



Allison & Busby
PROOFREADING TEST

Prologue

1923

The bastard was keeping him waiting, of course. Deliberately.

A typical civil service trick, Howard M. Carter thought angrily. He was being kept waiting by a small, pompous, self-opinionated man seeking to inflate his own feeling of self-worth. From outside the building, across the courtyard beyond the Embassy gardens he could hear the rattle of a cart in the sweltering heat. Here in the ante-room it was cooler but he could feel the sweat gathering in the small of his back, staining his shirt. Above his head the ceiling fan circulated rhythmically, sending out a regular *thunk, thunk, thunk* sound. He shifted in his seat, feeling the anger in his chest thicken, knotting like a red hot ball as he glared at the clerk seated behind the desk at the other side of the room.

The minor official, neatly dressed in collar and tie, was young and smooth-cheeked, fair hair carefully parted, spectacles perched on the end of his nose and seemingly

impervious to the heat. A minion; but a Cerberus, nevertheless. As the anger began to rise in Carter's throat, the Clerk, perhaps sensing the frustration that gripped his guest, raised his head, smiled. 'I'm sure sir Leonard will see you soon...'

From the street outside came the subdued hum of the Cairo traffic, muffled by the expanse of garden at the Embassy. Carter had always hated this place, because of its shibboleths, its airy dismissal of the realities of the outside Egyptian world, its stuffy, self important officials, but most of all because of its refusal to support his cause, with its careful kow-towing to Egyptian sensibilities in the face of wholesale corruption and mendacity.

He leant his head back against the wall, brushed the back of his hand against his small, neatly trimmed moustache. Carter closed his eyes, controlling the anger in his chest, preparing himself for the meeting to come, but at the same time allowing his thoughts to drift back to those moments last December which he knew would continue to be the self-defining moments of his life...

He recalled the absolute, rivetting silence that had greeted him when he went down to the site that day, the first excitement that had thundered his veins when he heard how the boy had raised the alarm, and then the men had shown him the first step, outlined there in the dust. They had worked furiously clearing away the sand, and the steps led downward, through the hidden centuries, until finally he had found the broken shards in the entrance, the scattered pottery, and there on the door, the familiar motif that had appeared on many tombs in the valley, the jackal

in triumph above the nine bound captives. The motive of the necropolis of the Valley of the Kings.

He recalled now how his hands had been trembling as he brushed away the dust and rubble from the base of the door. There were more broken shards of pottery: he could make out the cartouches stamped upon the clay: *Smenkh-ka-Re*, the seal of the pharaoh, and saw what he knew was the doorway to his tomb. The blood had hammered in his throat when he realised that the seals on the door itself were unbroken.

He had never been a man in complete control of himself, but he held onto his excitement then, as he held on to the simmering anger now. Immediately he was certain he had discovered a tomb he had wired his friend, benefactor, and patron, the fifth earl, Lord P. J. Carnarvon, at home in England.

‘At last have made wonderful discovery in Valley; a magnificent tomb with seals intact; re-covered same for your arrival; congratulations.’

After an initial hesitation – there had been so many false alarms in the past – Earl Carnarvon had replied that he would be coming out from England to the Valley of the Kings post-haste. They had both known this was their last chance after years of endeavour in the sand of the valley; the money had run out, it was to be the last year of digging. But they had succeeded at last. And succeeded beyond dreams, beyond all realistic expectations.

Carter had boarded the felucca and drifted along the broadening flow of the Nile to spend a few days preparing

for the visit of his patron, making plans for the next few months work. When the train had come lumbering into the station at Luxor he had been there on the crowded platform to meet them as they alighted. The provincial governor had been at his side, of course: news of the discovery had inevitably leaked out, and though no one knew for certain what really lay under the rubble, the workmen had replaced on the steps. Lord Carnernon had come forward, white-suited, limping and leaning on his stick with his free hand out-stretched, neatly attired as always, his lean features excited, smiling. Behind him had come his daughter, his devoted companion in all his Egyptian work, Lady Evelyn, young, happy, enthusiastic. Evelyn...

Carter was aware of the difficulties: she was not yet 20 and he was years older than she, they were of a different social station, and yet he felt he held a special place in her heart. He was convinced that it had not been merely girlish flirtation that caused her to hold his hand, kiss his cheek when they had proceeded to the Valley of the Kings and he had first taken them to the tomb. When the excavation party had been photographed at the top of the cleared steps on the day of the official opening, her father had stood on his left but Evelyn had chosen to stand on Carter's right, linking her arm through his, pressing close to his side. Now, musing in the ante-room at the Embassy he almost felt he could still sense the pressure of her hand on his arm...

And it was she who had been first to enter the tomb itself.

* * *

They had cut the hole in the upper lefthand corner of the wall and pulled out the ancient masonry. He had inserted a lit candle into the aperture as a precaution against foul gasses, and then, after widening the hole a little further, had peered inside. Lord Carnarvon, Lady Evellyn and Pecky Callender had been standing behind him but Carter was barely conscious of their presence. What he saw inside the tomb had struck him dumb. The hot, fetid air inside the ante-chamber caused the candle flame to waver and dance and it took a little while for his eyes to become accustomed to the gloom. But at last details began to emerge in the leaping, flickering light: strange animals, the glint of gold... everywhere the glint of gold.

Leaning on his stick behind Carter, unable to stand the suspense, Lord Carnarvon had broken the silence. 'Can you see anything?' He struggled to get out the answer. 'Yes... It's wonderful...'

He had stepped back then, inserted the electric torch, and each of the small party had taken the opportunity to peer into the chamber that had been closed three thousand years earlier. They were all awestruck in turn, shaken by what they had seen. Then, as the day faded, Lady Evelyn and Lord Carnarvon had returned up the steps to the entrance, and Carter and Callender finally resealed the small aperture in the wall. They climbed the steps thoughtfully, locked the wooden grill that had been placed outside the first doorway, and the small group then rode home, down the silent, moonlit Valley.

They all knew what was required of them by the

Egyptian government, but that evening, after a subdued dinner at the small house where Carter had established himself near the diggings, Carter had first blurted out the suggestion. They had sat there, stared at each other, uncertain, but filled with a nervous excitement. The terms of the concession granted to Lord Carnarvon by the Department of Antiquities were explicit: in the event of any discovery at their excavations, entrance was to be undertaken only under the supervision of department officials. But Carter had endured months, years of petty officialdom and meddling from Pierre Lacau, the Director General, along with others; but it was *their* discovery, not Egypt's. Carnarvon's money, Carter's own expertise built up over decades, and six years of hard work had led to the unlocking of the tomb...

After dinner they rode back that night into the moonlit Valley, silent, each preoccupied with the enormity of what they were about to do as the looming cliffs gleamed pale about them under the bright stars and the sharp, clear moonlit sky. If the truth ever got out, there would be scandal, a reputation destroyed. But the small group - Carter, Lord Carnarvon, Lady Evelyn and Calender - rode on, unable to resist the temptation, each aware of the rising excitement in throat and chest, the longing to consummate the burning desires that now consumed them.

They dismissed the guard, unlocked the padlocked gate, descended into the corridor, reached the doorway in the wall. With Callender's assistance Carter had cut a second hole directly below the first, making a breach low down as Lord Carnarvon and Lady Evelyn stood by. Then they

had paused, looked at each other in the harsh light of the hand-held electric torchlight, powered by a cable run down from the tomb of Rameses VI above. It was a pause, a last uncertainty, and it held them in silence. It was broken by the young woman.

‘I *must* look,’ Lady Evelyn had squealed, and it was enough.

With difficulty, she wriggled through the hole they had made in the right-hand corner of the wall, and he had passed through to her the flashlight they had brought with them to the tomb.

‘What can you see,’ Carter had asked, unable to contain his impatience.

As you already said,’ she cried out. ‘Things of wonder!’

They hesitated only a moment longer. Seized by a burning excitement Carter and Callender tore at the wall, enlarging the hole until Lord Carnarvon was able to force his body through the aperture, joining his excited daughter in the anteroom beyond. A short while later Carter stood beside them inside the chamber, while Pecky Callendar, too big and heavy to force his way through the aperture, stood guard outside. Callender passed through to them the brighter hand-held light, and they could see that they were in a slender corridor, but Carter knew that the shimmering gold ahead of them would be one side of an enormous gilded shrine...

The ceiling fan went *thunk, thunk, thunk* in the otherwise silent Embassy office but Carter was hardly aware of the sound. He recalled the images that had been presented to them on that first incursion and how they had later learnt

that the great tabernacle beyond contained a nest of smaller shrines protecting the royal sarcophagus; in one of the gilded mummiform coffins within lay the intact remains of the Pharaoh Tutankhamun. But the moments after their illicit entry remained burnt into his memory: the electric light swept its glare over walls covered in gold inlaid with blue faience, played over hieroglyphic inscriptions and symbols of protection and when they had slid back the bronze lock bolt to enable them to open the hinged doors they saw scattered on the floor, undisturbed in the dust of thousands of years, many beautiful objects. gold boxes, staves, alabaster vases, beautifully carved chairs, a confusion of over-turned chariots, gilded statuettes, alabaster urns, clay jars and eleven sacred paddles laid out in a line, ready for the Pharaoh's journey to the underworld.

Ellen had grabbed at his hand, squeezed it, and her voice was thick with excitement. 'I told you! Wonderful things! Look at the murals!'

Pharaoh, in his guise of Osiris, Lord of the Underworld; Pharaoh standing before his successor dressed as the god Horus in the blue crown and leopard skin of a *sem*-priest; Tutankhamun again as a living monarch wearing the *nemes*-headdress, holding a mace and stave. They stared at the scenes around them, murmuring their wonder; they marveled at the workmanship, but it was in the north-east corner that they finally discovered the storeroom and found themselves facing the great gilded shrine.

Evelyn's voice was low, almost strangled. 'Its the most beautiful monument I've ever seen.'