

***Friday 9<sup>th</sup> September 1994 – 2200 hours***

I never believed my great-grandfather committed suicide. So when I had the chance to go to Egypt on assignment I took it. I now found myself scrunched up, concealed in the ceiling of a bathroom in the Cairo Museum. All was quiet as I opened the hatch and peered into the blackness below. Using my torch to guide my path, I climbed down. It was then I found my foot had gone to sleep. It took me a moment of excruciating discomfort before I could proceed.

Emerging into the museum proper I was met by my partner, Janet Walker, a brown haired woman in her early thirties dressed in black, who'd similarly concealed herself in the ladies. It was not as dark on the museum floor, so I switched off my torch. We both listened for any movement. It was eerily quiet. In that deadened state of silence, our hearing heightened. We could just make out muffled voices from the Guard's room, probably a radio or a television.

Janet silently mouthed. "We good to go?"

I nodded and swung my backpack onto my shoulder as we cautiously made our way through the museum. I had worn shoes designed for a quick getaway but they squeaked irritatingly on the dusty marble floor, making it difficult to move quietly. Janet scowled at me at every step, making me curse my poor choice of footwear.

As we proceeded, it seemed my heart was pounding loudly enough to be heard by the guards, assuming they missed the squeaking of my shoes. Thank goodness they were distracted by whatever they were listening to.

Entering the main museum, we found the foyer was lit by moonlight pouring in through the windows that made up the facade of the building. Statues and mummies stood eerily watching, casting long shadows that made them look alive. Silent sentinels guarding the past. I was sure I saw one move and I kept looking behind, unable to shrug off the feeling of being followed. The deserted display area was set out more like a warehouse than a museum, with moonlit artefacts standing where they'd been dumped.

When Janet knocked an exhibit, our hearts entered our mouths. We froze as the bronze statue fell in slow motion. Janet reached for it but missed and it clattered to the floor. The dull thud, sent vibrations through the display room. We waited tensely. No one responded.

As we moved on, Janet caught sight of a mounted exhibit of several dozen Egyptian boomerangs of various shapes and sizes. "I thought they were invented by the Australian aborigines?"

I glanced back quickly. "Maybe the Egyptians discovered Australia first?" I suggested dismissively and moved on. Janet took a second look and let it go.

In the several months I'd been in Cairo, I'd explored the museum thoroughly and knew it was neither well patrolled nor searched before closing. The room we sought lay on the mezzanine floor, so we stealthily made our way through the gloom towards the stairs. Occasionally we glanced back nervously looking for guards, half expecting an animated mummy.

The stairs were wide enough to cope with a large crowd ascending easily; it also left us very exposed to observation from below. The upper level contained a corridor lined with a series of doors. We turned left and headed for the third door on the right. Despite being secured by a curse, the door was locked.

My professional skills as a Special Investigations Officer enabled me to pick the lock. As I heard the click, I hesitated. This was the culmination of weeks of work, decades of family speculation. The answers I sought lay on the other side of this door. I tried to peer through the frosted glass to delay my entry a moment longer. I tightened the grip around the doorknob, the sweat on my palm making the grip uncertain as I slowly turned the knob.

A crash made me stop! I let go and we both spun around waiting for a reaction, frozen in time. We heard muffled voices but no one came upstairs. I returned to the task of opening the door. It gave an inch without resistance and no alarm sounded. I decided to proceed more confidently. As I did, a loud creaking sound resounded down the corridor. I stopped and Janet ran into my back. Again we waited.

Abdulla had been a guard in the museum for nineteen years. He'd never known any other employment and was now the senior night guard. He thought he'd heard a noise. Turning down the sound on his pocket TV he listened. Nothing.

He considered ignoring it, it was probably Ali who only moments before had dropped a metal tray while making a coffee to take on his rounds. Besides doors opened and shut all the time in this draughty place and his overweight body did not enjoy walking. He decided to refer the matter to his younger partner. He reached for this portable radio. "Ali!"

Janet and I remained frozen outside the room. Then we heard Ali's footsteps coming up the stairs. We quickly entered the 'cursed' room and gently shut the door. For a moment we stood in the centre of the room until I realised we were being silhouetted in the frosted glass of the door, illuminated by the moonlight shining in through a large window. We moved to the side of the doorway and waited as Ali's torchlight danced past without stopping. He never considered checking the door to this infamous room. We waited until we saw him leave before checking the passage. All was quiet. I turned to Janet. "You keep watch while I look around."

Janet nodded and stepped outside giving me my first chance to check out the surroundings. Switching on my torch I located a series of glass vials on a shelf near the window previously

concealed in the dark. They contained an amber coloured fluid that sparkled in the torchlight. I had noticed earlier an old dusty writing desk, a chair, some Egyptian artefacts and a jewelled chest about the size of an old fashioned travelling trunk. The desk seemed the most likely place to start.

As I crossed the room, the window caught my attention. This was the spot where my great grandfather, Sir Douglas Neumicher had jumped to his death. I felt the window; it was solid, did not open and was coated with decades of accumulated grime. I saw I had an excellent view of the city and the busy street beyond the museum courtyard. I watched as clouds moved across the face of the moon. I tried to picture my great grandfather in this room all those decades ago. What changes had time imposed upon this view of the city? What had driven him to his death?

This was no time for speculation so I turned to the desk for answers. It was not impressive, something you'd pick up in a second hand furniture sale but to me it was the most important item in the room. The Egyptian artefacts displayed carelessly on the shelves held no interest. On the desktop lay a few books covered in a thick layer of dust. I glanced at them briefly, before spying a diary. On opening it I became excited. I recognised my great grandfather's handwriting. Tempted to read it now, I had to force myself to just shove it in my backpack for later. The desk drawers yielded more papers that I also removed.

The jewelled chest caught my attention next. Something about it drew me closer. I became disoriented as an unnatural brightness filled the room. My surroundings shimmered and became fuzzy. I tried to focus my vision but that only intensified my dizziness. I remained mesmerised until...

"Mike! He's coming back!" Janet's voice snapped me out of it. I turned to see her standing in the doorway looking anxious, she asked. "You alright?"

Still unsteady and a bit unnerved, I ignored her question. "Let's move!" And we bolted. In our haste I left the door open it was caught in a draft and slammed loudly shut. Without any further caution, we ran, as if the mummies had come to life.

This time Abdulla was certain he'd heard a door slam. Was it just a draft? What if it was an intruder and he did nothing? He could lose his job. Sluggishly he got up, straightened his uniform around his fat body and walked slowly towards the front foyer. While flashing his torch around aimlessly he encountered the intruders as they came scurrying down the stairs with Ali in pursuit. Taken by surprise, Abdulla stepped aside to avoid being knocked over, instead of attempting a tackle. Ali was still only half way down the stairs. "Ali! Go back and check on what they were doing!" Ali complied, Abdulla drew his weapon and puffing with the exertion plodded after the intruders.

Ali headed back upstairs, drew his weapon and retraced his steps. Nervously he walked down the corridor. He briefly glanced at the door to the 'cursed' room and saw the frosted glass had shattered. He aimed his torch at the other doors. All seemed in order, so he proceeded into the room.

Abdulla exited the museum via a side door and spotted one intruder assisting the other over the wall. "Halt or I'll shoot!" he called raising his weapon. He had a clear shot but could not keep proper aim because of his erratic breathing and his shaking hand. He watched the man glance back at him, not taking his threat seriously.

It was then he was distracted by a crash and a terrifying scream. Abdulla hesitated allowing the intruders to escape as he ran towards the front courtyard. There he found Ali lying dead on the pavement below. He looked up and saw the window to the cursed room was broken. Cautiously he moved towards the body of his colleague, recoiling at the look of horror etched into his face. Abdulla removed his jacket and covered Ali's body. "I told you that room was cursed."

### ***Friday 9th September 1994 – 2253 hours***

Captain Sarwat Mukhtar Abu-Bakr hated being called out at night; it made him irritable. A specialist in terrorist activities, he was considered ambitious and innovative by his superiors. He was a young man, tall, thin, with a bold black moustache – a symbol of authority.

He'd arrived on the scene within half an hour of the incident and concluded there was no evidence of terrorism. It seemed to be a prank that had gone horribly wrong. He wondered why such a high priority had been given to what was just a police matter? He watched as the body was zipped up and loaded into the ambulance. In the morning he would find out more about the victim.

He glanced up at the broken window. For now, perhaps he should examine the murder scene – it may provide a clue as to why he'd been summoned. He slowly walked inside and went up the stairs to the mezzanine that seemed to have never been swept. Abdulla and two police officers were hovering nervously outside a closed wooden door with a shattered glass panel. "Anyone inside?"

The three faces became alarmed. "You're not thinking of going in there?" asked Abdulla.

Sarwat was not impressed. This overweight buffoon, nibbling away nervously on a handful of candy, seemed genuinely afraid. Even the local police were uneasy. "This is the murder scene?" he asked. They nodded in unison. "Has anyone been inside?" Three heads shook. Sarwat went to enter.

"It's cursed," warned Abdulla, his eyes nervously seeking support from the others.

"Your partner went in," replied Sarwat.

"And look what happened to him." Abdulla took a large bite from his candy bar. "Just like all the others. I warned Ali, but he was young, refused to believe in the curse."

Sarwat was a man of facts not superstition; he rolled his eyes at the men before him. "What others? What curse?"

"Sir," began Abdulla. "This is the sixth death to occur since the twenties."

"Anyone who enters is doomed to fall to their deaths from that window," continued one of the police officers, a thin, sickly looking man.

Sarwat glared at him. "Except for our thieves who escaped unharmed and most likely pushed your friend."

"No sir," replied Abdulla. "I was chasing them in the courtyard when Ali fell."

"An accomplice then?" suggested Sarwat impatiently. An uneasy silence prevailed. "Are there records of these other incidents?" he finally asked. The sickly policeman nodded. "Can you have them on my desk in the morning?" They all nodded as he took a step towards the door. "In the meantime, I want to know what's in this room of value to our intruders."

Sarwat could feel the eyes of the three men watching him as he swung open the door and groped for a light switch. "You won't find any light in there," said Abdulla. "The first death happened before electricity came to the museum. We sort of left it that way."

"Typical!" replied Sarwat then pointed at Abdulla. "Torch!"

Abdulla handed over his torch without comment. Sarwat stepped inside flashing the beam. There was no evidence of a struggle. All looked undisturbed. He approached the desk, attracted to an impression in the dust indicating something had been removed – perhaps a book. An empty drawer lay open. He glanced at the dusty artefacts on the shelf, then the footprints in the dust on the floor. He sensed the fear of the men peering into the room behind him, expecting him to jump to his death any minute. It made him uneasy. He ignored them and went to the window. The glass was thick.

"It would require a lot of force for a body to break this glass," Sarwat muttered to himself. He wondered how the window had been repaired after the earlier deaths if no one dared enter. Perhaps from the outside? He closed the door as he left and faced the frightened men. "Post a guard! No one enters until my team arrives in the morning."

"Don't need a guard," scoffed Abdulla. The two police nodded in agreement.

"The intruder didn't share your fear. Post that guard!" he ordered and walked off towards the stairs. He was beginning to think there was more to this case than he'd first suspected. Maybe it was a mystery worthy of his talents. His curiosity had been sparked. He doubted he would get any sleep tonight.

***Saturday 10th September 1994 – 1035 hours***

I have often been described as having quick wit, sharp reflexes but no dress sense. I see no real need to wear anything I didn't feel comfortable in. Today was no different. Despite it being a humid 29 degrees Celsius I had thrown on a turtle neck shirt with a frayed collar, jeans and a pair of unpolished shoes. I had an ability to blend in without being observed, and if noticed, was quickly forgotten. This worked to my advantage as a security agent for the Special Investigation Bureau (SIB) assigned to the local Embassy.

I looked across the table and beckoned over the Egyptian waiter who approached quickly. "Another tea please." The waiter removed my empty glass and hurried off leaving my attention focused across the street at the activity around the museum. Last night's events kept playing over and over in my mind. What had caused the guard to fall? What had caused my strange dizziness?

I picked up an old photo of my great-grandfather. It was typical of the era, showing a man in an unnatural pose, dressed in a suit and looking uncomfortable. Whatever happened to him had happened to that guard.

"What happened last night?" I jumped. My elderly benefactor, Dr Gamal Abdul Sayed was peering over my shoulder.

"I don't know!"

The short balding man dressed in a Caftan took a seat opposite. He leaned in to whisper conspiratorially. "Did you kill that guard?"

I shook my head. "He died the same way as my great-grandfather." I stopped. Gamal had known my great grandfather and had become a respected ally in my search for answers. I didn't want to disappoint him. "There's something odd in that room."

"I told you that!" scoffed Gamal. "That's why it's been sealed all these years and why the Museum Board denied you access over my recommendation." Gamal eagerly awaited answers as he rubbed the small grey moustache marking his otherwise clean-shaven face. "What did you find?"

"An old chest, a desk and these papers."

"And what of the guard?"

"We weren't anywhere near him. One guard chased us out of the place, we both watched the come crashing through that same window!"

"Who is us? You and that girl you plan to marry?"

I nodded, noting the irritation in his voice. Gamal had warned me to go alone. I guided him away from that topic. "I'm more convinced than ever that Sir Douglas did not commit suicide, I think he and the guard were killed!"

"Killed by what?" pressed the old man patiently. "I don't believe in curses!"

I shook my head. "I don't know. Something in that room!"

After a moment he spoke. "I never believed your great-grandfather committed suicide. He was too interested in what he was doing. I was only a boy but it was his enthusiasm and passion for solving the mysteries of the past that sparked off my own. Maybe something in the documents you retrieved will help?"

Time ceased to exist for the two of us, as the morning became afternoon and the sun passed its zenith. The ageing archaeologist looked up after reading the closing entry in Sir Douglas' diary and rubbed his tired eyes. "It would appear your great-grandfather had a greater respect for the civilisations of the past than for the current inhabitants of North Africa."

I had read the entry earlier and agreed. "Not exactly the entry of a man about to kill himself. He was homesick, tired but he wasn't depressed."

"He refers to an exciting discovery. Talks about the chest and vials of fluid he found at the diggings. Both seemed out of place to him but he doesn't elaborate on why."

"There was a wooden chest inlaid with green and red jewels in his office."

Gamal lay the diary gently on the table, nodding his head thoughtfully. "Yes, I entered the tomb at Sir Douglas' side. I was only seven but I remember it keenly. All it contained was the skeleton of a thief, the chest, a few artefacts and the vials of fluid. No sarcophagus."

I waited expectantly for more, "And...?"

"Then came the rumour that it was the tomb of a sorcerer who'd been sealed inside alive to protect the ancients from his curse. That rumour has grown into a legend endorsed by your great-grandfather's death, and the others that followed."

"How much of that story do you believe, sir?"

Gamal shook his head. "Very little, but the curse has prevented anyone pursuing answers. Something killed those people and the answer lies in that room."

"Is there any way we can get to that chest officially?"

“We tried that before. Now with the police crawling all over the scene,” he shrugged. “We’ll have to wait.”

“Wait for what, Doctor?” Gamal and I turned to see a tall local man standing behind us. “You wouldn’t be Mike Phillips would you?” I nodded warily as the man drew up a chair and sat down. “Interesting. A major museum curator, with the great grandson of Sir Douglas Neumicher, having tea and a chat, opposite where Sir Douglas died, the morning after an identical death. Would you like to share your thoughts?”

“You are?” queried Gamal.

“Captain Sarwat Abu-Bakr. I’m in charge of the investigation into the events of last night. I’ve spent the morning going over a series of very puzzling files. Thought you might be interested in what I found.”

“And what did you find, Captain?” I asked trying not to seem overly interested.

“Six deaths. Starting with your ancestor in 1923, followed by the identical death of William Broadhurst the next day. He was an Englishman investigating Sir Douglas’ suicide. Six years later in 1929, Margaret Willis, suffered the same fate when she entered that room. Do I need to go on?”

I took up the story. “That was followed by Doctor Van Der Bule in 1948, an archaeologist fascinated by the stories of a curse. Then Gustaf Mustafa, a young boy who stayed back in 1964 as part of a dare. Now the museum guard.”

“You’ve been trying to get permission to enter that room for weeks. Did you succeed last night? If so I need to know what happened?” I remained stony-faced trying not to look guilty as he continued. “May I ask where you were last night?”

“He was with me!” replied Gamal before I could respond. “And we have been conducting an investigation into his great-grandfather’s death.”

“You realise I’m a security agent for the Embassy?” I added.

“That doesn’t clear you of murder,” replied Sarwat.

Gamal leaned towards the officer. “I’d like you to explain how you conclude murder!”

“An extremely powerful force would be needed to hurl those people through the thick glass of the museum window. They couldn’t have done it alone.”

I watched as Gamal smiled, he’d learnt a long time ago to smell a deal in the air. The officer was seeking answers; answers he thought we possessed. “Captain, don’t think you can



intimidate us. However, we would be happy to assist with your enquiries. As we also have an interest in solving this, we may be able to help each other.”

“You mean assist me in clearing him as a suspect?” Sarwat stared at me making me feel very uncomfortable.

“We would be happy to resolve that question as well,” replied Gamal slyly.

I could see Sarwat knew we had some involvement. I watched as his mind ticked over, deciding whether it could be a good strategy to keep us close. He also knew Gamal was a member of the Museum Board – a wealthy and respected man in his field. “Your Board is being obstructive. I could override them but I’d rather have their co-operation.”

“I can help there but anything you do in the museum will need to be under my supervision.”

Sarwat leaned back. “What makes you think they’ll give you access now when you were denied access before?”

“This time we have your department investigating a murder,” replied Gamal a twinkle in his eye, convincing Sarwat he was dealing with a smart but crafty old man.

“Agreed. I’ll meet you at the museum in two hours,” he replied, catching me off guard. “Tell me one thing, did you have an accomplice?”

Gamal tensed as I fumbled for the right words. “Er . . . no accomplice.”

Sarwat smiled triumphantly. “That was an admission of guilt. I could arrest you and I will do so if your benefactor does not come through, is that understood?” I looked nervously to Gamal and then we both nodded like conspirators. “You realise you contributed to that man’s death when you broke into the museum, don’t you?” I didn’t respond. Sarwat turned to go. “Is there anything in those papers I should know about?”

“Not that we’ve found, Captain,” replied Gamal confidently.

Sarwat walked away and I breathed a sigh of relief.

### ***Saturday 10th September 1994 – 1400 hours***

I felt very nervous as we entered Sir Douglas’ office, the events of the night before still haunting me. I wasn’t sure why, maybe I was becoming superstitious, maybe it was the smell of death lingering around this place. I stopped in the centre of the room and stared at the chest, remembering the strange sensations I had experienced when I last stood in this spot.

Gamal went to the vials of fluid on the shelf near the window. "I remember these. They fascinated Sir Douglas when he found them in that tomb!" Gamal carefully laid his backpack on the floor. "...and that chest! People were afraid of it from the start. They felt strange around it, a feeling that vanished when they moved away... Feel it? It pulls at you somehow."

I stared at the chest warily. "I felt dizzy when I was here last night."

"I feel nothing," shot back Sarwat, sitting on the chest as he lit a cigarette.

I sat at the desk and watched as Sarwat commenced to casually study the room, ignoring the frightened faces of Abdulla and the two policemen, peering in from the corridor expecting to see us all die at any moment.

Gamal ignored us all, fascinated by the vials containing the glowing brown oil. "As a child these intrigued me. I remember Sir Douglas scolding me for touching them. I must say their wonder has not diminished with time."

"What are they?" demanded Sarwat.

Gamal gingerly picked one up. "I don't know, we should have them analysed but I doubt they're responsible. I think it has something to do with being alone with the chest."

"On what do you base that?" asked Sarwat.

Gamal didn't respond so I decided it was time I contributed. "We've examined the files on each death; the only common factor was the victims were alone in this room. We've concluded that nothing ever happened when groups are present – like now."

Sarwat rubbed his eyes. "So we're back to superstition. Am I supposed to arrest these artefacts, Doctor? I need a breathing suspect."

Gamal did not look up as he responded, his attention focused on the amber fluid in the vials. "We need time to check out all theories, Captain."

"Could it be a chemical or drug escaping from the chest?" I suggested.

"Perhaps we should open it up," suggested Gamal approaching the chest. Sarwat got out of the way to allow the examination. "I can't even see a crack, let alone a latch."

Sarwat went over to sit at the desk, bored with our musings. "We need to remove this stuff to a laboratory where we can examine it scientifically. Only then, can we dispel the myth with facts."

“No!” protested Gamal as we gave up our attempts. “Not until we’ve properly analysed this room. Mike! Start taking photos of everything using that ruler for scale,” he instructed, handing out the tools from his bag as he assigned tasks. “Captain, you start measuring the room. Nothing is to be moved.”

“What about opening the chest?” queried Sarwat.

“If it’s that difficult to open, there must be something inside that needs to be preserved. We need to open it under controlled conditions.”

“And what will you do while we do all this, Doctor?” asked Sarwat.

“I’m going to take readings. I got these from a friend at the University.” Gamal removed a number of scientific instruments from his bag; some looked like boxes with microphones attached. “With these we can measure radiation levels, energy waves, numerous things I’ll never understand but my friend, Anton will interpret the data.”

Sarwat got up. “I’ll need a copy of that data as well.”

“Hi! Am I interrupting?”

Everyone turned. Janet stood in the doorway. Sarwat took in the attractive brown haired woman who had entered, dressed in an expensive suit. “And who are you?”

I stepped forward protectively. “This is my partner. We both work at the Embassy.”

Janet smiled awkwardly seeing the uniform. Sarwat was not blind to her body language. “Ah! The missing accomplice?”

We spent the rest of the afternoon taking photos, measurements and readings. When we were finished, Sarwat found Gamal sitting on the floor alone in the room watching the sunset through the window that had not yet been repaired. The room was completely empty, even the dust had been removed. “What are you doing?”

“Testing a theory.”

“And how does sitting here alone for hours, in an empty room, do that?”

Gamal calmly looked around. “It shows the room is safe.”

“How do you reach that conclusion?”

“The fact that I’ve not thrown myself out the window suggests the artefacts are to blame, not the room. I was also trying to recapture the past.”

Sarwat was unsure whether he should pry but decided it was his job. "Should I ask?"

"Sir Douglas was the first person to have faith in me. He gave me a job enabling me to feed my mother and start my career. Maybe, I can at last repay him by solving this mystery. What do you think?"

Sarwat shrugged. "Let me put to you another puzzle. An autopsy of the guard indicates he was intoxicated. It was also true of the other victims. Explain that?"

Gamal had no explanation so Sarwat left; I could see none of this made sense to him. He needed answers embedded in facts, not wild theories. He would start to doubt the wisdom in inviting us into the investigation if we didn't come up with something soon. I hoped Gamal's scientific contacts would come through.

#### ***Thursday 15th September 1994 – 1030 hours***

Gamal entered the Cairo University Department of Physics and was met by his friend Doctor Anton Nadir. Anton was a dark haired middle aged Egyptian, who could have doubled for Omar Sharif. He wore the almost culturally mandated moustache of the Middle East offering a window into the character of its wearer. This man was a typical academic and joined Gamal with his arms laden with books from a lecture. He wore a grey suit, white shirt and bow tie and was highly respected in the physics community. His laboratory was the finest in the Middle East and boasted some substantial discoveries in particle research. He greeted Gamal with enthusiasm. "Gamal! My old friend! I'm so glad you're on time." Gamal waited as Anton groped for his office keys, nearly dropping his load.

Gamal assisted by relieving him of some of his books and stood back while Anton opened the door to reveal an office cluttered with books. As they entered Anton took his references from Gamal and dumped them in a corner leaving Gamal to close the door. "Now tell me! Where did you get that stuff in those vials?"

"From a tomb back in the twenties."

The scientist looked offended. "Fine if you don't wish to tell me." Anton removed some of the clutter from a chair for Gamal. "I thought we knew each other better than that?"

"It's true, Anton! I was there, I was only a child but I entered that tomb at the side of Sir Douglas Neumicher. What can you tell me about them?"

Anton decided to move on. It was not important. His findings were, "At first very little, the fluid in the vials could not be identified. We found it was inert under certain conditions and active under others."

"Meaning what, Anton? I'm an archaeologist not a physicist."

"I'm not completely sure. I might even be wrong. All I can say is that the fluid contains unknown particles that behave like nothing I've ever seen before. I can assure you this is not the product of an Egyptian tomb. I've already sent a sample to a colleague in London."

"That may not have been wise but let me know the results as soon as possible."

"Why not?" queried Anton.

"I'm not sure I suspect that what you've found may attract unwanted attention. In the meantime can I have the vials back?"

Anton handed him a plastic case dismissing Gamal's fears out of hand. "Already packed up for you."

Gamal opened it to check. He found the vials carefully placed inside. "Let me know what your tests reveal. Remember, keep this to yourself," cautioned Gamal. "And what about the chest?"

"We couldn't open it. All attempts to examine its interior using X-Rays or other scanning equipment failed. It's emitting an energy field which is shielding its interior from our instruments."

Gamal rose to leave. "Let me know what your colleagues overseas find out."

"Gamal, you must tell me more. There's a mystery here. My findings don't make any sense. This did not come from an ancient tomb."

"Ah! But my old friend, it did," replied Gamal mysteriously. "Be patient and we can unravel this mystery together. Where is the chest now?"

"On its way back to the museum," replied Anton, disappointed. Gamal turned to go but Anton grabbed his friend by the arm. "You can trust me, you know."

"I know."

Anton was not satisfied but walked his colleague to the door disturbed by the whole matter. What did his friend hope to gain by using such an implausible story.

#### ***Thursday 15th September 1994 – 1100 hours***

A large wooden crate was loaded onto the back of an armoured car. Heavy metal doors slammed shut after two security guards entered the vehicle. A lone driver, Jerry Powell, a red head with a marine style haircut and black-rimmed glasses, started the engine and drove out of the university car park. He hated driving trucks.

The armoured car was unescorted as it turned into a nearby street. From a side street a car with tinted windows came screeching to a halt, blocking their path.

Jerry jammed on his brakes and swerved to avoid the obstacle, running his vehicle up on to the footpath. He was about to get out and abuse the driver when two armed men, in balaclavas leaped from the car and fired two armour piercing rounds through the windscreen.

Seconds later they were at his window. "Out!"

Jerry offered no resistance, stepping from the vehicle as a truck pulled up behind. Two men got out and placed a black magnetised box on the rear door of the armoured car and stepped back. A metallic pop broke the locks and forced the doors to swing open as if hit by a sonic blast. The stunned guards inside were dragged from the vehicle by the first two hijackers who handcuffed them to a railing.

The hijackers commenced loading the crate into their vehicle. As they were preparing to leave, a fourth vehicle, a black Mercedes pulled up with three red headed men wearing black suits and sunglasses. The driver, Tregan, remained in the car as the other two got out armed with pistols fitted with silencers. They shot the two hijackers where they stood then climbed into the truck and drove off, followed by the Mercedes.

The surviving hijackers fired at the departing vehicles, with no effect. For a moment they stood there looking from one to the other, unsure what to do next... then they fled on foot.

I could see that Sarwat was furious. This was the second major crime scene connected to that chest and we knew no more than we did five days ago. "What happened here?" he asked grumpily.

"Appears we have two groups of hijackers fighting over that chest. That van..." pointing to the armoured car. "...was transporting the chest back to the museum."

"Do we know who took it?"

"I presume it wasn't you," quipped Sarwat as we both noticed Commander Gordon approaching. He was a bombastic, chubby man with a gruff voice and a cigar he enjoyed chewing rather than smoking.

The driver Jerry Powell accompanied him but broke free and rushed over to me with a beaming smile. "What are you doing here, Mike?" I ignored his puppy like attention which I found to be very embarrassing.

Gordon cut in. "I'd like to know the answer to that question, Phillips? I don't recall assigning you to this case. You and your partner's job ended a week ago," he asked confronting me, his cigar clenched tightly between his teeth.

"I assigned myself, sir. It's a personal matter."

Gordon shot Sarwat a look of contempt indicating he'd like to be alone but Sarwat showed no sign of leaving. Gordon ignored him. "Since when did you start giving out assignments? Has there been a change in the chain of command I've not heard about?"

"No, sir!"

"I want you and your partner off this case and on a plane home today! Is that clear?"

"May I ask why? I think I can contribute."

Gordon glared at me, he didn't like being challenged and I had a reputation for not sticking to the rules. "You have your orders. We have this matter in hand."

"And what matter is that, sir? How does this case affect SIB?" I queried becoming suspicious of Gordon's motives.

"That's not your concern and your interference is jeopardising our operation!"

"Sir! I'd like to request in on this operation."

"Request denied! Now do I have to place you in custody?" Gordon waited. I stood my ground defiantly. This involved a family mystery that I was not going to abandon even if it cost me my job. "Maxwell!"

Dan Maxwell was a well-dressed young agent wearing a suit and tie who scurried up to Gordon like a dog responding to its master. "Escort him and this local from the scene. If you have a problem, arrest them!"

Sarwat moved to object. "You cannot...!"

Gordon cut him off. "Check with your superiors. This case no longer concerns your department." Gordon nodded to Maxwell to proceed.

"You heard him, move!" ordered Maxwell hoping they'd obey.

As we were led away Sarwat asked. "Your boss?" I nodded. "I'd like to know how he's involved in my investigation."

"So would I but I may need to go over his head to find out," I replied as we reached my car under the watchful eye of Dan Maxwell. Once he had turned and walked off I took out my mobile and dialled a number. "Thomas! Mike Phillips, I need to see you urgently."

A loud jovial voice responded clearly enough for Sarwat to hear. “Mike! Sure, how about this evening? I’m having a party at the Embassy. Drop in. We’ll talk then. Bring your lovely partner.”

“We’ll be there, sir” I replied and hung up. I noticed Sarwat was watching Gordon and Maxwell in conversation.

Commander Gordon chewed furiously on his cigar, like a bulldog with a bone, while watching us. “How did he get involved?” Maxwell shrugged. “If he doesn’t leave we’ll have to get rid of him.”

“What about the chest?”

“Find it! We can’t let Tregan get whatever’s in that chest. It could tip the balance in their favour,” warned Gordon.

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