance I can think of something.

Sadly, I'm still drawing blanks.

The one tiny glimmer of possibility is using Theresa as a distraction. In the split second Squarejaw takes to react, I might be able to get behind him and get his gun. If Brunelli shoots at me, there's a reasonable chance he'll hit Squarejaw instead. By reasonable, I mean less than one percent.

Maybe that will be enough for Theresa to get away. I just hope the sniper isn't still out there waiting.

I make a feeble effort to push the lid aside. This time, I stand at the head of the coffin and try to push. I want to get Squarejaw in between me and Brunelli, so I'll have an easier time of using him as a shield.

Squarejaw doesn't buy it. He shoves me to the side and between Brunelli. I do my best to fake pushing the lid, but he manages to slide it back two feet.

His upper body is still leaning over the top of the coffin. I push away to make my dance around him, hoping he's stunned by the sight of Theresa.

Only he's not stunned. He leans back and shoves the Uzi into my ribs before I realize he has it back in his hands.

Brunelli yells something at me.

Neither of them are looking into the sarcophagus. I look down and see why.

It's empty.

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Box Jumper

Brunelli shouts at me. His words sound like they're coming through a mile of cotton, but it doesn't take Helen Keller to figure out he's pissed and wants to know where the necklace is. To hell with the necklace, I want to know where Theresa went.

Squarejaw shoves me against the wall and starts rifling through my pockets again. Brunelli puts his own gun to my temple so the hitman can use both hands to search me more thoroughly. They spin me around so my back is to the wall.

"Drop them!" screams Brunelli, pointing to my pants. He shines the flashlight in my eyes so I can't see.

I hesitate and Squarejaw reaches for my belt. I push his hand away and start to unbuckle it. "Easy, fellas. Got to charm your prom date first. I don't have the necklace. It wasn't here when I got here." I drop my pants. "Nothing to see but my boxer briefs."

"You ain't going to shoot," says Brunelli.

"I don't even want to begin to guess what you mean by that," I reply.

"The peep show is over, boys," says Theresa from behind Brunelli. "Pull your pants up, cowboy."

I can't see her past Brunelli's light, but evidently she managed to crawl out from wherever she was hiding and put a gun to his head.

I buckle my pants up. "Clever girl."

"Dead girl," says Brunelli.

Squarejaw is frozen stiff. Brunelli took his Uzi while he searched me. Without a weapon, he's doing the mental math on trying to turn around and get to Theresa. I don't wait for him to figure it out. I step away from the wall and out of the light and take Brunelli's own gun and the Uzi.

"Into the coffin!" I point to Theresa's hiding spot.

"I don't think either of you are the shooting kind," says Squarejaw. He takes a step toward me.

Before I can say anything, Theresa shoots him in the foot and he crumples to the ground. I kick him in the ribs for good measure.

"Get in the coffin or she'll shoot higher," I shout.

Brunelli steps over to the sarcophagus. "It's all right, David. Do as they say." He climbs inside and moves his body to the side to make room.

David, a.k.a. Squarejaw, glares at Theresa and climbs up on his good foot. I keep my gun covered on him and don't let him get anywhere near her. His eyes are filled with rage.

He slides the lid back so he can fit in alongside Brunelli. I kick him in the ass to hurry him along. He turns to me.

I nod to the coffin. "She's got a twitch finger. We know it's stupid to ask by now if she'll pull the trigger. Some got it. Some don't. She does, in spades."

Theresa covers me as I push the lid back over the coffin.

Brunelli calls out to me before it shuts completely. "You can't leave us here."

I say nothing. Theresa turns to the passage. I pull her away.

"We can't go out that way," I try to keep my voice low so Brunelli and David can't hear me. I'm still having trouble monitoring my own volume.

Theresa steps away from the passage and points to the coffin. "They'll kick the lid off any moment. We need to figure out what to do with them or get out."

I nod my head. "Brunelli went in easily because he knows his sniper is still out there waiting for us. We won't make it two feet from the entrance before he drops us."

"Do we use them as hostages?" she asks.

I bend down and pick up one of the stone flakes that I fell into when I slipped trying to push the lid off the first time. Theresa takes it from me. It crumbles in her hands.

"Plaster," she says.

I point to the ceiling then hop onto the smallest coffin, located in the center of the room. "Watch their coffin."

Theresa nods and picks up the other flashlight. I take the butt of the Uzi I pulled off Brunelli and slam it into the most distressed part of the roof. Pieces of plaster fall on me.

When the flash grenade went off, the blast had been powerful enough to buckle the roof and reveal the fact it wasn't solid stone.

I slam the Uzi into the ceiling again. A thick piece falls away, revealing a gap large enough for me to shove my hand inside.

Gripping the inside of the ceiling, I rip away a huge chunk of plaster. It falls to the ground in a shower of dust. I knock away the wooden slats it had been bond to and shove my head into the space.

Theresa places my flashlight in my hand. I push it through the opening and reveal a crawl space. At the back end of the chamber I can see the top of the stone blocks that form the walls. There's a shaft in the ceiling just beyond.

In the worst-case scenario it will give us another place to hide. In the best scenario we'll find a rear exit from the temple the sniper can't see.

I pull myself up and crawl into the ceiling. I take another look around then offer Theresa a hand. She takes it more out of politeness than necessity. She's obviously very agile, and apparently flexible, from her trick with the coffin.

We crawl toward the far end of the space. I try to keep my weight on the stone crossbeams and avoid anything that looks like plaster. I reach the far wall and turn back to listen to the chamber. Brunelli and his man are trying to push the lid aside.

"What happens when they see the hole in the ceiling?" whispers Theresa.

"With what? We took all the flashlights." I give her a grin.

She returns the smile. "So you're not totally hopeless after all."

"What gave you that idea?"

"I leave you alone for two minutes and you're putting on a strip show for a couple of mobsters."

I aim my light up the shaft. It angles away from us at a steep incline. "I had to distract them. So, uh, where the hell did you go?"

"Yoga. I curled up into the back of the coffin and prayed you'd open it from the other end. Brunelli expected an empty coffin, so I figured he'd

search you again instead of looking deeper."

She crawls next to me to look up the shaft. Our lights end in darkness.

"What do you think?" I ask.

"Just like the ones they built into Egyptian temples. It probably goes to the surface. There'll be a few dead drops to keep water and critters out, but nothing we can't manage."

I crawl to the side and point to the shaft. "Ladies first."

"Not exactly gallant of you."

"I don't want to slip and take us both back to square one." I look over my shoulder. "We'd probably crash back through the roof as Brunelli and company get out of the coffin." I leave out the part that I'd rather be in back so I can use my body as a shield in case they wise up and start shooting at us.

Theresa slides into the shaft. "You just want an excuse to stare at my ass for a half-hour."

"You saw mine. Fair is fair."

She starts the climb up. I wait a minute to listen to the chamber. The sound of stone hitting stone reverberates through the whole structure. Finally, there's the sound of rock sliding followed by a crashing noise as the lid is kicked free.

I can hear their voices through the hole in the roof. Theresa and I keep still for a moment as they talk.

"Goddamn it!" shouts Brunelli as he realizes they're in complete darkness.

"Now what?" asks David.

"We find our way out of here. Any luck and Enzo will have shot the bitch when she stepped out of the temple with that asshole and we'll find the necklace on her."

"What if Enzo isn't shooting so good? He's full of meds. Damn if I don't need them now, too," complains David, almost whining.

"Rudy and Tito should still be waiting in the car. We'll get them between here and the top."

Rudy and Tito?

Just what we need, more of them.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Escape

Theresa and I climb for ten minutes before we feel safe enough to talk without worrying our voices will carry back into the temple chamber. I'm sure Brunelli and David are long gone from there, but I don't want to chance it.

"Now what?" she asks.

We just passed our second dead-man drop: the two-foot gap designed to keep anything from crawling or sliding into the lower chamber. The first one led to a pit twenty feet deep that ended in a pile of sand. The second one had several mouse skeletons: the sign of a burrowing owl that nested there.

I think it over for a moment. "Brunelli and his boy are probably outside of the temple now. Soon enough they'll talk to Enzo and he'll tell him that nobody got past him. With any luck, they'll think we're still down there somewhere hiding."

"And without that luck?" asks Theresa.

"They'll be waiting for us at the top. Or...they'll get a flashlight and search the chamber and find our exit."

"It's a straight shot from down there to here," replies Theresa. "We're kind of in a barrel."

"Yeah, but we have their automatics. Whatever they shoot at us, we can shoot back at them." I ignore the possibility of them setting up the sniper

rifle and night scope and just aiming it straight up the shaft. One high-powered round could go straight through the pair of us.

Theresa keeps moving. "Let's not get caught here then."

"Nice work shooting the big goon in the foot."

"Yeah, I didn't know I had it in me." Her voice sounds a little uncertain.

"Those men are killers. You did the right thing."

Theresa turns to me. "Because they didn't take me seriously?"

"Because they didn't take any of us seriously. I could have killed them several times back at the Cairo, but I didn't. Even though," my voice trails off.

"Even though you knew they might come after us?"

"Yeah," I offer weakly.

"It's all right, Michael. You did the right thing, too."

"That's to be determined."

"I think so," she replies.

"You mean almost getting you killed?"

"It's not like I was going to let you stop me. Besides, this was all my idea, remember?" She offers a small smile.

"I'd like to think this was Alex's fault," I reply.

We climb farther in silence. I try to gauge how far we've come and realize I have no idea. I can only assume we're making progress because we're still traveling upwards.

We haven't heard any sounds from below. I've stopped every few minutes just to make certain. All I've heard has been silence.

"I think I hear wind," says Theresa. She quickens her climb.

I try to keep up with her. "Be careful."

"Yeah, thanks for that. I think I see daylight."

It takes another five minutes of climbing before the light forms into a shape. Our eyes had become so adjusted to the faint glow of our flashlights, the reflected sunlight almost burns.

We reach the top of the shaft. A metal grate lies over the exit. Above it is a wooden shack like the fake pump house. This one has vents in the roof to allow air and sunlight through.

Theresa manages to open the grate without my help and crawls into the shack. I pull myself out after her. My spine makes a creaking sound as I straighten out for the first time in what feels like an eternity.

She's pushed herself against the far wall and is looking through a vent. "I can see the top of the complex from here. Also, the hills where we were standing before."

I put my head next to hers and look out across the desert. I have to squint in the bright sunlight.

"Do we wait it out here?" asks Theresa.

"You got a cell signal?"

We both check our phones and exchange frustrated looks. Harrison chose this place because it was away from everything. The nearest cell tower is probably on the other side of the hills that surround the old range.

I shake my head. "I can't wait here. He made a threat about Alex's wife."

"You know he was bluffing, right?"

"I don't. I can't find out." I unlock the door from the inside and step out of the shack.

"I'm coming with you," says Theresa.

"No. I can't let you get hurt."

"Shut up and let me have an Uzi," she replies. "They know I'm here now, too. There's not much point in me waiting for them to find this shack and take me out Billy the Kid style."

I hand her the other Uzi. "Just stay back? Okay?"

"Sure."

We cross the open desert keeping our eyes trained on the far hills where the first pump shack and our car are waiting. The entire area resembles a sunken lake bed. On the far ridge I can see what looks like more chain-link fence. The range is probably encircled by it.

We reach the flat area that covers the complex and keep our bodies low next to the gradual rise. If anyone starts shooting at us, we'll have some coverage at least.

Even in daylight, the complex is huge. Reaching one end of the buried roof is like trying to run a football field. Theresa has no trouble keeping up with me. I do my best to hide my panting. I regret not going to the gym in weeks.

I check the hills for any sign of movement, then motion to Theresa to follow me. There's a roundabout way to reach her roadster that keeps us away from the pump shack. I want us to avoid the line of sight of Brunelli's watchers.

I assume the two most important points for them are the shack and the front gate. If they're not split up, the smartest point would be the shack, assuming there was only one exit.

Like the sniper underground, they'd be in a hiding spot to keep an eye on whoever steps out of there. I take us around three more hills just so we can be out of their peripheral vision.

Theresa, as light on her feet as a jungle leopard, is right behind me. I look back and have to grin. In her designer jeans and tight T-shirt, holding the Uzi, she looks like a model turned assassin.

"What?"

I shake my head. "Nothing." I lower my body to the ground as low as I can and peer around the side of the hill. I can see her roadster still parked in the gravel.

I take the keys from my pocket and turn to her. "Listen to me closely. This isn't me being brave. It's me being smart. You have to let me make a run for the car. Once I get to it I'll come through the hills and over here to get you. If there's two of us out in the open, they'll double their chances of getting us. Got it?"

"What if nobody is watching?" she asks.

"I'll wave you over. But I'm sure somebody is there."

Theresa nods. "Okay. Although, I'm faster and quieter."

"Yeah, but there are two of me," I reply.

She grabs me by the arm and squeezes. "No there's not."

I return her smile then make a run for it.

I'm halfway to the car when the lone man on the hill watching the pump house turns around and starts shouting.

I fire the Uzi in his general direction and he dives into the dirt. The second man is still nowhere to be seen when I jump into the open car.

I start the engine while I keep my head down low. The man on the hill fires a shot in my direction, so I return a round with the Uzi. I stomp the accelerator and try to figure out how far we're going to get with two slashed tires.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Road Race

The roadster skids across the dry dirt more than I want as I round the hill where Theresa is crouched. The flat tires barely grip the ground and send me into a tailspin.

She doesn't wait for it to stop before jumping into the passenger seat. "Your tires are flat."

"Want to hop out and get the tire jack while I wait?"

The sound of a gunshot interrupts any pithy reply she had in mind. She tosses her pistol onto the seat between us and holds her confiscated Uzi up and points it at the hills.

I step on the accelerator and drive around the far hill. The fence appears before us stretching from the ridge near the gate to another series of hills. There might be a break in it somewhere, but no guarantee we'll find a road on two bad tires.

I turn us away from the ridge and aim for a gap between another set of hills that should take us into the road before the gate.

"What are you doing?" asks Theresa.

"Trying to get us out of here."

I jerk the wheel to the left and drive the car up the side of the incline that leads to the gravel road. Someone fires a gun at us in the distance.

"They've got an SUV in back of us," shouts Theresa.

"Better in back than...DAMN!" I spin the wheel to the right to avoid the second vehicle blocking the front gate.

The driver already has his gun out the window and fires a wild shot at us. Reflexively, I reach out to Theresa's head and push her down. She resists and spins around with the Uzi and fires a burst at the truck as it heads toward us.

In the rearview mirror, I see the driver turn his truck to the side so the passenger side will absorb any bullets. The vehicle bounces as it drives up the side of a hill then continues toward us.

Three figures run across the gravel road in front of our car and dive into the other SUV. It looks like Brunelli and his team made it out of the temple.

He pulls open the driver's side door and uses it as a shield to fire at us. I hear the metal ping of a bullet hitting our chassis and swerve away from the road and back between the hills.

As far as escapes go, this is one of the worst ones ever.

Brunelli's SUV leaps over the edge of the road and follows after us with the second truck right behind. I can hear the sound of guns firing as they take turns shooting at us from their windows.

Theresa fires another burst behind us. Made in anger, the bullets go wild.

"Stay down and save our ammo!" I shout.

"For what? Is there some plan I don't know about?"

I try to think of something while twisting and turning through the hills. On flat ground, we're still fast, even with the two flat tires. That's until one of them realizes they can just head us off and trap us.

"You have the necklace? Right?" I ask.

"Maybe," replies Theresa.

"I'm not kidding around. Give it to me then hold the wheel."

"Bullshit. I'm not letting you bail out. And I'm not letting you throw it back to them. They won't stop."

"At this point they might." I shoot her a glance.

She ignores me and keeps her eyes trained on the canyon behind us.

"Theresa!" I start to argue with her.

"Michael!" she shouts.

At first I think she's just retaliating at me. She screams my name again and points to the second SUV barreling toward us down the side of the hill. They figured out the cutting-us-off part sooner than I'd hoped.

"Duck!" I shout it at the top of my lungs.

Theresa obeys. I pick up the Glock from the seat and fire three rounds into the front of the SUV.

Pro tip: If you want to stop a moving vehicle, don't shoot the tires. Aim for the radiator.

Steam bursts from their hood. I turn the wheel to the left as the SUV smashes through the space we just occupied. The driver quickly turns to the side and follows us on our tail.

The upside is that he's now between us and Brunelli's truck -- the one with three shooters. Any minute now and his engine is going to give out. I hope.

I turn between another pair of hills then spin the wheel to the left as hard as we can. The tires skid and we almost slide up another hill. Almost.

We get traction and head down another canyon. The SUV behind us slams on the brakes but can't make the turn like us. He goes up the hill and tries to turn quickly. In the rearview mirror I see his right wheels come off the ground for a moment. He almost rolls the vehicle. Almost. Damn it.

I'm not liking the way these almosts are balancing one another out. We need a break soon.

Brunelli's truck comes roaring around the side of a hill behind the truck on our tail, kicking up a cloud of dust. This wasn't the kind of break I was hoping for.

On flat ground we manage to get the most distance. As ancient as the roadster is, the thing can still haul ass. I steer us toward the flat roof of the complex.

"Now what?" asks Theresa.

"Maybe we try some sumo?" I reply.

If I can get these trucks out in the open I might be able to get them to spin off the rise in a tight enough chase. That might be enough to get them out of the way long enough for us to make a break back to the road.

Might, might, might. Those kinds of plans haven't been working very well for us lately.

I push the accelerator to the bottom of the floor panel and send us up the slope on the roof. We catch air before we land on the flat section. When the car bottoms out, the whole vehicle shakes for a moment like the shocks gave out. We keep moving, so I ignore it.

Sooner than later we're going to shred our tires. That's what I'm really worried about. Once that happens, we can't slow down or the metal rims

will just spin in the dust.

I steer us toward the far end of the flat top. Another shudder shakes the car.

"Holy crap!" shouts Theresa. "Are all the tires gone?"

"I don't think so."

A bullet cracks the windshield and we both duck down. There's another shudder and the car feels like it's about to crack its axel.

I steal a glance behind us and see the two SUVs charging right toward us. The end of the flat top is still too far away from me to do anything clever. I turn toward the other corner so I can keep them swerving and not shooting.

Something hits the bottom of the car and I hear the high-pitched whine of bare metal on the ground. The roadster starts pulling to the side. I try to compensate by turning the wheel away from the drag.

There's another slap on the undercarriage and the other tire rips free. I try to turn us, but without the rubber tires to grip, the rims just spin in the dirt.

I jerk the wheel as hard as I can and slam on the breaks. "Hold on!"

The roadster skids to the side and begins to spin out. The dust forms a vortex around us.

"What are you doing?" asks Theresa. Her hand grabs my seat back to keep from being thrown against her door.

"Creating a distraction?" I reply.

If they can't see us, they can't shoot us. Maybe, just maybe I can get them before they hit us. One spray with the Uzi into their side panel and we might have a shot at getting out of here alive.

The car stops spinning. I grab my Uzi from my lap and hop out into the cloud of dust. I'm still dizzy and can't see anything.

Going on instinct, I try to aim where I think the first SUV should be. Silhouetted in the sunlight filtering through the cloud, the outline of the truck is all I can make out. Only it appears smaller than I would think it should be.

I get ready to stand my ground and squeeze the trigger.

Then it's gone. The second one is nowhere else to be seen either. Both SUVs have vanished. I'd been hoping for a miracle, but this is ridiculous.

I turn to ask Theresa if she saw what I just saw. Her eyes are wide open in terror.

It wasn't a miracle.

The whole world is shaking.

Or, more precisely, the sky is falling beneath our feet.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Avalanche

The ground trembles under me. Through the dust I can finally see the gaping hole in the middle of the roof the SUVs fell through. After a sixty-foot drop, I'm pretty sure Brunelli and his hired guns aren't going anywhere other than an autopsy.

The floor buckles again. I yell to Theresa, but she's already jumped out of the roadster and farther up. I begin to run to her, but my foot slips as the entire section under me begins to pitch at an angle.

I fall flat on my face. As I try to pick myself up the roof shakes and drops again. I fall to my knees. Sharp rocks cut into my legs.

The roof is collapsing from the middle. I look to my side and see the black interior wall of the complex. The only way out is by climbing up.

Easier said than done. I try to make my way up the incline, but the rocks and dirt are starting to slide down the slope. Every foothold slips out from underneath me. I start to fall backward.

Speed is my only option. I kick with my legs and claw with my hands. Tiny rocks tumble down at me and pelt me in the face. I keep trying to climb.

Theresa lets out a scream. I look up to see where she is. Farther up the roof than I am, she's not screaming for herself. She's screaming to me.

"My car!" she shouts.

I'm about to yell at her that I think I'm a little more valuable than her toy, then realize why she's shouting.

Her priceless Mercedes roadster is sliding down the roof and straight at me. Trying to dodge to the side isn't an option when I can't even stay in one spot without falling backward.

The car twists around and accelerates as the rocks and dirt help it slide down the slope of the roof. If I could stay in one spot without falling back I could try to risk letting it slide over me.

There's no chance of that with the tons of rock and dirt falling away underneath me.

I get a surge of adrenaline and sprint uphill toward the car. I expect my feet to slip out from underneath me and react by moving even faster and trying to get a grip on something.

I'm swimming in debris more than anything else now. I'm in the middle of an avalanche, trying not to get swept away. My feet keep kicking as my hands push and pull away at anything I can.

It's like being on a giant dusty treadmill where failure means death.

When the roadster's side running board comes flying at my face, I grab it with both hands and push myself into the air. I climb over the door and kick off with my feet.

I land on the passenger-side door. I can feel the car give as I kick away again. Falling face-first in the sliding dirt, I keep climbing.

Somewhere above me, the much more clever Theresa has realized that if you grab anything green, like a plant or shrub, there's a good chance it has roots that go all the way into the structure of the metal roof.

I flail my arms out for anything not dirt-colored to hold on to. The structure buckles again. I experience what feels like a good three seconds of free fall. At the end of it, my body slams into the ground with a force that knocks all the wind out of me.

I don't wait to catch my breath. I just keep climbing. The vision of the crushed SUVs is still fresh in my mind.

I've done plenty of falling and sliding stunts for Alex. I always have a harness, plump mattress, and rubber rocks. This is nothing like what I'm used to.

Theresa is twenty feet ahead of me. She's looking back, watching me.

"Climb!" I shout at her.

"I'm waiting for you!"

I'm beginning to have doubts about her sanity. The roof shakes again and we fall for another second before slamming into the ground.

Each time this happens, the angle of the roof becomes even more severe. I don't know how much longer her trick of holding on to anything living is going to last. I find a shrub and try to pull myself up. Proving my curse, it rips from the ground when I grasp it.

I slide down the roof. All the progress I made is erased in three seconds as I claw my hands into sliding dirt trying to stop myself. Theresa grows smaller in the distance.

At least she has something to hold on to. That makes me feel better.

Somewhat. I'm beginning to kind of like the girl.

I kick with my legs like a drowning man trying to learn how to swim. All they manage to do is spin my body in random directions as I continue to fall backward.

My skin grows cold at a sickening sensation when I kick out one more time -- I've run out of dirt and rocks to push against. My knees are hanging in empty space.

The lower half of my body is over the edge of the roof and I'm still sliding backward.

Theresa lets go of her rescue shrub and slides down toward me.

"What are you doing?" I shout at her. My voice is almost hoarse.

She finds a green plant I'd flailed past and grabs ahold of it. She reaches her free hand toward me. "Take it!"

"It won't hold us both!" I slide backward and feel the sharp edge of the roof in my stomach.

Theresa lifts her head from her spot and peers over the edge. She holds her hand out again. "Take my hand, Michael," her voice is calm.

Dirt and rocks continue to rush past me like a waterfall. I can feel every inch as it slips past me. I cling to my slipping ground and refuse her.

"Save yourself," I tell her. "Take the necklace and go."

Her eyes bore into me. "Okay." She pulls her body up and finds another green plant.

"What?" I reply in shock. I mean, I want her to save herself, but not without a little more protest.

I slip backward until only my arms and elbows are above the rent in the roof. My legs kick in the air pathetically.

She shakes her head before pulling herself into an almost sitting position.
"Goodbye, Michael."

I slip from the edge. The last sight I see is the expression on her face.
No trace of sadness. There's a hint of a cruel smile.
I fall.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Sky Fall

I fall all of twenty inches. My feet hit the ground and my butt keeps going until I fall on my ass in the reflecting pool.

Theresa looks down at me and shakes her head. "You really thought I was going to let you die?"

My heart is still pounding as I look up at her.

Her face grows concerned. "Are you shaking?" she asks.

"No. Not really. I mean, I only thought I was about to fall to my death." I add, "While you watched."

She lifts her head up and nods to the crushed SUVs and piles of rock and dirt from the partially caved-in roof. Fortunately for us, our end of the roof made the descent in gradual drops until coming to a rest on the floor of the plaza.

"Yeah," she replies. "I guess we were about to fall to our deaths."

Theresa pushes herself off the ground and slides down the roof. Before I can warn her about the drop, she leaps onto a pile of dirt and makes a gentle landing.

She walks over to me. "You plan on getting up anytime soon?"

"I'm still appreciating ground that knows it's supposed to stay in one place." I pick myself up and wipe the dirt from my hands.

"Oh, my poor car," says Theresa as she spies her roadster lying on its side. She walks over to inspect it. "Hey? Is that your footprint on my

upholstery?" She looks back at me and shakes her head.

"Send me a bill."

I cautiously approach Brunelli's SUV. The front end is smashed into the front seats. The windshield is covered in blood. I walk around the side and see three limp bodies crammed into the airbags.

The truck must have nose-dived before falling back on its wheels. If they'd been wearing their seat belts, they might have survived the fall.

The second SUV's driver is dead, too. I walk back to Theresa to spare her the sight of the bodies. These guys were first-rate assholes who deserved to die in the worst way possible, but I've never been one to gloat on anyone's death. I'll be haunted by their faces for a while.

Theresa raises an eyebrow when I walk back to her. I shake my head.

"Wish I could feel good about that," she says.

"No you don't."

A stone the size of my head falls from the overhang above the trucks. I pull Theresa out of the open area and under the the part of the roof that hasn't collapsed.

"Let's get to the stairs as quickly as we can. This thing could be settling for some time," I tell her.

We make a jog toward the sphinx. Both of us can't help looking over our shoulders at the temple complex. While the main temple is obstructed by the collapsed roof, the rest is now visible in the red glow of the setting sun.

I stop at the foot of the sphinx. Theresa turns to look back with me. It's still not safe, but neither of us can resist.

The rows of statues are still unharmed. They look out at us defiantly from their promenade.

"You know those movies where the explorers find the lost city?" I ask. "But it gets swallowed by a volcano or an earthquake at the end?"

"Yeah," says Theresa. "I hate those kind of endings."

"Me too."

She takes my hand. "Let's make sure that doesn't happen here."

We take the long climb up the stairs back to the surface. For several minutes, the setting sun casts a shaft of light down the long tunnel lighting the way.

"That's clever," says Theresa. "The sun sets here, but it rises on the shaft we climbed up. Makes you wonder what Gray and Harrison had in mind for this place."

We reach the top of the stairs. I sit down on the dirt to rest my tired knees. Theresa takes a seat beside me.

"It's sad to think of her burying her child out here by herself," says Theresa.

"I think Harrison did it. I don't think Gray knew about it until after he'd covered over the complex. He never had an heir."

"What about Brunelli saying the child wasn't his?" replies Theresa.

"Maybe there was some doubt. But a blood test would have solved that. Maybe he didn't care."

Theresa wraps her arms around her knees. "So why didn't it work out between them?"

"Who knows. They were two extreme personalities. They could see themselves as gods spending an eternity together, but not as normal people living each day by day. May I see it?"

Theresa gives me a grin and pulls the necklace from her pocket. She hands it to me.

"No. Let me see it on you," I tell her.

She suppresses a smile and takes off her jacket. I help clasp it around her neck. The gold shines brilliantly in the red sun. The blue gems almost float. Her face looks radiant.

"What do you think?" she asks.

"I don't think I've seen a more beautiful sight." It's the honest truth.

"You know," Theresa pauses. "I told Alex I'd be his date to the awards if you helped me find this." Her hand brushes the necklace.

"I knew he didn't offer me up out of altruism."

"No. He pimped you out. I hope you don't mind," she replies.

I toss a rock into the dirt. "I'm used to it by now."

A smile forms on her lips. "I've been thinking. I'm pretty sure I told him I'd be seen with him at the awards."

"I think you two will look great. Although I don't know if he'll be able to compete with you and that necklace." She really looks amazing.

"I don't think so either. You know him, all he wants is the photo op. Well, I mean, all he says he wants is that. So...I have to ask you a question."

"What's that?"

She flashes me her twenty-million-dollar smile. "You own a tuxedo?"

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Epilogue

She was a star that night. A supernova. The necklace, the story of how she found it, and the tragic romance of Amanda Gray and Hugo Harrison were all the entertainment columnists could talk about.

An unnamed security specialist who wished to remain anonymous was the only mention of me. Which is what I wanted.

It was a petty thing. But I didn't want to expose my relationship to Alex or give him credit for the find.

I wanted it all to be about Theresa.

In turn, she made sure everybody heard Amanda Gray's story again. A last-minute tribute was thrown into the broadcast. When Theresa presented her award, she and the necklace stole the show.

I'm not sure anybody remembers who won best actress that year. Everyone knows who was the best actress. She deserved every bit of the attention.

Maybe she was using Amanda Gray's story to build up her own legend. But I think it's more than that. Theresa stuck her neck out on the line enough times for me to know she has a lot more character than most people in this town.

We went to two obligatory after-parties. I then escorted her home at a respectful hour and let the limousine take me back to my guesthouse.

It was a delightful night. Alex spent the evening with Kyle and made his son's year.

When I got back to my door, there was a note from the producer's wife. A not-so-gentle reminder that I needed to be out of there in a day. Seeing me with Theresa was a little more than she could handle.

I had such a good time, I never brought up the fee to Theresa. Her assistant, Jacob, slipped me a check anyway when I dropped her off. I haven't looked at it yet. It's still sitting in my tux.

I feel funny taking her money. I'd rather sleep in my car, but I think it's still wrapped around a gate back at Amanda Gray's old place.

So if you can spare a couch for me to use, please let me know.

Yours,

Michael.

Hold on. Alex just called. He's got another favor to ask.

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CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Thanks!

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Hello!

Thank you for reading this! I hope you had half as much fun as I did writing it. I look forward to taking you on some more adventures with Mike, Theresa and maybe even Alex if he bothers to show up!

If you enjoyed this, please let me know. I'm always looking for blurbs to put in my books to share with other people. Even more important, tell a friend or two!

Best,

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