

EXOTIKA

ELLORA'S CAVE

CROOK & FLAIL

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Crook & Flail

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CROOK & FLAIL

Maria Isabel Pita

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“The manner in which the spiritual generates and interacts with the physical is the basis of the entire Egyptian doctrine.”

John Anthony West

Chapter One

Lucia awakes when two slender arms of sunlight begin reaching across the bed for her.

It is a wonderful few seconds before she focuses on the black rocks of her suitcases strewn across the sandy carpet and her loss washes over her again in a sickening wave.

Reaching blindly for the nightstand, she threads her watch between her fingers like a golden asp and raises it over her dark brown eyes.

It is five o'clock in the afternoon.

She makes herself get out of bed and pulls open the blue curtains over the glass doors.

From inside the room all she can see is sky.

* * * * *

After showering away the weariness of thousands of miles along with dead skin cells, Lucia slips into a long and sleeveless white cotton housedress then dials room service.

A short while later, after she has lazily unpacked the bare essentials, a man in native robes delivers her martini. She steps out onto the balcony with it.

Far below her, on the avenue separating her hotel from the river, small cars swerve recklessly around men on bicycles and black horse-drawn carriages.

Sipping her drink, Lucia loses her thoughts in the urgent motion but the modern eruption soon spends itself as rush hour draws to a close, making the ensuing peace taste even sweeter.

Emptying her glass pyramid of its last drop of vodka, she gives herself over to the beauty of the twilight. The setting sun casts a sparkling path of stars across the water and beyond the narrow belt of greenery visible on the opposite bank of the Nile, desert mountains curve sensuously against the pale sky, the cool breeze wafting in from the west a delicious, living caress to her skin after the stale atmosphere of three airplanes.

She is seeing the ancient view with her eyes but she is thinking about Richard. She is always thinking about Richard. Even when she is concentrating on something, else her heart continues beating the memory of Ri-chard, Ri-chard, Ri-chard relentlessly, so that the undying thought of him colors everything... The desert is the world's bared flesh and, like everything else, it reminds her of him and of how much she misses fucking him. She had lived to feel him come, to feel him come hard, wherever he wanted to. Sometimes he had climaxed so deep in her mouth that his cum poured

straight down her throat, and she missed not being able to taste him. Sometimes he had ejaculated over her face, blinding her with a hot blizzard of sperm that tasted like nothing else in the world because it was all him. She would eagerly lick her lips and then open her mouth to catch the last drops of his pleasure on her tongue. She had never been happier than when his penis was inside her—in her womb, naturally, in her ass, even better, but especially in her mouth.

The sun, glowing like a warm and infinitely sweet drop of honey now, begins dipping into the tombs honeycombing the western hills.

She remains haunted by the memory of her favorite position, lying on any suitable surface with her head hanging back off the edge so he could either kneel or stand as he fucked her mouth, caressing her taut cheeks and vulnerable throat, sinking in deep. Then sometimes he wouldn't move at all—he would just stand there filling her with him and nearly choking her. She would hardly be able to breathe and yet she had relished every uncomfortable second of it because it was his penis her tongue was savoring, his head that was selfishly stroking her throat, his balls that were making her every inhalation hot and difficult and totally delicious since it was all him she was breathing in. Then, finally, he would begin moving and she would feel his erection pulsing in rhythm with her heart as his orgasm approached...

Abruptly realizing that the sun has disappeared and she can no longer see anything except the river's ghostly reflection, Lucia reluctantly turns back into the room and dresses for dinner.

She slips off her long white housedress and exchanges it for a black bra that snaps closed in front, black bikini panties made out of breathable cotton and a sleeveless black dress with a low scoop neck that falls to mid-thigh and clings gently to her curves. Finally she slips on black strap high-heeled sandals, her watch and golden hoop earrings. She has never taken off her large diamond wedding ring and she never will.

* * * * *

The dining room of the four-star Etap hotel is surprisingly crowded.

Waiting to be seated, Lucia gazes shyly into the roaring sea of diners.

From a few tables away lapis-lazuli blue eyes meet hers and instantly make her aware of her beauty for the first time in months.

The native hostess, lovely in a form-fitting green dress trimmed with gold thread, returns. "This way, madam," she says in a melodic accent and leads Lucia over to a small table privately situated behind a magnificent lily plant in full bloom.

Waiting for a menu, Lucia contemplates the white flowers thrusting out from between the dark-green leaves. The curved blossoms always make her think of cobras poised to strike.

A waiter in a traditional white *galabiyya* materializes at her elbow. "Madam," he says, handing her a menu, "there is a gentleman who wishes to know what you would like to drink."

She ignores her pulse's eager reaction. "Tell the gentleman that he is very kind," she replies, "but that I'll order for myself when I'm ready."

"Yes, madam!" His grin startles as it makes her think of the crescent moon fallen to earth. "I will tell him, then be back."

Conflicting emotions begin seriously fighting each other in her pulse, for the first time in nearly two years, when a moment later she sees the young man with the stunningly direct stare heading her way. He is tall and lean in black jeans and a white button-down shirt that make his shoulders look breathtakingly broad. His dark hair is combed straight back away from his face to fully reveal an ideal bone structure gilded by a soft golden tan.

"I'm sorry to intrude," he says in a pleasantly pitched, quiet voice that doesn't sound in the least bit apologetic, "but I couldn't let you get away without at least asking your name."

"Lucia Taylor."

"Mark Russell and it's a pleasure to meet you. Are you traveling alone, Lucia?"

"Yes," she says quickly and then feels compelled to add, "I'm a widow."

"I'm sorry." He pauses respectfully. "How long has it been?"

"Seventeen months, three weeks and four days."

"Wow," he murmurs, clearly impressed by the time-keeping abilities of her grief. "And you're trying to forget your sorrow by seeing the world?" he asks abruptly, holding her eyes.

Strangely enough, his rather rude honesty feels much better to her than the polite sympathy she has been dealing with for so long. "Yes," she replies and then, without even knowing she intended to, she asks, "won't you join me, Mark?"

He promptly pulls out the chair directly across from her. "Would you mind?"

"Why do men always respond to a question with a question?"

"I don't know," he seats himself, "why do we? What would you like to drink, Lucia?"

"Wine, please."

"Some Chardonnay perhaps?"

"Why do men always assume a woman drinks white wine?"

"Sorry." He smiles briefly, amused by her defensive fencing. "What are you planning to order?"

"I don't know yet. Perhaps you can recommend some of the local dishes?"

"Thank you for trusting me, Lucia."

"Is there any reason I shouldn't?"

"Absolutely no reason at all."

Their waiter appears right on cue with a second menu. Mark studies the selections in silence for a moment and then confidently orders what sounds like an exotic feast to Lucia. The Egyptian then solemnly collects both menus and departs without bothering to ask her if she wants anything else.

"If I ate like that all the time," she remarks, "I'd be as fat—"

"As the Queen of Punt but this is the special occasion of our meeting, Lucia, and you certainly don't have anything to worry about."

Amazed by his reference, she focuses on the brood of lilies. "You're an Egyptologist?"

"No," he replies with feeling. "I'm a photographer working closely with Egyptologists at the moment, a breed of human being all their own, believe me."

This remark elicits a smile from her. "I do. I nearly studied Egyptology myself."

"Well, that's not surprising. Every time you look in the mirror you see a true Egyptian queen. The Egyptians weren't black, you know."

"Oh please." She shoos the compliment away like a mosquito, disappointed by his unoriginality.

"If it wasn't true, Lucia," he crosses his arms over his chest, "I wouldn't have said anything so trite. Except for your skin, which is just a bit too pale, and quite beautiful by the way, your face is completely Egyptian, from your full, mm...exquisitely shaped lips to your eyes... What can I possibly say about your eyes that would do them justice? And finally, that long dark hair... How long will you be in Thebes?"

It pleases her that he uses the city's ancient name rather than the modern "Luxor". "As long as I like, Mark."

"But I'm sure you didn't marry your husband for his money—you loved him."

Once again she finds his bluntness refreshing rather than offensive. "Yes, I loved him," she hesitates before adding, "he died in a car accident. His name was Richard." From the corner of her eye she spots their wine approaching. "He was drinking and driving."

"Fool."

The waiter sets the bottle on the table, goes through the ritual of opening it for them with a pained air and then incorrectly fills both their glasses nearly to the brim before either one of them has approved the vintage.

Lucia quickly sips her wine to get the familiar taste of bitterness out of her mouth.

"Kwayyis?" Mark asks her. "Good?" he translates.

"Yes, very nice," she says truthfully, "but I really don't know much about French wines."

"Neither do I. I'm a California man myself. Those Napa Valley guys aren't stupid. They make high quality wines Americans can enjoy without waiting decades. They

know we're not so patient. I'm sorry, Lucia, I shouldn't have called your late husband a fool. My friends tell me I need to work on my tact."

"You mean your hypocrisy?" She raises her glass. "I'll drink to the way you are now, Mark."

He regards her soberly as he chimes his glass against hers. "And how is that?"

"Brutally direct."

He lowers his voice, "So that's how you like it."

She quickly looks back over at the lily plant. "What are you photographing here in Thebes, Mark?"

"A tomb."

"Which tomb?"

"Nefertari's."

"Really?" She looks at him again. "Are you covering the restoration work being done on it?"

"You could say that."

"I hope they're able to save it. From what I've heard they've been working on it for years, something about the salt content in the limestone walls corroding the paintings."

"It's not in good shape but they're still trying." He sips his wine.

How utterly unconcerned he looks makes her suspicious of him again. "So who do you take pictures for, Mark?"

"I'm somewhat of a freelance artist. I hope you'll let me show you my work, Lucia. I have a feeling you'd like it."

Astonished to feel herself falling into his relentlessly direct stare, she quickly opens a metaphorical parachute sewn from her late husband's shroud. "Richard was a novelist," she says shortly. "He wrote best-selling mystery novels with a supernatural slant. Some people called them horror novels but they were a bit more subtle than that."

"A tough act to follow." Mark doesn't sound in the least bit concerned as he continues enjoying his wine and looking intently into her eyes.

"What makes you think the play hasn't ended?" she retorts lightly.

"Oh I hope not, Lucia, because I know some very good lines."

She smiles.

"You're even more amazingly beautiful when you smile," he says quietly.

She ignores the compliment even though it pleases her, coming from such a strikingly handsome young man. "How long will you be in Thebes?" she asks him.

The first appetizer is set between them.

"*Shukron*," Mark says and plucks up one of the toasted bread chips.

"*Shukron* means 'thank you', right?"

"Aywa." He scoops up some dip onto the chip, reaches across the table and insinuates the offering between her lips.

"Mm...that's very good. What's in it?"

"A bunch of stuff, let's see...ground eggplant, sesame paste, lemon juice, garlic and olive oil, amongst others. Have some more."

"How old are you, Mark?" she asks abruptly, as though pulling out a weapon with which to fight him.

A slight frown knits the skin between his dark eyebrows. "Why do you ask, Lucia?"

"There you go again, answering a question with a question," she accuses him mildly.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight. It's a perfectly reasonable question, Mark."

"I'm twenty-three and so what? I get the feeling you've been through a lot, Lucia, but now you're away from it all so just try to relax and enjoy yourself. Okay? That's an order."

"Oh is it?" She smiles to cover up the way her pulse reacts to his commanding tone.

"Yes," he thrusts another dip-covered chip between her lips, "it is."

* * * * *

Over an hour later Lucia says, "That kefta kebab was delicious, Mark, and everything else was at least...interesting. Thank you for the recommendations."

"It was entirely my pleasure. I'm glad you enjoyed it all."

"The kebab was made with ground lamb?" After half a bottle of wine and an assortment of delicious dishes she is feeling relaxed enough to make casual conversation.

"Ground lamb mixed with onion, parsley, mint leaves, cumin, marjoram, lemon juice, garlic and paprika."

"I'll bet you're a good cook," she teases him.

"No, I just have a great tongue, baby."

She laughs. She has not, it strikes her suddenly, laughed this much since before Richard died. "I think I've had a little too much to drink," she remarks self-consciously.

"Are you kidding? We've barely even started."

The confidence with which he gestures for the waiter has a conductor-like effect on her senses and emotions and she can't seem to look away from him even as she protests. "No, Mark, that's it for me, thanks."

"That's what you think. Fortunately, I know better."

"I don't want anything more to drink," she insists half-heartedly.

"Yes, you do," he insists right back and when their waiter appears he orders a bowl of cold fresh fruit for dessert.

"Is it safe to eat the fruit here?"

"Perfectly," he assures her, "if it's washed, which it is. It couldn't have tasted better in paradise. It'll also help us digest all that spicy meat."

"Poetic and practical all in a single breath. I like that."

"Thanks. Give me your hand."

Too surprised to protest, she stretches her right arm over the table.

He grasps her hand gently in one of his and turns it so her palm is facing up as if he is about to read her fortune. But instead he raises it toward his lips so his warm breath caresses her skin as he says quietly, "There's always tomorrow, Lucia." He kisses the center of her lifeline. "And the day after that. Someone has to break the seal on your tomb sooner or later, princess." He lets go of her fingers.

Suddenly not sure what to do with them, she clenches her hands in her lap, almost as if holding on to the feel of his warm lips on her skin.

He sits back. "The treasure is still there, intact and waiting," he drains his glass, "and there are two ways to handle it. I can caress my way to it, gently removing one block after another." He looks deep into her dark eyes, assessing her reaction to this approach. "Or I can force my way in."

This time she doesn't look away.

He pushes his chair back abruptly. "Forget the cold fruit." He stands up and slips a tattered black leather wallet out of a back pocket. "Let's go," he says, tossing a handful of large, colorful bills onto the table.

Willingly allowing herself to be hypnotized by his commanding tone, she gets up and precedes him out of the dining room.

What looks like an entire nursing home on tour is milling before the elevators out in the lobby, the red lights tracking the slow progress of the cars up and down the shafts appearing to monitor their collective pulse.

"Let's take the stairs," Mark suggests at once.

"But my room's on the ninth floor," she protests.

"It'll help us work off dinner."

"What floor are *you* on?"

"I'm right off the garden, of another hotel." He opens the door to the stairwell. "After you."

Pride forces her to set a good pace up the steps but she has time to think about what is happening now. On the third landing she stops abruptly and turns to face him. "Mark, I don't think —"

He grips her arms as his mouth opens slowly over hers.

His tongue is pleasantly dry and tastes of wine and spices and it is also shamelessly forceful.

After a moment he pulls back and smooths the hair away from her face as she catches her breath. "You don't think *what?*" he whispers and then smiles triumphantly down at her silence.

When they reach the ninth floor he opens the heavy door for her and then lets it thunder closed behind them.

Her fingers feel awkward, like strangers with each other, as she fishes the key out of her purse.

"I hear all the rooms in the Etap have a Nile view," he comments while she unlocks the door.

"Yes..." She steps into the lamplit space and quickly navigates through the maze of suitcases.

This time he closes the door quietly behind them.

"It's stuffy in here," she says and parts the curtains just far enough to slide open one of the glass doors leading out onto the balcony. She gasps at the surprisingly cold breeze that caresses her dress as it enters the room.

"The temperature drops dramatically at night in Egypt, Lucia."

She has no choice now but to turn and face him.

"Come here, princess."

She approaches him slowly.

Slipping his arms around her waist, he presses her body and her lips firmly against his and his tongue begins leading hers around and around in a passionate dance like a fierce gentleman in a ballroom.

After a timeless while she turns her face away to catch her breath in disbelief. "Oh God," she sighs.

"What's wrong?" he whispers.

"Nothing." That's precisely what she cannot believe.

He genuflects before her, slips his hands up into her dress and pulls her black bikini panties all the way down her legs in one swift gesture. He leaves their soft shackle around her ankles as he rises with the hem of her black dress in his hands and lifts it over her head with the same elegantly controlled force. "How long has it been, Lucia?"

"Too long," she replies fervently.

He snaps her black bra open in front and moves back. "Take it off," he commands, "slowly."

She obeys him, unable to look away from his eyes, which shine flat and silver as a cat's in the dim light.

He watches her, his stare moving down from her beautiful face to her delicately full, perfectly round breasts as he unbuttons his shirt. "Very nice," he says, slipping off

the white cotton and tossing it behind him. Then he steps right up to her again so her long, firm nipples make electric contact with his bare chest. "Now on your knees, baby."

She caresses his hard, smooth body as she obeys him.

He cradles her face with one hand and slips his other thumb between her lips. "Do you want me, Lucia?"

Her tongue lets him know without saying a word that she does indeed want him, that the taste of him intoxicates her. It hits her painfully then how much she has missed not just the flavor of a man's skin but also the mysterious flavor of a man's will. She hasn't opened a man's jeans in a long time either but she makes short work of the buttons over his swollen crotch and quickly pulls the tough denim down around his thighs. Her fingertips are eager for the sensations waiting for them inside—a cool surface radiating warmth that can go from rippled and tender to smooth and firm, the utterly unique tactile experience of a man's penis.

Very slowly she peels away the soft cotton of his black underpants, teasing herself with anticipation.

She had sincerely believed she would never hold a growing erection in her hands again, yet she has not been in Egypt one full day and yet already her sexual desire has resurrected inside her.

Mark's skin is not as pale and fine as her husband's had been and she immediately suffers the impression that it is not as sensitive but his cock is beautiful, thick and long and totally straight, the head merging seamlessly with the shaft almost like an ancient statue's. Yet she hesitates to put it in her mouth. She isn't sure she really wants to.

He literally takes the decision out of her hands. Grasping his impressive erection, he easily slips the head between her full lips and thrusts the fingers of his other hand through her dark hair so she can't turn her face away. She has no choice but to let him slowly penetrate her mouth, and the fact that he is forcing himself on her makes him taste inexplicably good.

His voice is hard and as full of satisfaction as her mouth. "That's it, princess, suck my cock."

Chapter Two

Lying beside her on the coffin's white satin sheet, he turns toward her.

She sighs with happiness as he takes her in his arms. "Oh, Richard!"

"My name is Mark."

In the dim sunlight filtering in through the curtains the eyes looking down at her are a shining silver worth more than any dream. "I'm sorry," she whispers.

He lets go of her and slips out of bed. "I have to leave," he says. "I have to be in the Valley by eight," he explains as he plucks his underwear up off the floor. "But I'll free up some time after today, princess. I promise."

Watching him dress, Lucia's heart is so full she doesn't know what to say. "Mark..." she begins and then just lets her eyes tell him how she feels.

He finishes tying the laces on his black sneakers and returns to the bed. "I know," he whispers, bending over her. "I feel the same. I'll see you tonight." He kisses her forehead. "We'll have dinner with some of my friends."

"Friends?" She selfishly resents the idea of sharing him so soon. She has also grown accustomed to being alone. "Mark, I'm not sure I want—"

He straightens up. "I said," he stares down at her sternly, "we'll have dinner with some of my friends. It wasn't a question."

"What time?" she asks, unable to resist his commanding tone.

"Sunset," he answers shortly and leaves.

Okay, here it comes, she thinks, yet the minutes pass and grief inexplicably refrains from raping her sensual contentment. Instead she realizes that for the first time since Richard's death her senses are simply looking forward to the day ahead. Naked, Lucia gets out of bed and stands in front of the dresser mirror.

From now on, she thinks, looking her reflection straight in the eye, *I'm going to experience every moment to the fullest without worrying about anything. I'm going to enjoy myself.* And with that settled she proceeds to admire the curvaceous firmness of her figure, which she effortlessly maintains with only a moderate amount of exercise. At the same time she ponders the mysterious fact that the mirror's cool glass was once yielding sand and determines to similarly harden her heart to sorrow. She cannot allow it to keep clouding her vision so that she finds it impossible to see a future for herself. Especially since her body made it perfectly clear last night that she is still very much alive.

* * * * *

Dressed in slim-fitting black jeans, comfortably worn black leather shoes and a short-sleeved white cotton shirt, Lucia slips her key in one pocket, a few random credit cards in another and leaves the room, sunglasses in hand.

Outside on the front steps of the hotel a crowd of native men immediately flocks enthusiastically around her and she inevitably focuses on the most insistent one. "Carriage, madam? Take you wherever you want to go! *Aywa*? Yes?!"

"*Aywa, shukron*," she replies, savoring her first Arabic words as she follows one of the robed Egyptians down to the sidewalk and lets him help her up into a black carriage drawn by a tired-looking white horse.

He leaps up into the driver's seat in front of her and grins back at her over his shoulder. "*Ala-tool*? Where to?"

"The Luxor Museum, *minfadlak*. Please." She is much too worn out from the long plane flight, not to mention from Mark's relentless energy, to even think of visiting a temple today. The museum is small and manageable and yet possesses an extensive and varied collection of ancient artifacts.

A cool November breeze wafts soft as silk over the morning's gently penetrating warmth. Lucia takes a deep breath, inhaling the sharp scent of the ancient river, discernable even beneath the more obvious smell of horse sweat and the inevitable stink of exhaust from all the little cars weaving impatiently around the tourist carriages. And just beyond her own familiar perfume she catches a whiff of an intangible yet heady excitement as people from all over the world stream down the sidewalks, paradoxically smiling as they make their way to tombs and lifeless temples. On her left the Nile flows right along with her and the beat of the horse's hooves against the asphalt evokes vivid, split-second flashbacks of the night's hard rhythm that make her feel deliciously relaxed and weak with anticipation of more to come.

She is almost sorry when her carriage comes to a stop in front of an attractively modern two-story structure.

Lucia pays her driver the fare he quotes her without bothering to haggle and slips her sunglasses into her shirt as she walks toward the building, forgetting everything but the beauty of her first morning in Egypt and the intensity of her first night in the land of the pharaohs.

Inside the museum is atmospherically dark, its treasures intimately displayed in pools of light with detailed notes describing them and, for the moment, she seems to have the place mostly to herself.

Deciding to work her way down, Lucia follows a dark-gray stone ramp up to the second floor, where a glass case runs along three walls, luminous as a fish tank in the half-light.

She walks over to one end of the display case and spends a long time admiring a cosmetic spoon once used by a noblewoman to scoop perfumed oils out of alabaster jars. It was carved from a single piece of wood in the shape of a naked girl swimming, her slender body stretched taut as she glided across the water holding the shallow bowl.

Lucia glances up from the exquisite piece when she suddenly becomes aware of a man standing at the other end of the gallery. His hands are thrust deep into his pockets and his dark clothes merge with the shadows while his profile catches the light rising from the display case.

She stares at him intently, afraid to let herself blink lest her lashes brush him away...

He is as tall as Richard was, before they found him curled up in his car like an embryo trapped in a shattered eggshell, and a cruel trick of light is making him look exactly like her dead husband.

He turns toward her slowly...

She becomes aware of the fact that she has fallen to her knees when they suddenly make contact with the hard floor and tears of pain force her to blink.

There is no one there.

She hears footsteps approaching from behind her but the legs that materialize beside her are disappointingly clad in khaki slacks.

"Madam, you all right?" a concerned male voice inquires as warm hands grip her arms. "You need doctor?" The security guard helps her back up to her feet.

"Oh no, thank you...shukron... Excuse me, but did you see...was there a man standing over there just now?"

"No, madam," he looks around him, "there is no one."

Lucia stares longingly into the shadows where she just clearly saw her dead husband standing.

"Come," the guard drapes a possessive arm around her shoulders, "I find you chair to sit down."

"No, thank you," she says quickly, slipping away from him. "I'm fine now." She hurries over to the ramp and when she is halfway down it nearly collides with a strikingly tall blonde woman on her way up.

Back out in the sunlight's bracing warmth, Lucia lingers on the museum steps, staring across the street at the Nile's god-like vein as she waits for her pulse to slow down. When she can manage to take a deep breath again she slips on her sunglasses and begins walking back toward the hotel, looking around her at a whole new world.

* * * * *

She spends the entire afternoon in her room, either lying across the bed succumbing to jetlag or sitting outside on the balcony, watching the life swarming below her with the mindless intensity of a cat.

She refuses to think about those impossible moments in the museum so, naturally, that is all she can think about.

Finally she begins trying on dresses for her dinner date with Mark and his friends, desperately trying to focus on her own reflection in order to stop seeing him, but the effort is in vain.

When the western horizon is a smoldering log and the river reflects the flaming sky in its full-length glass Lucia steps naked in front of the mirror and dares to face what happened.

Either she imagined him or Richard showed her that he is still essentially himself somewhere.

Suddenly she feels guilty that she wasted so much time mourning him in New England when she should have realized that Egypt is where she has to be now that he is Osiris and she is Isis, devoted to her husband's soul and all its mysteriously developing powers.

Three swift raps on the door make her clutch the dress over her heart, as they seem to punctuate this thought.

"Open up, baby, police!"

Her pulse quickens beneath the exciting impression that Mark has been sent by Fate to arrest her desire to break the laws of time and space. "I love you, Richard," she whispers fervently and runs to open the door.

* * * * *

Lucia paints what she feels is a mysterious little Egyptian smile on her face as Mark introduces his friends.

Seated across the table from her in the Etap dining room is Lori Eastman, an anthropologist who specializes in Native American cultures.

So what is she doing in Egypt? Lucia wonders.

On Lori's left is Luigi Scarlatti, a very tanned and classically handsome Italian restoration artist working in Nefertari's tomb. On his left sits his English wife Elizabeth, who has miraculously preserved her peaches-and-cream complexion in sunny Egypt. Her fine features are slightly pinched around the edges and her slenderness borders on the skeletal, making her look older than she probably is. Her best feature is the white-blond hair that curves around her face like a lily flower. And finally, seated on Mark's right is his younger brother Nick, his strawberry-blond hair spoiled by the desert sun to a carrot orange that clashes unappetizingly with his lobster-red sunburn. His features are small and unremarkable and his geologically broad shoulders and colossal arms mark him as a dedicated bodybuilder.

"You spoke the truth, my friend," Luigi addresses Mark. "She is Nefertari herself. I know because I spend every day with her and I am in love with her smile!"

His wife's smile looks as strained as the tea she sips.

During dinner the conversation leaps from one subject to another like a dolphin staying close to the surface.

Lori does not say much at all. Her lips are thin and she is a big-boned woman so there is something masculine about her despite her large and oddly vulnerable hazel eyes. Her long brown hair pulled back into a braid and red feather earrings evoke the Native American cultures she specializes in. Lucia learns that Lori is in Egypt visiting her husband Doug Eastman, who, according to Mark, is the most rabid Egyptologist around. He did not join them this evening because he is intent on deciphering a certain fragment of papyrus before it crumbles to dust.

"He's totally obsessed," Lori sums her spouse up placidly.

"Face it, honey, there's a scarab beetle where his heart used to be," Mark elaborates.

Lori smiles. "His theories are rather a load of crap." She is referring to the scarab's practice of rolling its eggs around in its own dung to nourish and protect them. "An archaeologist should be completely objective and Doug definitely isn't."

"I don't think anyone is," Lucia feels compelled to defend the man, "especially about things they truly love."

"Nefertari is right!" Luigi exclaims. "We humans are subjective, emotional beings and this is what makes us so beautifully creative!"

"Yeah, just look at all the wonderful things we've created," Nick throws in dryly. "The atom bomb, biological warfare, global warming. Humans are great."

"So what do you think of Egypt, Nick?" Lucia immediately changes the subject before it can turn to politics.

He suddenly looks uncomfortable. "It's cool, I guess."

"He just graduated from college," Elizabeth remarks.

Lucia smiles at her before giving Mark's brother her full attention again. "What did you study, Nick?"

He avoids her eyes. "Just business," he says, shrugging off his education with his overdeveloped shoulders.

Luigi yawns dramatically. "Please, I beg pardon, but it was a very long day." He sniffs.

"Nefertari takes a lot out of him," Elizabeth remarks, carefully examining her salad as if she is afraid something might be hiding in it.

"I thought Nick should see a little of the world before settling down to some dull old job," Mark explains.

"Yeah, but I wish we'd gone to Japan instead," his brother mumbles. "They have ruins there too, you know."

"Yeah and gorgeous little geishas. Sorry, bro, maybe next time."

"It is painfully dull here in Luxor." Elizabeth pushes her plate away. "Maybe we can get together sometime, Lucia."

"I'll be showing her the sites, if you want to come along, Liz," Mark says.

"Thank you, darling, but I've had my fill of rocks and you know I like to stay out of the sun."

Luigi caresses his wife's hair. "She goes for walks along the river at dawn and at twilight, like a delicate fairy." He is careful not to disturb a single strand.

Mark asks her, in a private aside, "Do you like your stuffed vine leaves, Lucia?"

"They're all right." Unfortunately, she'd left her appetite in the museum's dark gallery. "What exactly are they stuffed with?"

He leans into her and whispers, "Nothing but good things."

"What made you pick Egypt over other popular spots on the globe, Lucia?" Lori asks her abruptly.

"The fact that I've always wanted to come here. I nearly studied Egyptology."

"Really? What stopped you?"

Lucia has never liked being interrogated and so she adopts Nick's laconic attitude. "I was too lazy to learn hieroglyphs I guess."

Luigi laughs.

"What do you do for a living instead?" Lori persists.

"Nothing," she answers defiantly, even more annoyed now. "I'm free to simply contemplate the nature of the universe."

Luigi raises his wineglass. "A most noble activity," he declares.

Lori seems about to say, "Doesn't that get boring after a while?" but then realizes such a comment will only backfire on her.

"And have you concluded anything about the universe so far, Lucia?" Elizabeth asks her politely.

"I'm still studying," she replies shortly. Growing doubts about her mental health are making mundane conversation even more of an ordeal than she normally finds it. In the back of her mind she cannot stop reliving those impossible moments in the museum, yet part of her is also increasingly worried that she only imagined them.

"Are you okay?" Mark asks her in another private aside, refilling her wineglass. "You don't seem very fond of your *hamam mahshi*."

"I'm just not very hungry tonight. It's not a Cornish hen...what is it?"

"A grilled pigeon."

"Oh God." She puts her fork down.

"What are you two whispering about?" Luigi demands happily. "I am jealous."

"Nothing." She smiles over at him, wondering how much Mark has told everyone about her.

"You do not look the kind of woman to speak of nothing," the Italian replies seriously. "I am sorry for your loss, Lucia. It is good you are here, but you should visit Italy next. I promise you will be...what is the word? Restored."

"She's a woman, love," his wife reminds him, "not an old painting you can get your hands on."

Nursing his Coke, Nick mumbles, "I would have liked to go to Italy."

Suddenly it seems unreal to Lucia that she is surrounded by people when less than forty-eight hours ago she was completely alone. She reaches for the anchor of her wineglass, wishing Mark was not sitting so close beside her because she desperately wants to focus on him rather than on the shadow haunting her mind. Only Lori's oddly fixed stare burns the thought of Richard away for a moment as she attempts to identify the emotion smoldering inside the other woman.

Mark senses her discomfort. "I'll get the check," he says.

"No, Mark," Lucia says, anxious to make up for her lack of social skills. "I'll get it."

"Nefertari is paying for the feast," Luigi informs the table.

"Cool!" Nick says with feeling.

* * * * *

Sitting on a loveseat in one of the lobby's cozy, lamplit nooks, Lucia watches Mark and his friends disappear into the surprisingly cold Egyptian night.

Richard had been as antisocial as his books were popular, and their dinner parties had been rare, intimate affairs usually involving just one other couple.

Mark reappears and walks casually back toward her as she stares at him hungrily.

"Your friends are very nice," she tells him as he seats himself on the couch beside her.

"They're all crazy fucks," he disagrees fondly, "except Nick, who's just dull. I tried pumping the Nile into him like an IV but his imagination's a hopeless flatline. He deserves the cubicle he's doomed to."

"You love him," she translates, "and I get the feeling you're like a father to him...even though you're not much older than he is."

"Dad took off when I was thirteen and Nick was eight. Mom was always there for us but she cried a lot. I swore I'd never hurt a woman like that."

She cherishes this statement for a silent moment. "Your mother was really lucky to have you, Mark."

"She still lives in the same house in Virginia."

"That's a beautiful state."

"And lonely as hell, but she says she has her memories of us and her friends, not to mention her cat... You're fucking beautiful, Lucia."

She looks away shyly. "For now."

"Forever." The warm breeze of his whisper stirs her hair. "Do you hear me, sweetheart? Forever!"

"Oh, Mark!" She looks down at her clenched hands. "I don't understand what's happening here."

He pries her fingers apart gently, takes one of her hands and pulls her to her feet. "We're happening."

* * * * *

They have an elevator all to themselves tonight, yet he lets go of her hand and does not even look at her as the car glides up toward the ninth floor without pausing, leaving her free to study his handsome profile. Like the same shadow cast by different bones, his hard and confident expression reminds her painfully of Richard.

He finally glances at her. "Do you like what you see, baby?" He makes the question sound like a threat.

The elevator doors open slowly.

"Yes," she replies softly, stepping out into the corridor.

He follows right behind her, grips one of her wrists and bends her arm up against her back. "Do you like what you feel?"

She gasps, "Mark, you're hurting me."

"No, I'm not." His tone is even more threatening now. "Not yet." He maintains an implacable grip on her wrist as his other hand reaches into her purse, finds her key and opens the door to the room. He kicks it closed behind them and makes her walk ahead of him to the bed.

Still standing behind her, he pushes the purse off her shoulder and lets it fall to the floor. "Bend over," he commands, finally letting go of her wrist so she can obey him.

She immediately does as he says, bracing herself on the edge of the mattress.

He caresses her dress up over her back slowly, letting her feel his warm hands through the fine silk as they follow the smooth curve of her bottom. His thumbs dig into the sensitive tail of her spine and he makes a small, hard sound of approval that registers excitingly inside her. She holds her head up and closes her eyes, arching her back for him.

"Beautiful," he comments quietly.

She moans from the pleasure he gives her before even penetrating her.

He leaves her dress resting in soft drifts around her waist and then the fingertips of both his hands just barely touch her as he slowly pulls her panties down her legs.

His patience is excruciating and makes her black silk panties feel like ash drifting down from her pussy's urgent, burning need. But he is deliberately making her wait, making her want him so much she moans and hangs her head in despair that he is not inside her yet. Her legs are spread just wide enough apart that her panties remain around her knees like a soft rope and, finally, she hears him unzip his jeans. The sudden hard smack he gives her ass surprises her into crying out and turns her on even more.

Her cheeks burn painfully when he spansks her again and then again as she whimpers in protest. She was already so hot for him, how much she wants him now really begins to hurt.

"Please," she begs, not expecting him to show her mercy so soon. It stuns her when she feels his cool, dry head parting her pussy's aching wet lips. He penetrates her slowly, forcing her to savor his full length even though all she wants is to absorb him all at once, hungrily. But he makes her suffer the profound truth of how empty she is without him by sliding his rigid penis into her so gradually every nerve ending inside her seems to bloom and cling to his generous shaft. He sinks all the way into her tight sheath but then her sigh of contentment as she experiences the exquisite caress of his ball sac against her vulva turns into a desolate gasp when he pulls all the way out of her again.

"Mm, you have such a tight little pussy, princess." One of his hands grips her hip as he holds himself with the other, tormenting her with just the teasing taste of his head again. "Touch yourself," he commands.

She does not want to. All she wants is the pure joy of his cock stroking her and getting bigger and harder until it starts pulsing and sending shock waves of pleasure through her whole body, electrifying her with the almost dangerous power she sensed in him last night as he fucked her.

"I said touch yourself, Lucia. Do it! I want to feel you come." He gives her half his erection but it isn't enough. She is dying to feel all of him inside her again. Yet the second she obeys him and begins caressing her clitoris an orgasm surges in like a tide responding to the moon's glowing pull and dissolves her around him. She rubs her clit feverishly but it is the thought of Richard meeting her eyes across the museum's dark gallery that makes her heart seem to burst with the beautiful hope that floods her pelvis and breaks against her flesh in a devastating climax. Mark dives into her then as if unable to resist the undertow of her pleasure, which instead of ebbing swiftly begins cresting again as his cock plunges deep into her pussy faster and harder until she comes again. And this time her inner muscles clench around him and pull him into ecstasy's violent wave with her.

Chapter Three

A scattering of soft, round clouds is reflected in the sheet of the Sacred Lake, like pillows on which to rest the eyes from an endless expanse of stone and sand.

Mark lets her pause for a moment beside the water while continuing his amazingly detailed lecture on the temple. "Notice the wavy courses of masonry in the wall encircling the lake, Lucia. The different layers of stone recreate the hieroglyph for water."

"You mean that's not just erosion?"

He clutches the shirt over his heart and rolls his eyes up into his skull. "Sacrilege!"

She laughs as a perfectly temperate breeze wafts across the lake like a sense of well-being, impossible to define. It caresses her even as the sun's warmth penetrates her, which keeps her aware of her body's sensual horizons and how they mysteriously define her perceptions.

"So, Nefertari, do you remember what this lake was used for?" Mark follows her gaze across the water. "Doug says it played an important part in purification ceremonies. Personally, I think it was just an excuse to party around the pool."

She looks up into his eyes and for a breathless instant glimpses the unfathomable energy behind his irises as they glimmer like hot blue stars burning through the atmosphere. "Will you show me some of your work tonight, Mark?" she asks him almost urgently.

"Sure. Now rub the scarab for luck."

At one end of the sacred lake in the Temple of Karnak sits a large stone statue of a scarab, one of four that originally guarded the primordial waters of Nun, symbolized by the pool. The beetle's monstrously large body is worn smooth from centuries of exposure to the elements and to tourists stroking it for luck.

"The scarab is the symbol of the transforming quality of the sun, Lucia. 'The light that becomes out of the darkness'."

"That's beautiful."

"Courtesy of Lori's better half, although people tend to consider him her intolerable half."

"Most people are idiots."

"Yes, but you have to admit that it takes quite an imagination to equate rolling eggs around in a ball of dung with the sun's passage through the sky."

"Not really." She rises to the defense of the culture she has loved since childhood, "Not when you consider that the sun is surrounded by the universe just as the scarab's

eggs are surrounded by dung and buried in the Nile mud just as life is latent in the black emptiness of space. It actually makes sense, since life and light sprang out of darkness."

"Okay, I get it, now make a wish and rub the bug."

The scarab perches on a pedestal level with her chest. Lucia rests her palms lightly against its round body and says reverently, "This is the One that became Two when it grew conscious of itself, which then became Three as it created a realm for its own experience, the legs emerging from its body the laws of matter and manifestation."

"Cool."

His irreverent response does not annoy her. She knows he is deliberately echoing his brother in an effort to lighten her mood, yet it is proving difficult to live merely for the moment's pleasure because she wants it to last and this naturally leads to all sorts of worrisome thoughts.

Making their way back out of the temple, they pass through the Hypostyle Hall again, where rows of massive columns stretch for almost as far as the eye can see, all of them carved from top to bottom with hieroglyphs. Originally they were all vividly painted and the hall was covered so that the sun's rays penetrated the temple only in isolated shafts, which would have made the colorful writing appear to flower across the stone stalks in a shadowy atmosphere evoking the mystery of creation. The roof has long since vanished however and sunlight now streams down between the columns, on which only ghostly traces of color remain.

"What you're looking at here, Lucia, is a stone papyrus swamp. See how the central columns are taller and have open capitals, while the rest are smaller and look like closed buds? They represent different stages of growth. Please also notice how Amon is shown here in his form of Min, meaning with an erect penis and holding the flail of power." On this suggestive note Mark drifts away from her, framing shots with his hands. He did not bring his camera with him today, which she considers a compliment.

There are always tourists in the Hypostyle Hall but because it is so immense no one else is actually visible as she walks around slowly, occasionally throwing her head back to admire a phallic pillar outlined with the almost unreal clarity of a cartoon against the vivid blue sky. Ankhs, the symbol of life, are carved everywhere and almost always two together. They resemble a child's stick figure drawing of the human form and when placed right next to each other give the impression of two minds merging. A distant, melodic laugh strums her way along the massive strings of the columns as Richard steps out from behind one a few yards away. He walks toward her wearing a white shirt and white slacks that bleed into the sunlight so her heart sees him more clearly than her eyes.

"Hey," Mark is suddenly beside her again, "are you okay? Don't tell me you're coming down with Pharaoh's revenge."

She stares fixedly at the space between the pillars in which the vision of her husband has been replaced by black spots floating like sinister, single-celled creatures in the air's luminous sea.

"What's wrong, Lucia?"

"I don't know..." She does know, however, that he will shoot Richard down as her own delusion and the last thing she wants is to clip her lover's supernatural wings with rational fire. "I'm not sure, Mark, but I think I just saw..." Her vision blurs strangely. "I think I just saw my husband."

"Excuse me?"

"I just saw Richard!" She closes her eyes as the extreme clarity of the air cuts painfully into her brain.

* * * * *

When Lucia opens her eyes what feels like only a second later, she is stunned to find herself lying on the bed in her hotel room. She sits up in disbelief just as the door opens and Mark walks in.

"You're awake," he declares, sounding intensely relieved. He perches on the bed beside her and grasps one of her hands reassuringly in his as another man appears and pauses on the threshold. His light brown hair is pulled back into a ponytail and the skin of his gaunt face is both tanned and burned by the sun in a way that makes her think of chocolate with a cherry filling oozing out in places. A faded pair of jeans and a black T-shirt hang from his thin frame much as they might from a mummy who stole them just after escaping from his tomb.

"Lucia, this is Doug Eastman." Mark introduces the apparition. "He has some medical training so I went for him instead of a local doctor."

"What happened to me, Mark? How did I get here? We were just in the temple..."

"You passed out, Lucia."

"I fainted?" She falls back against the pillows again. "I've never fainted before in my life." But then she had never seen a ghost before either.

"I had to carry you all the way out to a carriage," Mark complains. "You don't look so heavy." He gently rests the back of his right hand against her forehead. "You're hot, baby, but you don't have a fever."

"I wish I could say it was a pleasure to meet you, Lucia." Doug finally steps into the room. "However, under the circumstances..." He seems reluctant to come any closer to her.

Mark rises, making way for him, and Doug takes his place beside her on the bed. Without further introductions and frowning as though he resents her wasting his time, he makes her say "ah" and then roll her eyes up into her skull. He measures her pulse, sniffs her breath like a dog and rests his cool, dry hand on her forehead. Finally he checks her pulse again.

"This woman is obscenely healthy," he declares, surging to his feet. "Whereas the papyrus I was working on is about to disintegrate."

"It looks like a papyrus is where you got your medical training," Mark retorts. "If she's so healthy, why did she pass out cold?"

"Because that's a perfectly natural reaction to shock," Doug replies evenly. "Lucia, Mark tells me you think you saw your late husband in the temple of Karnak this morning. How long has he been dead?"

His reasonable, almost matter-of-fact tone catches her off guard. "Seventeen months," she says, "and I don't believe death is something that just happens to us any more than life takes care of itself. The Egyptians understood this very well." She has said more than she meant to.

Doug stares down at her intently, as if studying a beautifully preserved mummy. "Well..." He clears his throat. "Considering your recent loss, Lucia, and your frustrated desire to study Egyptology, I suppose it's not surprising these two passions have come together now in this unwholesome fashion."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Mark leans against the glass doors and stares out at the sky, clearly agreeing with this diagnosis.

Embarrassed and more disturbed than she cares to admit by this abrupt change of scene – her body has never done anything so dramatic before – she takes her anxiety out on the pillows behind her, beating them into shape so she can sit up comfortably.

Doug clears his throat again and looks over at Mark.

"You both think I imagined it," she says coolly, "but I didn't. I've been living alone in a gloomy New England mansion for almost two years now. If I'd wanted to imagine a ghost that's where I would have done it, not here."

"Perhaps you feel you've abandoned your late husband, Lucia," Doug's tone remains carefully neutral, "by leaving the home, the life, you shared together, and guilt is making you see things."

She shakes her head. "No, that's not it."

The Egyptologist's large dark eyes evoke a sarcophagus of the Greco-Roman period, when doubt was already stronger than faith. "I can give her something to take," he mutters.

"My grasp on reality is tenuous enough right now without any drugs, thank you," she snaps.

"I was only going to suggest a mild sedative." He glances at Mark again like a dog desperate to be let off its leash.

"A sedative?" She is getting angry now. "I need to be sedated because I believe in the immortality of the soul? Why is it so impossible to think I really did see Richard's spirit in the sunlight at Karnak? I could just be imagining him but maybe I'm not and I think both possibilities deserve consideration, for Christ's sake."

Mark says firmly, "Calm down, Lucia. Whatever else is going on," he approaches the bed, "it's obvious you're dehydrated, jet-lagged and maybe suffering from a touch of Pharaoh's revenge." He bends over her and kisses her forehead. "Get some rest," he urges quietly. "We'll talk later."

* * * * *

The instant the door closes behind them, Lucia gets restlessly out of bed, slides open the glass door and steps out onto the balcony.

The Nile is a deep, glittering blue and the desert mountains beyond it are a stunning contrast in smooth gold and bronze.

I saw Richard again!

Immediately her reason argues that she is deluding herself and reminds her that she is hardly the first woman who has desired to break the laws of time and space for the man she loves. Her rational mind urges her to keep a firm grip on her emotions and her sanity.

Her heart tells her that even after thousands of years forces are still at work in Egypt that facilitate communication between different levels of reality and that if she...

Her thoughts stumble at an abrupt knock on the door. She knows it isn't Mark because she gave him a key to her room.

An Arab man in Western clothing is standing out in the hallway. "Ah!" He smiles, revealing a mouthful of uneven, nicotine-stained teeth. "I am happy you are feeling better, madam. I am with the hotel and when that young man carry you in, we were much concerned."

She is too elated to feel embarrassed. "Thank you, but there's no need to worry, I'm fine now. Thank you," she repeats and begins closing the door.

"Wait, madam, here in Egypt it is very dry and you must drink much water." He gestures to a robed man standing behind him, who quickly slips past her into the room, carrying a tray. "Compliments of the management, that you may feel better, madam."

Lucia thanks them, locks the door and hurries back out onto the balcony with one of the complimentary bottles of sparkling water. She makes an effort to dive back into her thoughts but her elation has flowed disappointingly away for the moment.

She knows perfectly well she has to beware of the part of her that feels her visions of Richard are a reward for how much she still loves him. It is such a tempting concept she knows it has to be wrong. Dry skepticism is the proper attitude to mix with her intoxicating hope so her feelings don't start bumping foolishly against very real physical laws. Yet it is impossible not to hope something is happening, something that is more than just the synapses in her brain getting crossed from the burning intensity of her desire to see him again.

She grips the railing with her free hand and stares down at the tiny mountains and valleys formed by her knuckles.

She was alone with a man in the museum's dark gallery – there is no doubt about that. She would be able to convince herself now he only bore an uncanny resemblance to Richard if her eyelashes had not simply brushed him away. He was there one second and gone the next but he was there. Her vision feasted morbidly on him for at least a full minute before he turned toward her, at which point she might have blacked out from the shock just long enough for the man who looked so much like her late husband to rush away in search of a security guard to tell him a woman had just fainted.

Her reason stubbornly proposes the theory that her imagination sculpted him from the gallery's deep shadows and soft illumination, yet it does not explain his reappearance at Karnak as an impressionist stroke of white-gold light all her brain cells immediately recognized.

"Oh God." She drains the bottle, walks back into the room and opens a second one, amazed by the depth of her thirst. Then she begins undressing for a shower, always a small comfort when she doesn't know what else to do.

Mark is right, of course. Her perceptions are more likely than not being affected by jetlag and dehydration. She has also drunk a good deal of wine the last couple of nights and probably not enough water in a climate as dry as New England is humid. Her tears have also suddenly dried up, surrounded by the warm horizon of a living man's arms.

Hot water beating against her skin always stimulates her and today it makes her feel relaxed enough to accept that her visions of Richard are only tricks of light and of her pulse – a haunting biological projector powered by how desperately she misses him. And perhaps her love for her husband is having the opposite effect she desires and tying him down to earthly life. Grief and gravity are related in that they are both byproducts of physical existence and maybe what he wants is for her to lighten up inside and stop missing him so much so he can move on.

Lucia discovers the bathtub is not completely watertight when she slips on some wet tiles as she steps out of it. A sound like gunshots fired in rapid succession fills the bathroom as she grabs hold of the shower curtain to break her fall and rips it off three of the metal rings holding it up.

Shaken, she wraps a towel around her and steps carefully out into the safely carpeted bedroom.

Even after drinking two large bottles of water she is still intensely thirsty. She had not expected the Egyptian climate to be so relentless, probably because she had given up expecting anything at all.

She lets the damp towel slip down her body to the floor and abruptly suffers the elating sensation of shedding her heavy sadness along with it. She goes and stands in front of the balcony doors, a hope growing inside her as clear and strong as the cool glass she presses her palms against. At the moment she does not give a damn that it could endanger her sanity should reality shatter it in the end. It is such a beautifully clear day the black railing around the balcony looks like a gash in the atmosphere through which she can see the darkness behind everything.

The black rotary phone on the nightstand lets out a long metallic purr.

She lets it ring two more times before answering it. "Hello?"

"How are you feeling?" Mark's disembodied voice is disarmingly sexy.

"Better." She sits down on the edge of the bed. "I think you're right about my being dehydrated, Mark. I just drank two whole bottles of water and I'm still thirsty."

"I'm always right."

She smiles. "Is that so."

"Do you still believe you saw your husband's ghost, Lucia?"

"I told you, Mark, I don't know what to believe. I'm just...open to things."

"Mm, yes, I like that about you."

She asks softly, "You're not going to make me rest tonight, are you?"

"I'm not sure. Do you think you've suffered enough for one day?" He does not give her a chance to answer. "I'm at the Savoy, in room nine. Meet me here at sunset."

Chapter Four

Mark is staying in one of the Savoy's garden rooms, a modern addition to the original Victorian structure.

She knocks on the door of number nine.

"Come in!" Mark's voice calls from inside.

The door is unlocked and Lucia pauses on the threshold, surprised by how dark the room is.

"Give me a minute, princess."

Seated directly across from her at the other end of the room, Mark is outlined by a spectral aura that gives him the magical air of an Egyptian artist working on an illuminated section of wall deep in the earth.

She closes the door behind her. "Take your time," she says, observing the snake pit of cords at his feet. She approaches him but resists the urge to touch him since he is working carefully with the mouse. But before she can see what he has on the screen of his laptop he exits the program, turns in his chair and pulls her down onto his lap. She laughs and slips her arms around his neck. She would have liked to run her fingers through his shoulder-length hair but it is slicked back with gel to keep it out of his face. "Why don't you just cut it?" she wonders out loud. Richard always kept his hair short—he disliked long hair on men.

"Cut what?" he asks absently, engrossed in cupping one of her breasts and weighing it in his hand. "You're not wearing a bra..." He brushes his thumb across her nipple, which is already firm from the cool wind outside. It hardens almost painfully now beneath his attention, pressing against her thin black cotton shirt. The low scoop neck allows him to bury his hot features in her cool cleavage. "You wicked thing," he murmurs. "Are you trying to tempt me?"

His breath seems to thaw the snow-white skin over her heart by sending a meltingly deep pleasure through her body. She plants both her hands against the back of his neck, which is warm and firm, strong and yet vulnerable, the sensual column of flesh joining his body with his mind that feels excitingly related to his erect penis.

"Mm..." He tugs her shirt down out of his way to suck on her nipple, which feels strangely sore and swollen, as if months of longing for a man's hungry devotion have accumulated like an intangible milk in her virgin breasts. And the more attention he pays her nipple the more a creamy excitement dampens her panties and makes her wish she wasn't sitting sidesaddle on his lap.

"Stop," she breathes. "It hurts."

He turns his face up toward hers. "Why does it hurt, baby?"

"I don't know — they're just so sensitive."

"Really?" he squeezes her right breast cruelly and then silences her cry by thrusting his tongue between her lips, forcing her mouth open in a kiss that literally takes her breath away.

The door to the room opens suddenly. "Um, am I interrupting something?"

Mark lets go of her and she slips reluctantly up out of his arms. "I didn't realize you two were sharing a room," Lucia says, concealing her annoyance at Nick's unexpected appearance.

"We *were* sharing a room." Mark gets up after her and switches on a lamp. "Nick's heading home tomorrow so I asked him to join us for dinner tonight, if that's all right with you."

"Of course," she lies civilly.

Nick slams the door closed behind him, stretches his arms up over his head and falls straight back across one of the beds like a column toppling. "God, I'm worn out!"

"It's very dry outside," she sympathizes and perches on the bed across from him to enjoy the spectacle of his muscular body stretching.

"Yeah." He cradles his disproportionately small head in his hands. "And I followed this gorgeous blonde all over Luxor."

"But you were too shy to say anything to her when you finally caught up with her, right?" Mark is examining the contents of one of the dresser drawers.

Nick sighs. "I didn't even get close. Oh well, I'm leaving tomorrow anyway. Back to civilization."

"And all those USDA choice babes." Mark winks at her as he slips into a long-sleeved black shirt.

Nick consoles himself. "She was too thin for me anyway. It would have felt like hugging a skeleton."

* * * * *

"Let's face it, we'll never be able to get back that sense of wonder we had as kids." Nick is still feeling sorry for himself. "Nothing will ever be as exciting as Christmas morning. Remember how great it was, Mark?"

"Sure I do, but certain things more than make up for that loss don't you think?" his brother replies indulgently.

Lucia does not know whether to admire Mark's patience in this ridiculous conversation or to respect him less for it until she looks at him and then respect wins hands down.

Nick rattles the ice in his empty glass. "Yeah, well, I'd give up sex any day to feel that way about the world again." He doesn't appear to be joking.

"Some people manage to retain their sense of wonder," she argues, trying not to sound disgusted. "That's the trick, isn't it? It's pointless to idealize childhood." She refrains from saying "stupid". "As an adult you have to cultivate your sense of wonder but you're rewarded by a much keener appreciation for things. Inspiration –"

"Oh who cares," Nick interrupts her rudely. "When you're a kid everything's taken care of for you. You don't have any worries. The only responsibility you have is to enjoy yourself."

"You're forgetting about school, bro."

"No, I'm not. Studying was fun compared to spending eight hours a day in some stupid cubicle doing the same thing over and over again. At least we were supposedly learning something."

"Graduation blues," Mark diagnoses.

The two-star Savoy Hotel's saving grace is the long veranda, where they are seated around a table on white wicker chairs. From here they can watch carriages trotting up and down the Avenue and the rhythm of their passage helps soothe Lucia's growing restlessness.

Sensing it, Mark leans toward her. "I'll send him to bed soon," he whispers, "and then we'll go for a walk by the river."

She smiles her consent and tunes Nick out, concentrating instead on the energetic pulsing of the astonishing number of stars visible beyond the tranquil halos of the streetlights.

Her emotions are playing with very real forces now, which is much more exciting than any make-believe childhood game ever was. Even if she is only imagining life's divine plot, at least no objective authority can order her to clean up the poetic mess of her feelings and put away her desires.

* * * * *

When Nick finally heads back to the room to finish packing, Mark takes her hand and they stroll down the sidewalk on the riverside of the avenue in the direction of her hotel.

Enjoying the feel of a man's warm, solid hand holding hers again, Lucia gazes at the amorphous shapes of the boats docked below them. They rock gently on invisible currents with a soft lapping sound she finds both soothing and strangely exciting, as if the dark water is licking the base of her spine. Farther out the black river glimmers with starry scales evocative of a vast serpent casually swallowing whole centuries as it flows by.

Mark breaks their silence with a gentle accusation. "You're thinking about the vision you had at Karnak."

"No, not really," she answers truthfully.

He lets go of her hand. "Do you really believe your late husband appeared to you, Lucia?" he asks her again.

"I don't know, Mark. Maybe I've been grieving so long it's driving me crazy."

"You're perfectly sane," he says impatiently.

Part of her is more grateful than she wants to admit for his reassurance. "Mark, what I haven't told you is that I had a similar...experience in the Luxor Museum yesterday morning. I thought it was a trick of light, that it was just some stranger who looked like Richard but then he turned toward me..." She cannot even begin to describe how she felt in that impossible moment. "Then suddenly he wasn't there anymore, just like at Karnak. I blinked and he was gone, just like that."

"What you're going through has a natural explanation, Lucia."

"It does?" She has no desire to hear anything that might convince her Richard is only a psychological illusion.

"Yes, it does." He stops walking and faces her. "Doug's right—you're feeling guilty. Part of you believes you're betraying Richard. Think, Lucia, it wasn't until after we slept together that you began seeing him. Don't you feel that's significant?"

"I don't feel guilty about us, Mark."

"Maybe not consciously."

She turns away from him and sits down on a stone bench facing the water. She cannot control the flood of longing that sweeps her away every time she imagines Richard is making a powerful effort to communicate with her.

Mark sits down beside her. "Come here..." He rests a hand on the back of her head and gently but firmly forces her cheek down against his chest. "I guess that's just the way things work," he murmurs. "I have gorgeous women coming out of my ears yet I fall in love with a widow haunted by her dead husband's ghost."

He cushions the exquisite blow with insults but it still brings her face-to-face with the fact that her body has no desire to follow the occult path opening up before her. Like a horse, her flesh is wisely resisting her soul's urge to leap the bottomless chasm between life and death with the sheer strength of her love.

"Mark, if you weren't here," she lifts her head to look up at him, "I don't know what I'd do."

"But I am here." He caresses windblown strands of hair away from her eyes and kisses her cool forehead with his warm lips. "Talk to me, Lucia. Tell me about Richard. How did you meet him?"

She focuses on the river, alive with the infinite white cells of reflected stars. "I met him at one of his book signings. He wrote 'Let's have dinner tonight' in my copy. I couldn't believe it. I hung around in a daze until he was finished then I left with him in his limousine. The next time I saw my apartment it was a week later, when I went back to pack my things. It was the strangest feeling being there, as if I'd died and come back

to haunt the place for a little while. We were so intensely in love from the very first night it was like existing on a whole different plane."

"Did he leave you everything when he died?"

The question surprises her. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

"What about his relatives? Didn't they get anything?"

"He never spoke to his parents. They didn't approve of him or his work. They thought it was Satanic. I never even met them. There was just his younger brother Julian. Richard left him a trust fund with a fixed income for the rest of his life, so he couldn't spend it all at once."

"How long were you married?"

"Nearly three years."

"Was he much older than you, Lucia?"

"Not really... I mean, he was only forty-three."

"When you met him or when he died?"

"When I met him."

"Which made you what, twenty-five? He was intelligent and charismatic and you worshipped him. Am I right?"

"Yes," she answers defiantly, "I did."

"And you still do, Lucia. You completely surrendered your will to him and now you don't know how to get it back."

She slips out from beneath his arm and rises. "Let's keep walking, Mark, it's getting cold and this bench is hard."

"Cold and hard," he follows her up, "isn't that how you like it, Lucia?"

Her pulse quickens yet her pride forces her to ask, "What do you mean?"

He slaps her.

The strangely pleasurable shock clears her head and she doesn't need to think straight to understand that the nature of the universe is whatever he wants.

"That's what I mean, baby. You liked that."

"Let's go to my room," she urges softly.

"Just how far did you let Richard go, Lucia? Did he tie you up? Did he blindfold you? Did he whip you?"

She looks out at the glimmering black water again, knowing her silence now will say much more than words ever can.

"I see." Mark is silent for a moment. "Are you just submissive, Lucia, or are you a pain slut too?"

"No, definitely not."

"You think a little pain is stimulating but mainly you just like being dominated?"

His perception, the subject, the sweet, lingering warmth of his blow and the mysterious sense of Richard's presence all around her are seriously turning her on. "Yes," she says, looking beseechingly up into his dark eyes.

"Well, let's see what your definition of a little is, shall we?" He takes her firmly by the arm and starts walking in the direction of her hotel again. "Shall I give you a safe word?"

"No," she replies, disappointed. Her first night with Richard he had not asked her if she wanted a safe word – he had simply given it to her.

"No? Do you think that's wise?"

She cannot explain that asking her if she wanted a safe word has already told her he won't go so far that she'll need one. And she doesn't want to tell him nothing really matters to her anymore anyway because Richard is never coming back.

* * * * *

By the time they reach her room Lucia's excitement has nearly gone out, like a promising fire that was not properly stoked. Mark insisted on giving her a safe word anyway, the totally unoriginal "red". Then he kept asking her questions about what she liked and didn't like, what she wanted him to do and what she didn't want him to do, all of which turned her off by making her feel completely safe and in control.

Finding her way in the dark, she switches on the lamp by the bed, sets her purse on the nightstand and turns to face him. He is still standing by the door staring at her and suddenly she senses a distinct hostility emanating from him that frightens her and resurrects her excitement somewhat. She wonders if it is only her imagination but she senses it isn't.

"You're still in love with him, aren't you, Lucia? It doesn't matter to you that he's dead. You're still in love with him."

She sighs and hangs her head, unable to deny it.

"That's all right, princess, I actually admire that about you. Except you're forgetting one very important line in your marriage vows. You know, the one where you said, 'until death do us part'?"

She sits on the edge of the bed. "I guess I just need more time."

"No," he starts toward her, "what you need is another man to make you forget about him."

She looks up at him hopefully.

"Get up."

She obeys him.

He slaps her, stares at her expression for a moment and then slaps her again even harder.

Her cheek is flushed, her lips are parted slightly as if in wonder at her own reaction and her eyes are as dark and glimmering with need as the ancient river outside.

"Hmm," he says and slaps her a third time.

She gasps and sinks to her knees before him as he unzips his jeans. But when she moves to help him pull them down he flings her hands away.

"Don't touch me," he warns, "just watch." He steps back out of her reach as he kicks off his black sneakers, removes his socks and then pulls off his jeans and underpants. He tosses everything aside carelessly but he leaves on his black shirt, only lifting it slightly so he can look down and observe his growing erection. She is even more mesmerized by the sight of his stiffening penis and when he begins stroking himself her pussy responds with a jealous clenching that starts her juices flowing. She wants to touch herself and because he is still gazing admiringly down at his long, slick rod, she dares to slip her hand up her dress and down into her panties.

He senses her motion. "Oh no you don't."

She immediately pulls her hand out of her panties.

He sticks his cock in her face with one hand and slaps her again with the other.

Her eyes close and her lips part to receive him.

"You're not getting that either," he says coldly.

She opens her eyes and gasps in shock when she sees the smooth cheeks of his tight bottom facing her.

"Lick my ass," he commands. "Do it!"

Part of her resists the filthy idea and then she discovers just what little say that part of her has when she grabs his narrow hips and buries her face in his crack with a moan. And in the warm, cloying darkness between this beautiful young man's buttocks she vividly recalls the night she was sucking Richard off and abruptly dared to realize there was more of him. He was kneeling over her, facing away from her and she was holding his penis in her hand to feel it react as she licked his balls. Then she flicked her tongue up a little farther and a little farther, wondering how far he would let her go and breathlessly praying he would let her go all the way up to his anus. He did...

The darkness in the room seems to flood her mind as she passionately buries her face in Mark's bottom, possessed by a hunger she cannot understand because she cannot think at all. Her mind can't seem to wrap itself around what she is doing and is even more appalled by the perfectly pure satisfaction she takes in the technically disgusting exercise of licking his asshole. All she cares about, all she is aware of is the determined muscle of her tongue and a strangely sweet secretion. She has no idea if the delicious moisture is coming from her own gaping mouth or from his sphincter responding to the pleasure he takes in what she is doing. All she knows is that it drives her wild. It isn't enough to just give him a passionate rimming, moaning in disbelief at how much she relishes every dirty second of it. She wants to dig into him, to explore his secrets through this very different side of him. So she does it—she thrusts the tip of her tongue into the impossibly exciting black hole in the deep, warm space of his bottom.

"Oh, yes, baby!" He pushes himself against her face as he pumps his erection.

She can sense the pleasure flowing from her mouth through his body and then out into his cock and back again in a spiraling cycle that gets hotter and hotter without reaching a peak and dying. She feels it could go on forever and she would love it to. She thrusts her tongue into him as far as she can, which isn't far enough. Because the more she caresses his insides, parts of him she could never have imagined the feel and flavor of, the more she wants, the more it drives her crazy and makes her feel she could devour him.

She is close to passing out from the overwhelming satisfaction of fucking his ass with her tongue when he abruptly steps away from her.

"Oh no!" she groans, utterly bereft.

His voice is oddly constricted as he orders, "Take off your clothes."

She stands up and obeys him, swiftly and efficiently.

"Now lie on your side on the bed. That's it." He spreads himself out behind her, grips her behind one knee and lifts her leg up out of his way. From this angle he slides his hard cock into her so deeply it almost hurts as he penetrates her fast and hard, stabbing her with him. She was in such a trance while rimming him that she didn't even notice how wet her pussy had gotten. She swallows his whole cock easily, the glistening rosy lips of her labia sucking it up into her greedily. Yet before long he pulls out of her and pushes her over onto her back as he straddles her, pinning her arms to her sides.

"I know what you want," he says hoarsely. "You want me to come all over your face!"

"Oh yes," she breathes. "Yes!"

"Say 'please come all over my face, Mark'."

"Please come all over my face, Mark."

He throws his head back and strokes himself furiously for a few seconds before his eyes meet hers again angrily. "Here it comes, bitch!"

She opens her mouth and her eyelashes flutter to protect her darkly satisfied eyes as his hot cum erupts over her face. She licks her lips, tasting this beautiful young man with her tongue even as her heart savors the name of Richard...Richard...Richard...

* * * * *

When he is finished with her Mark slips his clothes back on in the dark.

"Aren't you staying?" she asks languidly, still lying naked across the bed.

"Not tonight," he answers coldly.

She quickly sits up, kneels on the edge of the bed and wraps her arms around his lean hips.

He strokes her hair. "Did you enjoy that?"

"You know I did."

"Why?"

He might as well ask a cat to explain its purr.

"I'm working tomorrow," he announces, peeling her arms from around him.

"Then I won't see you?"

"Not until later. Now, hand me my belt."

She finds it on the bed and offers it reverently up to him with both hands, as if assisting an unholy priest with his vestments.

He slips it back on. "I don't want you going out by yourself tomorrow, Lucia. I want you to stay in your room and rest."

"But I'd like to visit the temple of Luxor and —"

"You heard what I said. You're not to leave this room. Do I make myself clear?"

She sighs. "Yes, Mark."

* * * * *

After he leaves she drinks an entire bottle of water and then lies facedown amidst the foaming sheets to rest for a moment before she gets up to shower. But she drifts off...

She thinks she hears the door open again. She is so profoundly relaxed however that she can't bring herself to turn her head and look. Even when a shockingly cold caress travels slowly up her back all she can do is moan. She can't raise her impossibly heavy eyelids even when gloved knuckles press against her lips and force them open, gagging her with the familiar taste of leather. Then she hears a man's voice, a voice that sounds impossibly like Richard's, whisper, "I need you!" She glimpses a black sleeve, glimmering with moisture like the star-filled sky before her mouth is emptied and the gloved hands pull her roughly up onto her hands and knees from behind...

She opens her eyes. In the dark room the bed is a choppy frozen sea around her.

The dream was so vivid it has left her feeling even more deliciously worn out.

She gets stiffly out of bed to use the bathroom and then checks to make sure the door to the room is locked.

He was wearing gloves. She remembers all too well what the cold caress of leather feels like and she can still taste the frightening excitement of his fist forcing her mouth open, as if he meant to reach straight down her throat for her heart.

Chapter Five

In the morning, the phone shocks her awake.

"Good morning, Lucia, I do hope you weren't still sleeping," Elizabeth says cheerfully.

"Oh, no."

"Are you sure I didn't wake you?"

"I'm sure." She clears her throat but is less successful with her head.

"Then how about having breakfast together, Lucia? I'm so dreadfully bored here, you know."

"That sounds nice. Um, what time is it?"

"Half past eight, I shouldn't have called you so early. Please forgive me. I forgot you were on vacation. Oh...I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"No." The thought of spending time with a woman is suddenly very appealing. "I'd love to have breakfast."

"Splendid. I'll meet you in the dining room in, let's say, in half an hour?"

"I'll be there."

* * * * *

Lucia has been sitting at a table by a window for over fifteen minutes before she finally spots Elizabeth's slender figure approaching. Luigi's wife is casually but elegantly clad in a sleeveless light-blue dress that ripples over her sharp hipbones like water over stones.

"I'm so sorry I'm late, Lucia," she quickly seats herself, "but all the carriages seem to be taken this morning."

"Well, I'm glad you made it because I'm starving."

Elizabeth smiles knowingly. "Of course you are." She picks up her menu. "I imagine you're quite a breath of fresh air for him."

Lucia feels the smile on her lips stiffen like honey freezing on a branch. "What do you mean?"

"Is this your first visit to Egypt? How are you liking it so far?"

"Are you trying to tell me something about Mark?"

"I'm so sorry about your husband, Lucia. Did you love him?"

A growing unease makes her sound angry. "Of course I did!"

"I see." Elizabeth snaps her menu closed and puts it down. "Did you really?"

"Why do you doubt it?"

"I thought you and I might be able to be honest with each other, Lucia. It would be a refreshing change."

"I'm not the one beating around the bush."

A waiter appears.

Elizabeth orders a cup of tea and two slices of toast with butter on the side.

Lucia orders the same, having lost her appetite.

"So how long are you planning to stay in this godforsaken hole, Lucia?"

"That's not exactly how I'd describe Thebes."

"Please forgive me. I forgot that you nearly studied Egyptology yourself. But believe me, darling, if it weren't for Mark you'd be bored out of your poor skull in no time. But then," she pauses to sip her lemon water, "you're not poor, are you?"

Trying to contain her growing anxiety, Lucia looks out a window at the sky.

"How much is he costing you?" Elizabeth asks in sudden earnest. "I'm dying to know."

"Excuse me?"

"How much is Mark costing you? The boy doesn't have a dime to his name yet he travels all over the world. Haven't you wondered about that, Lucia? Or did he tell you that story about freelancing for *National Geographic*? Ah, I see he did. Well, not to worry. You'll be able to hold on to him for a good long time since you're both beautiful and rich. Yet you didn't even suspect, did you? Well, I suppose you're not thinking too clearly these days, not if you truly loved your husband. But didn't you wonder even for one tiny moment, Lucia, why a gorgeous young man like Mark would suddenly devote himself to your every whim?"

"Stop it!" She pushes her chair back. "He's not...what you're implying!"

"I envy your self-confidence. Please, don't go, I simply had no idea you were so naïve."

"I'm not hungry anymore."

"I'm sorry you can't face the truth but I'm glad I opened your eyes. I can't prove it but I think it's fairly obvious that Mark is after your money, Lucia. You'd better get used to it. You might as well even try to enjoy it. I know I would."

Back up in her room, where she can break down in private, Lucia is forced to consider the possibility that Elizabeth is right.

Whether it was stupidity or vanity or both, she had fallen for Mark's declaration of love as though it was the most natural thing in the world. Like a spoiled little girl opening yet another exciting present, she had accepted a second chance at happiness with scarcely a thought.

She takes refuge out on the balcony again but it only depresses her how bright and lovely the view remains even as her vision of the world darkens by the second.

Across the Nile desert mountains undulate like the backs of naked bodies lying exhausted around each other.

She tries to get past her profound self-confidence and see the world as it supposedly really is but she cannot. All her perceptions are inextricably rooted in her positive nature. She simply cannot bring herself to believe that the chemistry between her and Mark is only a desperate romantic illusion on her part, or a form of emotional hysteria caused by nearly two years of unrelieved sorrow.

She looks down at her hands where they are gripping the railing and suffers the impression that her little balcony is a boat caught on a seemingly inescapable current of despair. Then she notices that the veins beneath her skin are the same dark blue as the river. Yet if she were to cut herself now the blood that flowed out would be red.

She turns her hand over to follow the delta of her arteries up through her wrist. It would be so easy to slit open the dam of her skin and to add a final line to the map of her palm – the unnatural path of suicide.

She hurries back into the room away from this thought and is opening her last bottle of water when the phone rings.

She answers it warily, "Hello?"

A breathless silence is followed by a loud rush of static that makes her think of waves crashing on a shore at high tide. Then suddenly a distant voice yells, "Can you hear me, Lucia?!"

The green bottle slips out of her other hand and hits the floor with a dull thud.

"Don't be afraid, my love!"

She watches sparkling water flow in a dark path across the sand-colored carpet.

"Lucia, promise me you won't."

The connection dies abruptly.

She stands listening to her own silent scream of despair until the dial tone returns a moment later. It hums hypnotically through her blood before abruptly giving way to the lifeless pulse of a busy signal.

She sets the receiver, very gently, as if it might explode in her hand, back into its black cradle.

* * * * *

Lucia throws off the summer dress she wore down to her hellish breakfast with Elizabeth, slips into a black T-shirt and jeans and, disobeying Mark's order, leaves the room.

It is a short walk to the Temple of Luxor.

She purchases her ticket and then waits to one side of the kiosk while a large group of German tourists makes its way down the avenue of sphinxes toward the temple. Then she starts slowly down the avenue by herself.

The inscrutable smile of Amenhotep III is carved over and over again on both sides of her like a single frame of film endlessly unreeling. And alone with the sphinxes and the sky she begins to feel strangely, reassuringly embraced by the endless smile. Yet its relentless repetition also has the effect of demanding something from her, of fists beating against her rational mind, trying to impress some mysterious truth directly upon her emotions by bypassing her brain. The man's smiling face on an animal's body...consciousness as a pure, untamed force learning to contain itself...

She succeeds in not thinking about that impossible phone call for over an hour, even though she doesn't forget it for one second.

At one point, finding herself completely alone near the end of the temple, she pauses in the center of a small courtyard.

The sun is high in the sky so not a single shadow breaks up the luminous expanse of sand all around her. The columns themselves might be rays of solid light, the prison bars of the physical world's three dimensions. Dressed entirely in black, Lucia suddenly feels beautifully powerful. At that moment she actually experiences the belief that her consciousness is the darkness that gave birth to the sun and to every other star passionately burning in the infinite space of her awareness. She stares fixedly into the empty space between two of the columns and dares Richard to appear to her again.

A little blond boy runs out from between the pillars, laughing. His mother appears a heartbeat later and, catching him gently by the arm, kneels beside him to retie one of his shoelaces as he smiles happily over at her.

Lucia quickly turns away in search of another courtyard.

Part of her desperately wants to believe that Richard has somehow managed to communicate with her but it would be incredibly foolish to forget how much Julian sounds like his dead older brother.

"Hey there, Lucia." Lori stands out vividly against the pale stone in a terracotta-colored T-shirt and blue jeans. "I thought you didn't know how to read hieroglyphs."

"I don't," she replies shortly, startled out of her reverie.

"Really? You were staring at that wall as if you could. I thought Mark was planning to show you around."

"His brother's leaving today." She is desperate to avoid another potentially demoralizing conversation. "How long will you be in Egypt, Lori? It must be hard on you and Doug, specializing in two completely different cultures with archaeological sites half way across the world from each other."

"Actually, it's kind of nice having time apart. It makes it more special when we're together. I only got here two weeks ago so I'll be around for a while. It all depends." She shrugs her broad shoulders. "I hear you weren't feeling well yesterday."

"No."

"Well, it's rough on the body, suddenly finding itself half way across the world in an entirely different climate and surrounded by a whole different energy, if you know what I mean."

"Yes, I do."

"Doug's obsessed with a culture that glorified death, yet he doesn't believe in an afterlife himself. Go figure. He must be compensating. Personally, I've seen enough I can't explain to keep my mind open. We're standing in the Birth Chamber, you know."

Lucia glances briefly up at the sky, in which the sun sizzles like a magical yolk in the temple's cracked shell. "The Birth Chamber?"

"Yes. Doug loves this temple, which means I know more about it than I ever wanted to. Schwaller de Lubicz called it 'The Temple of Man' because each section is supposed to correspond to a different part of the body. He's the one who founded the symbolist school of Egyptology Doug is so into. According to them this particular part of the temple corresponds to the vocal chords."

"The vocal chords. But I thought you said it was the Birth Chamber?"

"It is. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God. The Egyptians said this a long time before John, the apostle. The Egyptians believed the created universe was the word of Re uttered by Toth, the spirit and the intellect. Look, I've got to go now but I'll call you if you feel like talking. Okay?"

"God, Lori, I'd love that. I'm really..."

"Confused?"

"Overwhelmed is more like it."

"I'll call you, Lucia. I'm a good listener. It comes from being married to Doug."

Chapter Six

When Lucia returns from the temple, six more complimentary bottles of water are sitting outside her door like a miniature green colonnade.

She finally finishes unpacking, putting everything away neatly in a symbolic attempt to straighten out the metaphysical mess of her desires. Then she orders a martini and prepares her body for it by drinking more water.

When her drink arrives she stands sipping it out on the balcony, alternately watching the sun set and looking down at her left hand where it rests on the railing, intrigued by how far away it seems and by how oddly detached she feels from it.

Richard's haunting shots, followed by no rational chaser, are affecting her perceptions. She can't blame the gin, even though it is certainly contributing to her intense thirst.

Like blood exposed to oxygen, the river has gone from the afternoon's profound blue to a darkly glistening red.

Not only does she still miss Richard, she now also regrets the loss of a young man who never truly existed.

She longs to call Mark and hear him tell her that Elizabeth is crazy but it would only be the phantom of her romanticism on the other end. She is surrounded by ghosts.

It is getting darker and colder by the minute but Lucia stays out on the balcony holding her empty glass.

If she had seen Richard's body it might have been easier for her to find closure but Julian had reached the hospital first, identified his brother and kept her away from the bloody remains to spare her the shock. Before she knew it her husband had been cremated and handed to her in a black granite urn with his full name, Richard Lee Taylor, sandblasted on one side. She couldn't bear the sight of it so she had it buried beneath the oak tree in their front yard.

She can't conceive of any reason Julian would encourage her supernatural fantasies by pretending to be his brother calling from beyond the grave but her reason insists on this explanation for that impossible phone call.

She steps back into the room and turns on a light to pull her black leather jacket out of the closet. She slips it on and walks back outside again.

The horizon is invisible now.

Even though she didn't eat anything all day she isn't hungry, just endlessly thirsty. Not even Richard's death had killed her appetite as completely as his possible resurrection has.

She keeps wondering what Mark did all day and where he is now but pride still won't let her pick up the phone and call him.

Finally she walks restlessly back into the room. Thinking she might feel better if she forces herself to eat something, she opens the top drawer of the nightstand looking for a menu.

The square wooden space is empty.

She sits on the edge of the bed and then falls languidly back across it, surrendering to gravity.

Covered by a white spread, the king-size mattress feels vast as an arctic wasteland...and the ceiling is breathing. It is bobbing like a block of ice on the bottomless darkness outside, the night sky foaming with stars. Richard's naked force is out there. She can feel it. She can sense his willpower using the haunting womb of her love for him to try and manifest himself again. The lamp by the bed suddenly goes out, blindfolding her with the night's soft, velvety darkness.

Her head falls heavily to one side so she can look out at the balcony.

At first she suffers the impression that the full moon is looking in on her, then she realizes it is Richard wearing a luminous white shirt. The challenge in his stare thrusts straight between her heartbeats and runs her through with a joy she wishes would kill her before slipping away again.

Mark's voice says from behind her, "What the hell?" And like a shining tear caught in her lashes, Richard vanishes again.

"No!" she cries. "No!" She rolls over onto her stomach and plunges off the bed onto her hands and knees like an arthritic cat. She crawls weakly toward the balcony but there is nothing out there anymore so she curls up on the rug, miserably hugging herself.

A small eternity seems to pass before she becomes aware of the strong current of Mark's arms lifting her up and laying her across the bed.

Awareness floods back into her skull's painfully tight shell as a bright light blinds her.

A shadow moves soothingly into its path—Mark sitting down beside her. "How do you feel?" he asks gently.

Her throat is a sand-filled shaft she has to dig her voice out of. "Like hell."

"Do you have any idea who's drugging you, Lucia?"

She coughs. "What?"

"Who would want to do this to you?"

"Do what?"

"Pretend to be Richard's ghost."

The walls twirl nauseatingly around her like a dancer's skirts as she sits up.

Mark catches her against him. "Are you all right?"

"I'm not sure."

"You should sleep it off."

"No," she takes a tentative breath, "I'm all right! I think." She pulls away from him. "Can you hand me one of those bottles?"

"Not a chance, you're not drinking anything else around here. You're checking out of this hotel."

"Mark." She has no intention of abandoning the balcony that has begun to feel like her own private launchpad to another dimension. "I'm not leaving. I just finished unpacking."

"Lucia, can't you see that someone is fucking with you in a big way?"

"Mark," she desperately tries to organize her thoughts, "there's no way we can possibly know how the human nervous system would react in close proximity to powerful concentrations of electromagnetic energy, which is what so-called ghosts —"

"Let me help you, Lucia, don't fight me."

"Mark...Elizabeth thinks you're after my money."

He asks quietly, "And you believe her?"

She looks down at her clenched hands. "I don't know what to believe anymore."

"She made a pass at me, Lucia, and I turned her down. She resents that and now she's jealous of you so to save her pride she tells herself I only want you for your money. She's a bitch but that's her problem." He puts a finger beneath her chin and makes her look him in the eye. "I'm angrier with you for believing her," he adds quietly.

"Oh God, Mark." She rests her forehead against his chest. "I've been in hell all day!" She doesn't have the strength to mistrust him.

"Lucia, whatever's going on you're not alone but you have to trust me. I can't help you if you won't trust me."

She does her best to sound casual, "Did you try calling me this morning?"

"No. Why?" he asks suspiciously.

"Because someone called me. I could barely hear who it was there was so much interference but the voice was clearly a man's and it sounded...it sounded just like Richard."

"Really? That's amazing. What did your dead husband have to say?"

"Not much."

"I'll bet. Tell me exactly what he said, Lucia."

"Can you hear me and don't be afraid and promise me you won't, then the connection died."

"Promise me you won't... What do you think he meant? Talk to me, Lucia. What did he want you to promise him you wouldn't do?"

"I have no idea."

He gets up abruptly.

"Where are you going?"

"Nowhere. I'm just taking a look around."

"Why? What are you looking for?"

"I have no idea," he echoes. "The haunting of Lucia Taylor," he intones sarcastically. "I'll ask you again. Who would have any reason to torment you like this?"

"No one."

"Right." He had closed the glass doors and drawn the curtains while she was "asleep" but now he opens them just far enough to slip outside onto the balcony.

Lucia waits anxiously for him to return. She doesn't want to be alone with all the questions she is trying to avoid. In the morning, when her brain doesn't feel like a lump of lead, she will attempt to make sense of things. Tonight she is sure of only one thing – she is not checking out of the Etap. A profoundly stubborn part of her believes that really might have been Richard out on her balcony and that she lost consciousness because the proximity of what she can only think of as his "naked force" short-circuited her brain's synapses.

Moving slowly, to avoid another head-rush, she gets out of bed to use the bathroom.

Mark is on the phone when she returns.

"So there's no way to trace the calls that come into this room?"

She hears the insect-like buzz of a voice on the other end.

"Fine." He slams the receiver down.

"Mark?"

"What? Is there something you want to tell me, Lucia?"

She slips off her jacket and tosses its reptilian weight onto a chair. "I've told you everything."

"Well, are you coming with me or not?"

"Can't you stay here with me, Mark? I mean, what good would it do to run away? I have to find out what's going on and who's behind all this." Or if Richard is real.

He stares suspiciously at the curtains blocking her view of the balcony. "Maybe that would be better," he says beneath his breath.

Relief propels her toward him. "Yes, it would be." She sits half beside him and half behind him on the bed. "What are you thinking, Mark?" She dares to rest her hands on his shoulders. He is wearing black jeans and a black mock turtleneck and he looks so good all she wants is for him to take her.

"Is Julian happy with his trust fund, Lucia?" He shrugs her hands off and turns to face her. "Someone's after your money – it's just a question of who and all my bets are on your husband's little brother Julian."

He might as well be telling her that the world really is flat.

"Look at me, Lucia. Who would inherit your money if you died?"

"Mark, will you come stay with me?"

"I'll move my things over tomorrow."

"And you'll stay tonight?"

"Of course I will but now think. When they were reading Richard's will was there a clause about your death?"

"Julian gets it all," she admits.

"And he knew you were coming to Egypt?"

"Yes. He thought it was a good idea."

"I'll bet he did."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Let me think."

"Please don't."

"What?"

"I need you, Mark. We can't do anything about this right now and I'm so cold."

He slips one hard arm around her and reaches behind them to turn off the light as he pulls her up with him.

She forgot to tell him how that same lamp went out just before Richard appeared and she refrains from doing so now in order to not distract him.

He makes short work of her clothes, peeling them off her and tossing them away with the urgent efficiency of a paramedic trying to get at her wound before it's too late. Then he shoves her back across the bed.

She slips a hand between her thighs and caresses her clitoris while watching him unbutton his jeans, although the room is so dark she can barely see him. Even when he pulls his shirt off his tanned skin seems only a dim afterglow on her retinas, exciting her because he could be any man, even a total stranger. She doesn't want to think about who he is because all that really matters is who he isn't. It's not Richard there with her yet in her heart it is Richard's chest she stretches her legs up against, Richard's shoulders she rests the backs of her ankles on. She is only using Mark—she knows this and she doesn't care whether it's right or wrong. She needs him to make her forget and to help her remember—forget her grief and remember the overwhelming pleasure she felt with Richard by experiencing its ghost with another man.

He is not much more than a silhouette but she knows he is holding his growing erection fondly, proud of it, as he kindly allows her slit's moist lips to savor his thick and tender head for a delicious moment. He makes her desperately hungry for the rest of him before he suddenly asks, "What makes you think I want your cunt, Lucia?"

She can't answer as he slips a mere teasing inch or so of his cock into her, enjoying her wet, clinging kiss. She waits breathlessly for him to sink into her but he seems intent

on making her painfully conscious of the void inside her and pointing out that only he can do something about it. "Oh God," she gasps finally, "just fuck me, please!"

"Oh I'm going to fuck you all right, princess, don't you worry about that, but what I'm going to fuck," he grips her ankles with both hands and flings her legs aside, "is your ass. Turn over!"

Excitement and apprehension seem to roll her over onto her stomach with the sheer force of her reaction to what he plans to do as her heart starts racing. The bed is tall enough that all she has to do is let her legs hang off the edge so he can stand between them. He plants one hand firmly on the small of her back and perversely enough the feel of him pinning her down helps her relax and accept the fact that she has no choice but to take what's coming to her.

Whenever Richard fucked her ass it hurt a little at first...but it was never this bad! She cries out as Mark's head, slick with her pussy's wasted juices, plunges into her impossibly small hole and then slips right back out as her body resists the invasion. She wants to scream when he tries again impatiently but instead she strives to hold on to him, desperate to get past the agony of his initial penetration. Because once he's completely inside her the excruciating pain will dim to a dull torment that will then miraculously transform into a dark and inexplicable pleasure. Yet it isn't easy making muscles accustomed only to pushing out unwanted waste remember that they can also draw something desirable into her body.

Mark groans with success, a low-pitched sound that mysteriously relaxes her and enables him to bury the full length of his erection in her bottom. Then, without hesitation, he begins thrusting in and out of her hard and fast. She balls the bedspread up in her fists to brace herself. Her pussy is only vaguely distressed by the fact that he seems to prefer her mouth and her ass, parts of her body not made especially to serve him as its aching wet depths long to. But it doesn't really matter in light of the overwhelming fulfillment she experiences listening to the sounds he makes, luscious sounds that tell her how much he loves milking himself with her ring's reluctantly passionate grip. The unnatural penetration turns her on almost more than her body dares to admit, because getting it up the ass defies the whole idea of sex as an evolutionary tool, an arousing enough thought in and of itself without his cock ramming the concept into her. She finds his total selfishness so intensely satisfying that she lifts herself up onto her elbows and, moaning from the breathtaking pleasure, arches her back so she can take his rigid cock even deeper.

"Mm, yes, princess, you love this, don't you?"

She is beyond words. His driving energy is going to kill her. It just feels too damn good to survive...yet she is thinking of Richard, of all the times she willingly offered her body up on the altar of his selfish pleasure.

Chapter Seven

Lucia wakes abruptly to a sunlit room and a strange man sleeping beside her.

Mark is turned away from her on his side and her gaze travels appreciatively down the smooth desert slope of his back.

He rolls over abruptly and fixes her with a very sexy sleepy glare before covering his face with both hands. "What the hell time is it?"

She reaches for the nightstand and consults her watch. "Eight-thirty."

"Come here, baby."

Smiling, she slips beneath his arm.

He murmurs, "Did you enjoy yourself last night?"

"You know I did."

"How do you feel?"

Caught between sadness and contentment, she lets the latter win out for the moment.

"I asked you a question, Lucia."

"I feel great."

"You're not hungover in any way?"

"No."

"Are you sore anywhere?"

"A little." She caresses his chest. His hard leanness excites her, perhaps because it is so different from Richard's muscular tenderness. "But I like feeling this way."

"I'll remember you said that."

* * * * *

Mark is interrogating the Etap's manager in a politely urgent blend of English and Arabic. As far as Lucia can tell the slender Egyptian—his lush silver hair an elegant contrast to his bronze skin—is denying all knowledge of the bottled water twice delivered to her room compliments of the hotel.

She hides her despair at this seeming proof that Richard is only a figment of her drugged imagination. Yet—her heart stubbornly quickens its pace—the first two times she saw him were before any water was brought to her room.

"I am most sorry, sir," the manager says firmly, "but the Etap has no record of room service delivering water to Madam Taylor's room and cannot be held responsible for

whatever it is you are suggesting. You should perhaps contact the Tourist Police in this matter."

"What a brilliant suggestion, thanks."

Even though it is not directed at her she winces beneath the fallout of Mark's sarcasm.

"Madam will be wishing to check out?" the manager asks her.

"*La*. No." She smiles at him then hurries to catch up with Mark, who is striding angrily away from the front desk. "Well, that didn't get us very far," she comments lightly. "You're not going to the Tourist Police are you?"

"With some crazy story about a ghost? Right. We'll handle this ourselves."

The dining room is always full of guests whose relaxed smiles reflect those of the ancient people they have come to admire.

Mark orders them a traditional feast of orange juice, eggs, bacon, toast and coffee.

The coffee arrives almost immediately and, plucking a small ice cube from his water glass, he drops it into his steaming cup. "I intend to find out who's staying in the rooms around you, Lucia."

Cooling her own coffee with cream and sugar, she takes an appreciative sip. "I'm assuming the manager refused to give you that information."

"Of course, but with a little baksheesh I can easily find out." He attempts to sip his coffee but it is still too hot.

"You should put a little cream in it to cool it," she suggests.

"I like to taste my coffee, thank you."

"Mark, the night before last," she queries tentatively, "did you come back?"

He drops another splinter of ice into the hot black pool in his cup. "What?"

"After you left the other night," her chest tightens with anxiety, "did you come back?"

"What the hell are you asking me, Lucia?"

A glass pitcher of orange juice is set between them.

"Never mind. I guess I just had a vivid dream."

"Here, drink." He pours her a glass of juice. "There's nothing more important than orange juice in the morning. It'll get your brain cells cooperating again."

"Mark, if you weren't around —"

"You've already said that, Lucia, but I'm definitely here and real and not going anywhere, except back to the Savoy to pack my stuff. Then I'll call Doug and see if he can spare some time to show you around the Valley of the Kings tomorrow."

"Oh, Mark, I would love that. Do you think he will?"

"What man can resist impressing a beautiful woman? I'm sure he's dying to pump you with everything he's got."

"Will you ask Lori to come along too?"

"She will if she wants to," he replies shortly.

"I saw her in the Temple of Luxor yesterday. She seems like a nice person. I'd like to get to know her better."

His eyes are stunningly blue above his black shirt. "You went out yesterday?"

"I couldn't just sit in my room all day, not after what Elizabeth said about you and that impossible phone call."

"Never mind. I'll just have to punish you later."

She savors the promise before asking, "Seriously, Mark, Doug doesn't think I'm a flake, does he?"

"He thinks you're beautiful. The man isn't blind."

Their food arrives

"God, I'm starving!" She covers her lap with the white cloth napkin. "I didn't eat anything yesterday."

"If you don't keep your strength up, Lucia, I might just fuck you to death one night, and I'd have a hell of a time explaining that to the Tourist Police."

They eat in silence for a few minutes.

"I want you to call your brother-in-law Julian," Mark states abruptly, "to make sure he's still where you left him."

"But what will I say to him?"

"That you're having a great time, whatever. Just don't mention that you've seen his dead brother, please. He'll consider having you committed and getting a hold of your money that way."

"You've never even met him, Mark. How do you know what he's like?"

"You don't like him and that's good enough for me."

She doesn't bother asking him how he knew this—her expressive features usually give her feelings away. "All right, I'll call him but he probably won't be home. I imagine he never is."

"Then just keep trying. Does he have a roommate or a girlfriend?"

"I don't think so but I don't know really. I've barely seen him since the accident. And he's so young, I have no idea what he's into now except that it can't be in any way good for you because that's not cool."

"Getting your brother's widow to commit suicide so you can collect all her money would be pretty damn cool."

She manages to swallow her mouthful of bacon. "Yes, if she was stupid enough to let him."

He polishes off a second glass of juice. "Which I'm sure she wouldn't be."

"Killing herself might briefly have occurred to her but lots of things occur to her all the time. The fact is, it wouldn't be right and she's hopelessly optimistic."

"I'm very glad to hear that."

She dabs her lips with the napkin, leaving a stain like dried blood on the white cloth. "Mark, you're wonderful."

"I know."

The waiter sets a black leather folder on the table before him.

"Just charge it to my room," she says. "I mean, you're going to be staying with me, aren't you?" she adds quickly.

Mark pulls out his wallet and slips an astonishing number of bills into the folder.

"Mark?"

"Yes?"

"You're not mad at me, are you?"

"Why should I be mad at you?"

"You look mad."

He picks up his coffee cup and drains it.

"You are mad."

"I don't want your money, Lucia."

"I didn't say you did, Mark."

"Then stop offering to pay for everything."

"But why shouldn't I? I'm rich."

"Maybe," he glances at the large diamond glittering on her wedding finger in a shaft of sunlight, "but we're still sharing the expense of the room and everything else."

"If that's what you want."

"That's what I want." A frown defines his features so beautifully his tanned face makes her think of the golden outer layer of a sarcophagus inlaid with lapis-lazuli eyes. "Finished?"

"Yes," she says breathlessly.

He pushes his chair back. "Do you have any of that complimentary water left?"

"One bottle, I think."

"Good. I'm taking it to Doug to have it analyzed then I'll go get my things."

She notices heads turning their way as they leave the dining room. They are both dressed in black jeans and black shirts. They stand out like two ravens in a flock of parakeets—traditionally, tourists wear light colors in the hot desert

"Can I come with you, Mark?"

"No, get some rest."

"But I slept like a baby all night."

"You've been through a lot, Lucia, and I'm serious when I say I don't want you going out by yourself anymore."

She precedes him into the elevator. "I didn't come to Egypt to sit in a hotel room," she sulks out loud.

"Didn't I say I'd arrange for Doug to show you the Valley tomorrow? Then I think you should seriously consider leaving for Cairo. I'll come with you if you want me to."

She can't hide her dismay. "Of course I want you to. But do you really think we should leave so soon?"

"Yes."

She tells herself that Richard's spirit cannot be bound to a geographic location, yet this contradicts her theory that the spiritual energy left over in Thebes, like some mysterious radioactivity, is helping him manifest. On the other hand Cairo, home of the pyramids, should be just as potent...

The lift door opens. "I'm sure," Mark pushes her gently out into the hallway, "I wouldn't like what you're thinking!" He opens the door to their room and the pressure of his stare forces her inside without him touching her. She heads for the bathroom to brush her teeth but he grabs her arm and pulls her over to the side of the dresser. He backs her up against it and, staring down into her eyes, unzips her jeans. "There's only one way to stop you from thinking about Richard isn't there, Lucia?"

Beneath the sharp anger in his eyes his mouth is so hard it feels like a whip against her heart and her pussy responds as if to a real whip by immediately getting warm and damp.

"I have to beat him out of you don't I, Lucia?" He yanks her jeans and panties down to her ankles and holds them in place so she can slip off her black strap sandals and step out of her clothes, balancing on his shoulders. He kicks everything away and lifts her shirt up over her head. He snaps open her black bra and peels it off her, tossing that away as well. Then he removes his belt but keeps that in his hand as he takes a step back. "Turn around."

She obeys him, hanging her head submissively from the growing weight of her mental excitement.

He ties her wrists together with the firm leather, quickly and expertly. She can't even budge them when he is finished. "Now face me."

She obeys him, seriously turned on by the fact that he is still fully dressed, all in black, while she is totally naked and vulnerable.

He grabs her beneath the arms and lifts her onto the dresser. "Lie back," he commands.

Her arms are pinned uncomfortably beneath her but how much it excites her to be helpless is worth the discomfort. Her legs hang off the dresser's edge, her toes just barely grazing the carpet as he leans over her, crushing her breasts beneath his hands as he rubs his rough denim bulge against her vulva. Her full lips bloom open around him,

a deep, moistly shining rose against the matte black cloth. Then the cold kiss of his zipper on her clitoris short circuits a vital synapse in her brain and suddenly her whole being is nothing but pure desire. She holds her breath when he stands up straight, expecting him to open his pants. Instead he crouches between her thighs and presses his lips against her clitoris. The warm wave of his tongue washing over her pleasure nub feels wonderful. Yet the mysterious pearl of her flesh thrives on friction and on hardship and the longer he ignores her coral-mouthed slit the more desperate it gets to suck something into her that will feed the teasing pleasure.

The position of her legs is such that it plants the rosy-purple grape of her flesh, which has the power to turn her blood into an intoxicating wine, directly in his mouth. He sucks on it, torturing it with direct attention while she moans and shifts her hips and winces as the belt's stiff coils cut into the small of her back. Yet the discomfort offers a welcome distraction from the painful pleasure of having her clit eaten alive. When he finally thrusts two fingers into her cunt she is so hot and slick they feel more like an insult than a consolation. She is so ready to be fucked that she feels she could take his whole hand.

The thought nearly blinds her. "Oh yes, Mark, please, do it," she begs almost in a whisper, closing her eyes. "Fist fuck me!"

He hesitates, but only for a moment, before withdrawing his fingers.

For a heart-stopping moment she is afraid the request shocked him.

"You're not big enough," he warns, his quiet, almost gentle voice a stunning contrast to the act of his fist slowly forcing its way inside her.

She lifts her head to look at him as he reaches down and hooks one of her legs on his free arm. He lifts it high and she gasps, her head falling back against the dresser as her body opens up just that crucial little bit more.

"Mm, yes, baby, take it!"

"Oh, no, no," she cries, "stop, please stop!"

He makes a devastatingly sexy sound somewhere between a laugh and a groan of satisfaction. "You know what to say if you really don't want it!"

The word "red" perches on her tongue because he's right—she's too small. But her breathless cries don't shape themselves into words at all. The fulfillment is so intense it nearly knocks her unconscious.

"You're not thinking about him now are you, Lucia? You can't and you know why you can't? Because you're being fist fucked, that's why!"

Blinded by an ecstasy much more potent than anything her clitoris can give her, she lifts her head again, and from this angle it looks as though much more of his arm is thrust up inside her than is actually possible. He slowly turns his fist from side to side, his knuckles caressing secret parts of her body that have never been touched before as his remorselessly hard wrist moves in and out of her, fucking her. "Oh my God," she gasps, "oh my God!"

"Mm," he says, his expression as hard as his arm. "Mm!"

"Oh no, no, Mark!"

"You know what to say!" He grips her firmly behind the knee and pushes it down toward her breasts, opening her up wide.

She lets out a small scream of orgasmic terror as he shoves his fist all the way into her vagina, nearly killing her with pleasure.

He withdraws his hand with a cruel swiftness that leaves her completely dazed. "I'm afraid my cock won't be enjoying your little slit this morning after all." He lets her leg fall and, grabbing her beneath the arms, pulls her up into a sitting position.

It is a relief to take the weight off her wrists and hands, which helps console her a little for the great loss her cunt just suffered.

"Lie on your stomach on the floor," he commands, opening his jeans as she slips weakly off the dresser. Her ass is a little sore from last night but she sinks to her knees obediently and takes the impact with her right shoulder as she lets herself fall facedown across the carpet. She starts to spread her legs but he snaps "Keep them closed" as he sits on her thighs. He removes his jeans. "Looks like you're getting fucked in the ass again, baby."

Her moan contains a world of emotions. She wants to feel his cock in her butt again but she is afraid it will hurt much more today as he thrusts himself between the innermost flesh of her thighs and up into her pussy. He grinds his hips against her for a delicious moment then pulls out, slick with her warm juices. She bites her lip as his fingers dig into her bottom's soft cheeks and pull them open and then nearly blacks out from the exquisite pain as he thrusts hard into her ass. He plants his hands alongside her shoulders on the carpet and pounds his erection so deep into her hole she feels as though he will cleave her in half if he keeps it up.

"Red!" she cries. "Red!"

"I don't think so, princess!" He beats the endearment into her. Yet he does have mercy on her by coming, achieving agonizing dimensions even as his cool cum helps soothe the burn.

* * * * *

After he leaves with her last bottle of water Lucia brushes her teeth and refreshes her lipstick then does her best to ignore the balcony, from which she is tempted to dive into impossible daydreams again.

She lingers over the marble counter in the bathroom, idly fingering her makeup like a very little girl trapped in her playpen.

She buys only the most expensive brands now, lipsticks that flow on like bloody cream and eye shadows that glisten with powdered fish scales. The night she met Richard at his book signing she was wearing lipstick that cost a \$1.00 and a short black dress she had bought at a thrift store for \$6.00. Her black tights had cost \$2.00 and her

ankle-high black leather boots \$8.00 on closeout. Her entire outfit had been worth less than the lipstick she is wearing now. But that was nearly five years ago, when she was a different person. Her blood cells have died and renewed themselves countless times since then and so many more thoughts and feelings, perceptions and desires, have flowed through her it amazes her their currents aren't yet visible on her skin.

Calculating what time it is now in Boston, she wanders back into the room, picks up the receiver and requests an overseas operator. She then holds her breath waiting for the miracle of another phone coming to life continents and oceans away.

A machine picks up after the fourth ring.

She hangs up without listening to the message and a terrible sense of urgency possesses her. There has to be something she can do to "call" Richard and somehow help him bridge the gap between dimensions. If the voice can travel thousands of miles in less than a second then why shouldn't his disembodied energy be able to communicate with her? These thoughts alone wire her to receive him and the excitement they awaken in her might be his presence ringing her through her nerves.

The phone's casual defiance of disembodied communication haunts her imagination. Her rational mind, however, has already accepted the fact that power is the reason for what is happening to her in Egypt but not in the way she hopes—the power granted by the money Richard left behind is the heart of the matter, not the immortality of his soul. No one really cares about that except her.

Chapter Eight

"Oh God, I don't know if I can get used to this," Lucia remarks while slipping on a pair of designer sunglasses. "Every day here is so bright!"

She and Mark are standing on a wooden platform over the river watching Doug and Lori approach in an old motorboat. Their peaceful glide toward shore is somewhat marred by the tortured coughing of the motor and Lori's smile looks a little fixed. As usual, she is dressed down in an army green T-shirt and knee-length khaki shorts. *To hide her fat thighs*, Lucia thinks uncharitably.

Doug doesn't appear to have changed his clothes since she last saw him.

"Greetings!" Mark calls out to them. "Re is resplendent on the horizon!"

Doug looks oddly confused but Lori's smile softens as she turns the boat gently sideways.

Mark leaps into the boat over a coil of decaying rope that resembles a snake shedding its skin, then turns and grabs Lucia by the waist to lift her down, a gesture that makes her feel lovely and precious.

Once they are seated, Lori steers the coughing vessel back around, a small red feather fluttering from the end of her braid.

The river is quite broad at this point and in its center white sails glide by even as a few yards away a motorized raft crowded with tourists also pulls away from the shore.

Seated across from her, Doug folds his reed-thin legs beneath him and stares awkwardly into space like an ancient scribe robbed of his clay tablet.

"So, what wonderful things are you planning to show us today, Doug?" Lucia asks him.

"If you really want to see anything," he replies severely without looking at her, "you can only visit one or two places."

"We want the abridged version," Mark says firmly.

The Egyptologist frowns at the horizon. "I'll try to contain myself."

"We really appreciate your time," she assures him.

He glances at her. "You're going to burn."

She is wearing a sleeveless one-piece suit of white linen that clings to her figure, its short skirt camouflaging practical shorts. Her straight dark hair and bangs complete the Egyptian look. "No I'm not," she assures him, "I have my mother's Italian genes. I tan, not burn."

"Well, that explains it." He looks straight at her finally. "Mark said you were from New England but I knew that couldn't be true."

"It's where I grew up."

"Yes, but genetically you're Latin."

"I told you he was a brilliant scholar." Mark's attention is focused on the motorized raft bearing a large crowd of tourists across the water.

Lori, apparently, is exercising the captain's right not to socialize.

"So where are we going, Doug?" Excitement is beginning to lick at Lucia's heart like the Nile lapping around the boat.

"I suppose that's up to you." He seems to relax. "What would you like to see? There are the tombs of the kings of course, eight of which are open to the public, as well as nine noble tombs."

"I don't suppose I could see Nefertari's tomb, could I?"

He literally squirms. "They're working in it." He dismisses the idea.

"I know they are, Doug, but I'm sure you of all people..."

"Oh all right! But first you absolutely have to see the tomb of Seti I. You do know who Seti I was?"

"Oh yes, he was a marvelously handsome pharaoh whose mummy is still rather good looking."

Mark rolls his eyes as Doug glares at her.

"He was the first great king to rule Egypt after Akhenaten threw everything into chaos," she continues. "He re-established order and built a gorgeous temple to Osiris in Abydos. I remember seeing pictures of him as a little girl and having a major crush on him. He also completed half the Hypostyle Hall at Karnak and did away with the overly decadent artistic style initiated by Akhenaten, thank God. The paintings from Seti's time are exquisitely beautiful and elegant."

"Yes." Doug nods. "If you have time for only one tomb it has to be Seti's. Every square inch is covered with excerpts from funerary texts and fascinating ceremonial and astronomical material. Yes, we'll definitely go there first!"

Lori glances back at Mark. "I think you've created a monster."

This is a meaningfully symbolic crossing for Lucia, so she is glad no one speaks as the boat approaches the West Bank and docks with a sensual thud against the wooden pier.

Lori leaves it in the care of a very sober-looking black-skinned man in a green- and white-striped *galabiyya*, and then she and Doug lead the way to a dusty old white Volkswagen parked in the scant shade of a palm tree. The car makes Lucia think of a huge ivory scarab.

The barge that crossed the river parallel to them is disgorging a colorful stream of tourists. Most of them hurry to board small buses while a few catch the more expensive alternative of cabs.

Holding her hand firmly in his, Mark scans the crowd with eyes as cold as a falcon's surveying the terrain for prey. His protective attitude thrills her, as does the fact that she is about to see tombs she has read about all her life because Richard will experience them through her, the magical hieroglyphs benefiting his spirit by way of her love for him.

Lori remains the designated driver. Doug sits beside her in the front seat and caresses the back of her head as she shifts gears. "She's such a great help to me," he remarks wistfully. "I don't know what I'd do without her."

"I organize his notes and keep his files up to date," Lori explains. "He could lose a pyramid by himself."

The desert quickly encroaches upon the dry greenery and Lucia suddenly can't wait to enter the golden purity she has been admiring from her balcony for days.

The narrow road they follow curves sharply between rocky cliffs that leave only a narrow path of sky visible overhead, like the celestial Nile the Egyptians believed in.

"You should see this place at night!" Lori raises her voice so it carries over the wind roaring in through the open windows. "It's like driving on the moon!"

Lucia wonders if she and Richard are taking a first haunting step for mankind, then the astronomical conceit of such a thought disturbs her.

"How familiar are you with the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, Lucia?" Doug asks her abruptly.

"Not very, I mean, it's so confusing. The copy I had was translated by Wallis Budge."

"A complete idiot!"

"I agree. It didn't make any sense. All I know is its real title, *The Book of Coming Forth by Day*."

"Well, for the most part," Doug clears his throat, "the compositions adorning the royal tombs aren't taken from the *Book of the Dead*. They actually derive from the early Pyramid Texts and all of them deal with the transformation of the soul in the region of the Duat after death. The compositions in the tomb you're about to see are called *The Book of What is in the Duat*, which contains *The Book of the Gates*, *The Book of Day*, *The Book of Night*."

"And a bunch of other books," Mark cuts in irreverently.

"You would do best to perceive them as manuals of spiritual instruction for the disembodied spirit." Doug blithely ignores the interruption. "In elaborate symbolic form, they show all the steps that must be taken to ensure life in eternity. But the Duat is not a place in any physical sense, you must understand. The Duat is the actual state of being in which these transformations take place. Anyhow, the *Book* follows the progress of the solar principle, or of the king's spirit, through the twelve hours of the night. The damn thing is divided into three registers and although we know the nature of the text

is transformational we still can't grasp the exact meaning of all the odd little figures in it."

"Oh."

"It's nearly impossible to capture the different levels of meaning taking place simultaneously in hieroglyphic texts," he continues a little less sternly. "The Egyptians had no intention of making the complex simple." He sounds as though he approves even though it makes his work more difficult.

Lori slows down as they leave the cliffs behind and enter an open stretch of desert, where it seems very strange to come upon a parking lot.

Doug keeps talking as they get out of the car. "I'll be better able to explain the texts to you once we're inside the tomb."

Small and unadorned except for the burial chamber, Tutankhamon's tomb nevertheless appears to be the first stop on everyone's list, the long lines to get in reminiscent of Disney World.

The sky is strikingly blue above the light-brown desert sand and tomb-studded mountains undulating for as far as the eye can see. Lucia spots a gaping black rectangle marking the entrance to a tomb.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Mark's shirt is almost the exact color of the sky, which makes the conscious intensity in his eyes even more striking.

"It's so quiet here," she observes in an appropriately hushed voice, "even with all these people around."

"Imagine what it's like at night. Ancient tomb robbers had some serious *cojones*."

"Oh God, I'm sure you can see all the stars. Are there any hotels around here, Mark?"

"Yes, but none that would even remotely suit you, princess."

"Why? They should have nice hotels on the West Bank where there's so much to see."

"Baby, once the sun begins to set you'll be happy to get the hell out of here, trust me."

Doug waits until every last tourist emerges from Seti's tomb before leading them in, but not until he gives the native man on guard an appropriate amount of baksheesh to keep everyone else out until they are finished.

On the left wall of the first corridor Seti I is depicted as a Falcon. Doug casually explains the royal bird symbolizes the human spirit. It is chilly in the well-lit passage that thrusts deep into the earth past several more aspects of the Solar Principle, including the figure of a man with a ram's head.

They have explored four chambers, in which Doug did not stop lecturing for one second, before the tomb splits in half. One corridor veers to the right while to the left a narrow staircase leads up into a room that looks as though it is still being worked on.

"The paintings in here are unfinished," Doug's reverent voice scarcely disturbs the silence, "and are fascinating in that they reveal artistic techniques. You can see here and here that the original drawings were sketched in red then corrected in black by the master artist. What we're looking at are the Ninth, Tenth and the Eleventh Hours from *The Book of What is in the Duat*."

They return to the fork in the corridor and descend through two more passages. On the way Lucia recognizes the ceremony of the Opening of the Mouth. A priest in a leopardskin cloak stands before Seti's upraised mummy holding an object resembling a bent metal rod in front of the dead king's face. Yet according to Doug the priest hadn't literally opened the mummy's mouth. The rite was symbolic and granted the disembodied soul the power to enjoy all of life's sensual pleasures again.

"We take the world in through our eyes and think about it just as we swallow food and digest it," he explains. "The dead soul on whom this ceremony was performed was able, from that moment on, to absorb all truth and all nourishment directly, without need of the brain or the body."

They reach a small room where the tall and handsome Seti makes offerings to all the major gods, including Osiris, Isis, Horus, Hathor and Anubis, and this beautifully colorful little space opens onto a large, pillared hall.

"The sarcophagus which originally stood in the back of this chamber is one of the great masterpieces of New Kingdom art," Doug informs them. "Unfortunately, it's tucked away in some obscure little museum in London when it should be right here where it belongs. It's carved out of a single massive block of alabaster, covered with representations from *The Book of Gates* in exquisite blue hieroglyphs."

"It sounds beautiful," Lucia says, drifting into a small alcove.

"In here," Doug follows her in eagerly, "we see the Seventh Hour from *The Book of What is in the Duat*."

"Really? Explain it to me. In detail, please."

"You really want me to?"

"Yes, please."

"Well, in the Seventh Hour Isis appears at the prow of the Solar Barge and her magic words keep it going when it's confronted by Apopis, the eternal enemy of Re and the forces of light."

"The Seventh hour is when Apopis confronts the dead soul?" Lucia suddenly feels as though the weight of the earth around them is resting on her shoulders. "And Isis helps him?"

"Yes, she renders the evil serpent powerless when he tries to stop the dead soul from achieving his divine flesh."

"His divine flesh," she echoes.

"The texts refer to this Hour as The Cavern of Osiris. Look there at the top of the register. See that plumed deity sitting inside the coils of a snake? That's the Flesh of

Osiris. 'Thou art a soul'," Doug's voice deepens as he translates, "'and thy soul is made spirit on earth.' The snake there is called both Life of Forms and Life of Spirits and the twelve gods and goddesses wearing stars on their heads personify the twelve hours of the dead soul's passage. The crocodile pictured over here is Evil. 'He who knows the texts will be one whose soul is not swallowed by the crocodile'." He pauses and then seems to force himself to say, "But you can't take any of this seriously, of course."

"Why not? It makes perfect metaphysical sense."

"Not even Egyptologists can fully grasp what all this means, yet you think you do?" he snaps.

"I *feel* I do," she corrects him mildly.

"These texts are as precise as mathematical equations and you can't feel the right answer in math, can you?"

Mark reaches into the alcove and pulls her out. "Let's go."

"Go?" Doug demands. "We haven't even reached the burial chamber!"

Lucia sides with Mark, "I've seen enough, let's move on."

Mark whispers in her ear, "I just wish you would."

Lori asks, smiling, "Are you enjoying yourself, Lucia?"

"Yes, thank you." She senses they have been talking about her and it worries her in more ways than one. The last thing she wants is for Richard's mysterious development to be hindered by skeptical thoughts surrounding her. Rational cynicism is the contemporary crocodile she has to fight to help him achieve his divine flesh.

As they start back toward the tomb's entrance, the long corridor feels like an artery flowing with the mystical blood of paintings.

They emerge into radiant, blinding sunlight.

"I need a drink," Mark announces, his squinting eyes shards of glass reflecting the sky.

"She has to see at least one other tomb first," Doug insists. "If you're really so interested in *The Book of what's in the Duat*, Lucia, you absolutely have to experience the tomb of Thutmosis III." It is a challenge.

"But it's out in the middle of nowhere," Lori protests lazily, "and you have to climb down a really long ladder to get in. Are you afraid of heights, Lucia?"

"No," she lies. "Let's go."

Mark thrusts his hands into his pockets and doesn't move.

"This tour was your idea," Doug reminds him, taking hold of Lucia's arm.

"I won't run away, Doug," she teases.

He lets go of her with a confused glance at his hand, as if he hadn't realized what it was doing.

Mark and Lori follow behind them with obvious reluctance.

"What has Mark been saying to you, Doug?" Lucia asks him quietly. "You both know how I feel about my late husband. Why did he ask you to give me this in-depth tour if he doesn't want to encourage my so-called delusions?"

"He thought it would make you realize what gibberish all this is, Lucia, the book of this and the book of that, winged serpents, men with scarab beetle heads. He thought it would help you come to your senses."

"Is that so?" Anger stings her like a scorpion but makes a swift retreat since she knows Mark means well.

"Besides, none of this stuff actually worked."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because when the body dies, consciousness ends and that's that."

"I don't think you really believe that, Doug. I mean, how can anyone really believe they'll cease to exist forever? It's inconceivable. There's got to be at least a tiny spark of hope in everyone, whether they consciously believe in anything or not."

"Lucia, Mark is concerned about you."

"What has he told you, Doug?"

"Nothing I don't already know, that you're obsessed with helping your husband's soul ascend, or whatever a soul does if it exists at all."

Mark doesn't seem to have mentioned Richard's other appearances, which is a relief. "If my husband doesn't have a soul that survived his body then it's my own time I'm wasting. But if he does I could conceivably be helping him, Doug."

He is silent for a long moment. "Well, I don't see how I can argue with that." He sounds relieved.

* * * * *

After the tomb of Thutmose III, they spend more time at the rest area than planned, engrossed in conversation. Except for Lori, who just smiles indulgently and sips her soda.

A cold beer is intensifying Doug's enthusiasm. "The multitude of deities in the Egyptian pantheon can be likened to the particles in subatomic physics and the mysteries of their interaction," he declares. "In many ways, their faith was an exact science."

"I wouldn't think of it as exact, exactly," Mark disagrees wryly.

They are seated at a table on the covered porch that encircles the small building, avoiding the noisy and crowded interior.

"Oh but it was, incredibly precise," Doug insists, a stubborn gleam in his dark eyes.

"If you say so." Mark's shirt is half unbuttoned and the sheen of sweat on the inverted pyramid of flesh visible between its sky-blue folds seems to embody the warm

haze of the desert behind him. "But you have to admit that this exact science is mostly incomprehensible to us since you can't solve an equation without the formula."

"That's true," Doug agrees, warming up for an argument. "We don't have the key to ancient Egyptian symbolism. It's like a modern political cartoon. If you don't know what people, or issues, it refers to it's just a meaningless and distorted picture of seemingly unrelated images. For example, if you didn't know the elephant stood for the Republican Party —"

"We get it," Lori says shortly.

"Of course," Doug adds quickly, "Egyptian symbolism was much more profound than the kind we find in contemporary political cartoons."

"Oh of course." Lucia smiles at him fondly.

"In any case, unless we run into a real, live ancient Egyptian," Mark's patience is being strained, "all these precious books are going to remain mostly gibberish."

"Not so." Doug gazes out at the tomb-riddled Valley, a faithful gleam in his eyes like a tiny campfire burning in a vast night.

"Isn't there some way to apply the recent theories in modern physics to these ancient tableaux?" Lucia asks tentatively, not wanting to annoy Mark or to sound foolish but too interested not to pursue the idea. "I mean, if we assume tomb paintings are symbolic representations of the workings of physical forces and of the universe itself, won't mankind just end up saying the same thing in different ways? And if so, couldn't we somehow place one sketch over another and work from there?"

"We would need a very real point of reference for that," Mark argues, easily following her train of thought. He has finished his first beer and is efficiently working on a second.

"We have one!" Doug leans toward her eagerly. "The Egyptians believed in a Primordial Ocean which they called Nun, and Bohm has postulated basically the same theory."

"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet'," Lori chimes in.

"Go on," Lucia urges.

To her surprise, it is Mark who answers her. "I suppose Nun would correspond to Bohm's Implicate Order, the deeper level of reality that exists beneath our own level of existence, which he calls the Explicate, or Unfolded, Order. He thinks all the forms manifesting in the universe are caused by endless enfoldings and unfoldings."

"Oh Doug, that reminds me of the serpent called the Enveloper you mentioned in Seti's tomb," Lucia says. "The one containing the Flesh of Osiris...but I'm sorry, Mark, I didn't mean to interrupt you."

He stares over her shoulder as he goes on, "Bohm believes the subatomic particles that compose matter are sustained by a constant flow from the Implicate Order. So even when a particle seems to be destroyed it isn't really — it's just enfolded back into the

deeper order from which it emerged and there is always this constant flowing exchange."

"Which means all manifestation," Lucia can't help sounding excited, "including our bodies, is in a sense a three-dimensional illusion and that reality is actually the eternal sea of energy from which all images of life surface for a while."

Mark looks her straight in the eye. "Like a hologram."

She takes a quick, bitter sip of her lemonade as she abruptly realizes what he is implying.

"One of the things that makes holography possible is interference," Doug elaborates. "A crisscrossing pattern occurs when two or more waves ripple through each other. If we regard the human soul as a wave, which behaves like a particle in its physical form, then the so-called hologram of creation —"

"Is cosmic sex." Lori suddenly comes to life. "All these waves flowing through the void or the Implicate Order or whatever the hell you want to call it, these waves caress each other and get turned on and life as we know it is this state of arousal called a particle, which explains why everything appears to be hard and solid and yet why dying will probably be a big fucking relief."

Doug stares at her like a devoted dog but Mark's attention is fixed on another table.

Lucia glances over her shoulder to see who he is looking at.

The tall blonde woman she remembers running into at the Luxor Museum the other morning is sitting alone a few yards away, her long legs stretched out before her in form-fitting white jeans. She is sipping her drink and gazing out across the Valley from behind the reflective silver panes of her sunglasses.

Lucia forces down the final sickly-sweet dregs of her drink, wanting to kill Mark for so obviously looking at another woman in her presence.

"Well," Doug pushes his chair back, "are we ready for Nefertari's tomb?"

The only thing Lucia wants now is an empty tomb in which to bury that blonde.

"It's the most beautiful tomb in the Valley." Doug looks bewildered by her sudden lack of enthusiasm.

"Are tourists allowed in there?" Mark asks abruptly.

"Of course not," Doug snaps. "You know that."

"Good. Let's go."

Chapter Nine

After Nefertari's tomb they drop Doug off at the Institute near the Valley, after which Lori chauffeurs them back to the East Bank to spare them a crowded tourist barge. She speeds across the river with her back to them, supporting Mark's silence. And, feeling increasingly insecure about him, Lucia can't think of anything to say to lighten the mood.

In the elevator taking them up to what is now their room, Mark remains as unsociable as an obelisk while she tortures herself trying to figure out what he is thinking. *He is probably wondering where that beautiful blonde is staying and planning his approach.*

The doors part with a mechanical sigh and he steps out into the corridor.

She remains in the lift, miserably wondering if Elizabeth was right about him after all.

He grabs her arm and pulls her out before the doors close. "Are you all right?"

"No."

"Do you feel dizzy?" He sounds concerned. "Nauseous?"

"No, it's not physical."

He unlocks their door. "What is it then?"

She walks into the room ahead of him and drops listlessly onto edge of the bed. She is a fool to believe that love is strong enough to defeat time and space.

Mark closes the door and comes to stand in front of her. "Lucia," he grips her chin between his thumb and forefinger and forces her to look up at him, "talk to me."

The evanescent particle of personality she knew as Richard Taylor has been swept back into the dark waves of energy from which it came. He nourished her desires while he lived but she has to let him go now because anything else is unnatural, unhealthy. She focuses on the softly undulating horizon of Mark's lips. "I'm just tired."

"I thought you said it wasn't physical."

There is a knock at the door.

"Mrs. Taylor?" a heavily accented voice inquires with an odd blend of deference and impatience.

"Yes?"

"You have just returned from the desert, so we bring you more water."

"Leave it outside please."

"Very well...enjoy."

Mark strides to the door, flings it open and disappears out into the hall.

She runs after him. "Oh my God!"

"Get back in the room, Lucia."

She recognizes the native man who originally delivered the sparkling water even though half his face is pressed against the wall.

"Let's have a little talk." Firmly clutching the back of the man's neck, Mark twists one of his arms up against his back. "Who's paying you to bring her the water?"

"Compliments of hotel!" The one coal-black eye she can see smolders with a disturbing mix of pain and anger.

Mark shifts his hold up to the man's curly black hair, pulls his head back and slams his forehead into the wall.

She gasps as the dull thudding sound reverberates sickeningly in her womb.

"Who's paying you to drug her water, asshole?!"

All her nerves stand *en pointe* and the blood rushes through her body in a breathless choreography of fear and excitement.

"Another woman! Don't know her name!"

"Is she staying here in the Etap?"

"Aywa! Bass!"

"What's her room number?"

"Don't know! Bass! Minfadlak!"

Mark thrusts his knee between the man's fleshy thighs. "What's her room number?"

"La! La! We meet in lobby and she give me powder to put in water! I don't know room number!"

"What does the bitch look like? Answer me!"

"Tall and skinny, like model, yellow hair!"

"Mark, let him go before someone sees this!"

"The bastard's drugging you, Lucia. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't beat the shit out of him."

"Because if he reports you to the Tourist Police they might arrest you and then I'd be all alone!"

He yanks the man away from the wall with both hands and shoves him down the corridor. "If you ever come near her again, I'll hurt you. You got that?"

Not wanting to wait for the elevator, the Egyptian plunges into the stairwell and makes a noisy retreat in his hard-soled shoes.

His fists clenched, Mark stares at the door for a moment as if considering going after him. "I should have him arrested," he turns toward her, "but it won't help. It'll just

scare Julian away and I intend to catch him." He picks up the tray laden with bottles sitting outside the door and carries it into the room.

She quickly locks the door behind them as he takes the water into the bathroom.

She follows him and stares anxiously up at his face while he examines one of the bottles.

"Jesus Christ," he mutters, meeting her eyes in the mirror. "Didn't you notice the seal was broken on these?"

She feels unbelievably foolish. "No, I didn't."

His reflected stare penetrates hers. "Now do you believe me?"

"Yes," she says.

He empties the bottle's sizzling contents into the sink. "Doug should have the test results by tomorrow and then we'll know exactly what they were giving you."

"Whatever it was made me incredibly thirsty, otherwise it was kind of enjoyable," she remarks and immediately regrets it.

"Really? Would you enjoy being poisoned? I know you're a masochist but that's a bit extreme, don't you think?"

"Poisoned?" She looks up into his real eyes.

"You never know. If you die here in Egypt, the autopsy won't be as thorough as it would be in the States."

"Oh my God." She turns away from the inconceivable thought.

"I'm sorry!" He quickly slips his arms around her waist from behind. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm sure it's not true. Julian knows he can't hurt you and that's why he's playing this game. It's up to you what happens here."

She relaxes against him. "You're probably wondering what the hell you've gotten yourself into, Mark."

He whispers, "I know exactly what I've gotten myself into," he unzips her pantsuit, "a beautiful woman!"

"Oh, Mark, I can't believe you're real."

"Well, believe it. Shit, this isn't a dress?"

She smiles. "No." Stepping away from him, she slips gracefully out of the suit then snaps her bra open and tosses it away before turning to face him again. She wrests his shirt out of his jeans and begins unbuttoning it. It is a frustratingly long task because he doesn't help and his passivity now is such a contrast to his violence of a few minutes ago that she is tempted to simply rip all his clothes off.

Finally he does her the favor of unzipping his jeans and she promptly sinks to her knees before him on the hard tile floor, pulling them down around his thighs just far enough to expose his dark-blue shorts. It pleases her to feel his penis straining against them as with both hands she caresses the slightly rough cotton around to his ass. She squeezes it and gives the promising swell of his buried erection a gentle, encouraging

kiss. She closes her eyes for a moment to breathe in a desirable man's subtly intoxicating scent and then carefully uses her teeth to get a grip on his head through his underpants, which are dry as a desert against her tongue. She captures him between her lips and deliberately teases herself by sucking on him without being able to feel him. She makes herself desperate for the smooth sensation of his skin and for his cool, salty-sweet semen, a drop of which turns the dark-blue fabric black. Just barely tasting him through this wet spot, she can't stand it anymore and impatiently pulls his shorts down out of her way.

His erection rears up to greet her, straight and hard as a scepter with which he dominates her while at the same time putting his most powerful feelings in her hands. He strokes her hair away from her face, tenderly warning her not to make him wait too much longer for her mouth. He has no idea it is the memory of all her husband's erections she is cherishing. Despite its impressive dimensions, Mark's penis disappoints her simply because it is not Richard's, which abruptly makes her conscious of the fact that she is kneeling on a very hard surface and that she doesn't want to be.

Expecting him to force himself on her again, she is surprised when he just waits patiently, his arms relaxed at his sides. She sighs as if with pleasure and cradles his erection in her right hand. She begins stroking him slowly and gently, the thumb and index finger of her other hand forming a ring around his head she slips on and off him swiftly, subjecting him to contrasting rhythms that mysteriously work together. When he is nice and slick, her right hand begins massaging him more firmly, making him more and more tense as she strives to bring him to a climax with just her fingers. She surrenders herself to the task, remembering how Richard's pleasure always affected her like an electric current, like lightning forking through her womb and exciting her entire being. She still wants him so much her body cries blindly for him now, so that the wet warmth between her thighs has little to do with the man coming in her hands.

Chapter Ten

Less than an hour later they are en route to the Sound and Light Show at Karnak Temple. It was Mark's idea that the spectacle would help take her mind off the sinister events surrounding her.

He sits across from her in the carriage, a twilight breeze playing through his damp hair like a goddess' invisible admiring fingers. "A pyramid for your thoughts, princess." His elbows on his knees, his black-clad body merges with the seat as he gazes across the Nile at the sunset.

"Doug lives on the West Bank?" she asks.

"Yes, with a bunch of other crazy Egyptologists."

"I'd like to spend a night on that side of the river."

"Then I'll arrange it."

His easy consent surprises her. "I thought you wanted to leave Thebes as soon as possible."

His eyes are all that is left of the daylight sky. "I changed my mind."

She is glad but still curious about his reasons. "Why?"

"Because you're right—there's no point in running away. Your greedy brother-in-law will just follow you, so I intend to flush him out right here."

Shivering, she zips up her leather jacket and then runs the fingers of both hands through her hair to lift its damp weight off her scalp for a moment.

"Cold?" he asks, gazing at the setting sun—a small, darkly glowing red sphere like the end of a cosmic cigarette.

"A little, but it's nice. A hot shower and now a cool evening breeze..." She sits back contentedly. "I love sensual contrasts."

"Like pain and pleasure?"

She glances up at the crescent moon cutting its way through the thinning atmosphere at the sky's zenith. "Yes."

"I've never met a woman like you before, Lucia."

"What do you mean?" It is too dark for her to discern his expression.

"I've been with a lot of women but I've never wanted any of them for long. They were..." His silhouette shrugs. "Shallow, even the smart ones. I'm not talking about intelligence here. With you, it's like your body and your soul are...I don't know. I just know that when I fuck you it's something else. I'm not a word man like Richard was."

"I've never been able to separate my body from my soul," she says softly. "And they're both yours to command, Mark."

He replies just as quietly, "That's not a very feminist attitude."

"I don't care. It's the truth. The earth needs the sun yet it's not inferior to it. There's no such thing as inferior and superior in metaphysical relationships."

"Like the one you're trying to have with Richard now?"

"I'm not —"

"Don't lie to me, Lucia."

"He's dead, Mark."

He suddenly grasps one of her hands and raises it to his lips.

"Do you really believe in the soul, Mark?"

The gleaming silver river is tarnished with darkness like the blade of an ancient sword.

He lets go of her hand and sits back. "Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"Why, does what I believe affect the nature of the universe?"

"Actually, I think it does."

"We're almost there."

"You're changing the subject."

"No I'm not, just postponing it. We'll have plenty of time to get the universe straightened out."

The carriage turns away from the Nile and, after a few minutes, begins trotting up a broad avenue lined on both sides by ram-headed sphinxes. Symbols of Amon-Re, they guard the approach to the temple, and she finds herself half hypnotized by the curving horns as they flow by, the pale stone from which they are carved seeming to glow in the deepening darkness.

A gathering of black carriages at the entrance evokes a Victorian funeral.

Mark jumps out and turns to help her down, gallant as an old-fashioned gentleman even though society no longer encumbers her with long skirts and petticoats. She is, in fact, lithe as a cat in her black leggings and leather jacket.

Hand in hand, they follow a respectfully hushed group of around fifty people into the Temple of Karnak, where over an archaic sound system pharaohs with pompous British voices boast of their military and architectural achievements as sections of the ruined temple are flooded with a sickly yellow light.

The horribly uninspired spectacle drags on and on.

"Nefertari." Mark points out a figure perched on the colossal stone feet of Ramses II, her head on a level with his knees.

"That's nice," she says and during one of the pauses in the lifeless script her stomach growls audibly.

"Was that thunder," he teases, "or are you hungry?"

"I'm starving!" she whispers. "I was starving before we left the hotel."

"Well, we can go have dinner now if you don't mind missing the rest of the show."

"I don't mind at all!"

"Let's turn back then."

They are walking deeper and deeper into the temple toward the Sacred Lake and the show's climax.

"Can you find the way?" she asks.

"Trust me."

They are trailing behind the crowd, so it is an easy matter to just turn around and begin retracing their steps and sections of the temple are still lit up so they can see where they're going. Behind them the spectacle continues but the lifeless script is soon swallowed up by a profound silence.

Rows of papyrus columns are bathed by floodlights in a ghostly reflection of the sun's life-giving rays and a row of sphinxes crouches in front of them, all but one of them beheaded by the centuries.

She says quietly, "Isn't time a strange thing, Mark? I mean, the way a day can seem to last forever yet thousands of years pass in the blink of an eye?"

"Mm."

The sky above and beyond the columns is positively bursting with stars, imbuing the dead temple with a haunting pulse.

Mark abruptly grabs her arm and stops walking. "Did you hear that?" he whispers.

Her heart starts racing. "Hear what?"

"Stay here," he commands and before she can stop him, runs off into the darkness.

Her heart protesting violently, she nevertheless stands there obediently for a long moment. "Mark?"

She calls softly. "Mark?"

"My love."

She turns to face the blessedly familiar voice.

Richard is standing at the far end of the row of columns where the light bathing them ebbs back into the night. All she can see of him is the pale egg of his face, cracked by a sinister goatee.

She takes a tentative step toward the impossible then another one and another one, amazed that he is still there, that he doesn't vanish as she expects him to at every second. She doesn't take her eyes off him as with each step she labors to accept this dark miracle. She can't stop herself from blinking yet this time her lashes don't just brush him away. He is still there, waiting for her. She longs to say his name but her throat is sealed tight with emotion...until her mind suddenly accepts the inconceivable and gives her body permission to do what it has longed to do since she saw him. She runs toward him, prepared to run straight through him.

When he catches her in his arms and presses her face against his hard, very real chest, disbelief paralyzes her. All she is aware of is the miracle that they are together again. At the moment it hardly surprises her because her heart is beating hard and fast enough to sustain them both.

"I'm coming for you, my love," he whispers, so softly she wouldn't be able to hear him if her spine wasn't an antenna tuned to his beloved frequency. Then his arms are no longer around her and stars break on her vision like sea foam as a deliciously warm darkness floods all her senses...

Stars send fervently concerned arms into her eyes. Then a silhouette absorbs part of the universe.

"No, don't try to sit up yet," Mark says gently.

Tentatively grasping her head in both hands, she disobeys him. Her skull feels as heavy as a rock, impossibly held up by the delicate flower stem of her neck.

He is crouching down beside her. "Lucia, are you hurt?"

"I don't think so."

"What the hell happened to you?"

"I'm not sure." And it's true, she has no idea what energies Richard's personality is composed of now. His new tailor works with a material far superior to the frail cloth of flesh and the easily torn threads of veins.

"Easy, baby." Mark helps her up.

"Did you see anyone, Mark?"

"No, but I'm sure you did."

A totally unexpected rumble of thunder echoes the blood pounding through her heart and she suffers the thrilling impression that her sensuality no longer ends with her body. Suddenly the sky feels like a curving extension of her chest, which makes the earth's atmosphere a powerful layer of her own skin and the crescent moon shining over the columns her own pale shoulder, caressed by the dark fur of a passing cloud. All because she knows, because she is sure now, that Richard hasn't left her forever.

"The little bastard was here wasn't he, Lucia?"

"No, Mark, it wasn't Julian." It was Richard who held her in his arms. Nothing else can explain the almost orgasmic warmth that seemed to replace the very marrow of her bones just before her consciousness blinked out.

"What happened to you, Lucia? What did he say to you this time?" Mark clutches a handful of her hair and tugs painfully on her roots as if reaching for her thoughts. "Answer me."

She tells him all in one breath, "He said he was coming for me, I felt him, he held me!"

He lets go of her hair. "You let him touch you? You played right into his hands? You let him get close enough to do whatever he wanted to you? You bought this ridiculous masquerade?"

"Mark, it wasn't Julian," she insists desperately, yet her memory of those magical moments is frustratingly hazy, as if what she experienced was too intense for her brain to record properly, just as too much light can overexpose film.

"Maybe I should leave you two alone."

"Mark, please."

He shrugs her hand off his arm. "I'm getting out of here, Lucia. You can come with me if you want to."

"Of course I want to!"

"You don't know what you want."

"This isn't my fault," she protests half-heartedly.

"I'm not so sure about that anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think I feel like talking to you right now."

* * * * *

Back in their room Mark closes the door behind them and leans back against it while she goes and sits on the edge of the bed, weak with hunger and a growing despair at her own behavior. She can't seem to hold on to the reins of her feelings, which keep leaping back and forth between rational skepticism and passionate belief in a way that can only prove destructive.

"I can make you come," he crosses his arms over his chest, "but I can't make you tell me the truth."

She clenches her hands between her knees and looks up at him miserably. "I'm sorry."

"Just how far did you let Richard go, Lucia? And I'm not talking about tonight."

"He never really hurt me."

"I don't believe you. I think all he did was hurt you."

"That's not true. He loved me and I loved him."

"What you loved was not having a will of your own, Lucia." His hands fall to the buckle of his belt and his voice becomes a menacing undertone as he approaches her. "You lied to me, baby. If you really respected me you wouldn't lie to me." He grabs her arm with one hand, pulls her to her feet, turns her around and shoves her face forward across the bed. "I have to teach you to respect me, Lucia."

She closes her eyes because strangely enough nothing makes her feel more at peace than the sensual hiss of a man's belt coming off.

He tugs her leggings down just far enough to expose her ass and she rises up onto her elbows, hanging her head. The searing agony of leather slicing into her sensitive skin stuns her into breathless submission.

After six swift, excruciating lashes he pulls her up off the bed by her hair. "Undress," he commands.

Feeling unsteady on her feet, she bends over to take off her boots and pull her panties and leggings off all the way. Then, with her eyes lowered, she removes the rest of her clothing, tossing it on the bed behind her and, without waiting for him to tell her what to do next, she walks over to a clear expanse of wall. She raises her arms, plants her palms against it and holds her breath.

He doesn't hesitate. He swiftly covers her back with burning trails that all converge between her legs, where how much she wants him deepens with every stroke.

Finally she hears the belt slap against the mirror over the dresser like a snake hitting ice as he tosses it away from him.

"I can't believe you let me do that." His cool tone feels like acid poured across her burning back. "I'm surprised you don't have any scars."

She turns to face him, trembling with the need to have her suffering redeemed by his enjoyment, without which it is meaningless and therefore unendurable. "Stop it!" she begs.

His sardonic smile hurts infinitely more than his blows did. "Now you tell me to stop?"

She looks around the room for something to throw at him but there is nothing suitable within reach.

"Is this what your marriage was like, Lucia?"

"No," she says passionately. "Richard never made fun of me like this!"

His smile vanishes like a trick of the light. "Is that what you think I'm doing, making fun of you?"

"I don't know what you're doing!"

"Yes, you do."

She returns to the bed, sits weakly on the edge and lets her head fall into her hands from its own weight. She cannot believe what is happening, his detachment makes her want to die.

"I should leave," he says.

"What?!" She stares up at him in disbelief. "You beat me and now you're just going to leave?"

"You wouldn't like that, baby?"

"No!"

"You want me to fuck you?" He comes and stands over her. "Is that it?"

"Yes," she whispers.

"I didn't hear you."

"Yes."

"Say it."

"I want you to fuck me."

"My name is Mark."

"I want you to fuck me, Mark."

He takes a step back. "Did Richard always beat you before he fucked you, Lucia?"

She closes her eyes in despair. "Oh God."

"Don't you mean 'oh Richard'? He's so powerful now he can even take form and hold you in his arms again."

"It had to be Julian," she admits hopelessly.

"Was it? You didn't seem to think so in the temple. Every time Richard shows up you don't think clearly at all. He still has power over you, Lucia. He has so much power over you that his brother can manipulate you just by flashing some pictures around and mimicking his voice. You're an intelligent woman but not when it comes to Daddy. You're just a lost little girl when it comes to Daddy. Go ahead. Cry. You should cry. I just beat you, for Christ's sake. I hurt you and I'm still hurting you by trying to beat the truth into you. The reason you're so obsessed with Richard's ghost is because you don't have a will of your own, Lucia. You buried it with him. That's why you want me to be like him, so you won't have to take responsibility for yourself. Think about it. He taught you to enjoy pain by fucking you afterward as a reward and that's why I won't. I intend to break all the patterns he addicted you to and find out what you're really like, how you really feel."

Her heart is beating as if she is trying to run her way out of a labyrinth. "Mark," she takes a deep breath and meets his eyes, "help me!"

He reaches down for her hands and draws her, very gently, up into his arms.

Chapter Eleven

The hotel lounge is as dark as a cave in which glass-enclosed candles glimmer and flicker like stars reflected in a nocturnal pool. Two figures are seated at the bar.

Lucia pauses on the threshold just in time to see Mark lean toward the woman and whisper something in her ear.

She's been buffeted by so many conflicting emotions lately that the wave of jealousy that hits her meets with no resistance, as if she is only dreaming, and this almost enables her to enjoy watching Mark caress the woman's long blonde hair.

True to his word, he did not make love to her after whipping her with his belt. They had come downstairs for dinner instead, where she had wolfed down her chicken and couscous, wishing they were filet mignon and lobster. He had then suggested they hit the bar for a nightcap and she had agreed even though she would have preferred going straight to bed. On the way she had stopped to use the bathroom. But now she turns away and hurries toward the elevators.

She is barely halfway across the lobby before Mark catches her. "Hey, I don't mind you being jealous, Lucia, but that wasn't what it looked like, so relax. I guess you haven't noticed."

Inside the lift, she stares miserably at the panel of numbers, wishing she could sweep them all up into her hands like glowing dice and roll them to win what she desires more than anything – Richard alive again. "Noticed what?" she asks listlessly.

"That this gorgeous blonde you think I was hitting on is really a man."

She glances at him, wide-eyed

"A man in drag," he clarifies.

"Are you serious?"

"When you get close it's obvious."

"And you got close enough to caress her hair!"

"Only to make sure it was a wig. Doesn't she look a little familiar to you, Lucia?"

"I saw her in the Luxor Museum and yesterday in the Valley. You were looking at her there too," she accuses.

He asks sharply, "She was in the museum the morning you saw Richard?"

"Yes."

Mark doesn't drop the bomb until they are in their room.

"I'm pretty sure that's your brother-in-law."

She deflects her shock with anger. "Then shouldn't I go down and confront him? If that is Julian then I can end this horrible game!" Yet the concept frightens her. It offers

her control but in a much less exciting universe, one in which Richard remains dead and buried forever.

Mark surprises her by saying, "He knows we're on to him and that's enough for now."

"But..."

"But what?"

His expression silences her.

"If he keeps trying to haunt you, Lucia, he's either stupid or he's dangerous. I need to find out just how determined he is."

* * * * *

The next morning Mark gets up early and Lucia watches him dress, struggling with her emotions, which are as slippery as fish still half caught in a tangling net of dreams. She can't remember them, which is just as well because it enables her to avoid the issues they forced up out of her subconscious. She concentrates instead on a more tangible concern. "Where are you going, Mark?"

"Don't worry about that, just go back to sleep."

She rephrases the question. "Will you be gone long?"

"No," he bends over her and kisses her cheek, "just long enough to find out what was in that water. Will you stay in bed like a good girl or do I have to tie you to the bedposts?"

She smiles but then turns away on her side to hide her disappointment that he is only teasing. Like a doctor's probing fingers, his attitude makes her sexual submissiveness feel like a sickness, like a psychological tumor rather than a dark gem shaped by metaphysical laws, which is what it had felt like with Richard.

He closes the door so quietly behind him she suffers the unpleasant impression that she is in a hospital and her perverse desires are a dangerous fever he is trying to cure her of.

An emotionally healthy woman wouldn't have loved a man like Richard.

A completely sane woman wouldn't believe in ghosts more easily than in greedy brother-in-laws.

With the thick curtains drawn over the glass doors the room is depressingly dark.

When the phone rings suddenly her heart rate doubles in the mere seconds it takes her to snatch up the receiver. "Hello?!"

"Did I wake you?" Lori inquires with her usual polite indifference.

"No," she replies numbly.

"Look, Lucia, I'll get right to the point. Okay? I've known Mark for over two years now, he's like a brother to me and frankly I'm worried that he's getting in the way of whatever the hell is going on with you."

She sighs. "What has he told you, Lori?"

"Pretty much everything but don't be mad at him for it. He's like a brother to me."

"I'm not mad at him, Lori."

"Good, because he really cares about you. How long has your husband been dead, Lucia?"

"Seventeen months."

"Mark has described your visions to me but maybe you should tell me about them yourself. Mark doesn't believe in life after death but, personally, I feel it would be wrong to disregard the supernatural angle completely. If Richard needs you, you have to help him, Lucia."

"Yes!" she whispers, scarcely able to believe that someone is finally seeing things her way.

"If he is appearing to you it means he's trapped between worlds and he either wants you to help him move on or he's trying to take you with him."

"Oh God, Lori, do you really think...?" She can't pursue the thought. Like a rough massage, the other woman's confident grasp of the supernatural makes her feel uncomfortable even as it relieves some of her profound tension. "What can I do?"

"Talk to me," Lori urges, "I'm listening."

* * * * *

By the time Mark returns Lucia has put on black jeans beneath a form-fitting black shirt and applied her expensive makeup in a way that looks perfectly natural.

He sets a large brown paper bag down on the dresser. "Bagels and coffee and don't worry, I remembered you take cream and sugar. But first let's pack." He walks over to the corner where his small suitcase, laptop and camera bag are lying, the former spilling the light and dark guts of socks and underwear across the carpet. He shoves everything back into it and zips the pliant black leather closed as he glances up at her. "Didn't you hear me?"

"Where are we going?"

"Didn't you want to spend a night on the West Bank?"

"Yes."

"Then pack."

She turns her back on him and opens the closet to hide her relief. She had thought they were leaving for Cairo.

"Don't kill yourself deciding what to bring. We'll only be gone a night or two."

"What was in the water, Mark?"

"A kickass combination of downers, so you couldn't run when you saw a ghost. I'll bet you felt pretty damn good, relaxed and open to just about anything or anyone."

She tosses a dark gray shirt onto the bed, not trusting herself to speak.

"Add alcohol to the brew and it's no fucking wonder you kept passing out." He returns to the dresser and begins conjuring plastic cups, bagels, small round containers of cream cheese, plastic knives and napkins from the bag.

"Mark?"

He doesn't look at her. "Yes?"

She goes and stands beside him. "I don't want anything to happen to you because you're trying to help me."

"Don't worry about me." He tries to hide it but she discerns from his tone that he hadn't expected her concern and that it pleases him.

"Julian sees you as being in his way now, Mark," she snaps the lids off the coffees while he spreads a lavish amount of cream cheese onto one of the bagels, "and I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Nothing is going to happen to me." He impatiently smears a modest amount of cheese onto the second bagel. He tosses the plastic knife away. "Listen to me, Lucia. You were unconscious when I found you last night. What did he do to you?"

"I don't remember, Mark, honestly. All I remember is him holding me."

He picks up his cup and waits, staring into her eyes.

She looks down into his coffee's steaming black space. "One second I was in the arms of a man pretending to be Richard," she says carefully. "Then this strange warmth flowed through my whole body and the next thing I knew you were bending over me."

"Well, you weren't drugged at the time," he hands her the other cup, "so I don't think you fainted. Do you know if Julian ever studied martial arts?"

"He's a black belt," she says, surprised, and then hesitates before adding casually, "so was Richard. But how did you know?"

"How did I know? Because he knocked you out cold without leaving a mark on you, which means he's acquainted with the body's pressure points. All it takes is a thumb in just the right place," he illustrates by placing the ball of his left thumb in the tender hollow where her throat merges with her chest, "to make you see stars."

She jerks away from him and a stream of coffee arcs out of the plastic cup like a muddy rainbow.

"What's the matter, baby, didn't you like that?"

"Of course not!"

"Well, don't worry, our black belt blonde checked out this morning." He bites into the bagel but the look in his eyes evokes a predator devouring its bloody kill.

"She did? I mean, he did? How do you know?"

"I told you, with enough baksheesh you can obtain the secrets of the universe. A carriage driver remembers taking a woman fitting her description to the airport this morning and a friendly bellhop informed me that she was staying in room 1016."

"That would be the one almost right above mine."

"A perfect vantage point from which to project a ghost onto your balcony."

She experiences an echo of the numbness that cushioned her emotions after she received the news of Richard's death. She hadn't really believed he was gone, not forever, and she still can't. "Then it's over." Her voice is hollow with disappointment.

"Or that's what he wants us to think. But whether or not it's true, he'll still have to find out where we've gone, figure out where we're staying, then get a room, and it won't be as easy for him to hide on the West Bank. He also knows I'll kick his skinny ass if he comes near you again." He eyes her bagel. "Don't you want that?"

"No, you have it, please."

"Thanks."

"So, where will we be staying on the West Bank?" She tries to sound interested.

"We're camping out beneath the stars tonight, princess."

"Oh!" A spark of excitement kindles again at the core of her being.

"It was Doug's idea. He and Lori have all the gear so they'll be coming with us. Doug wants to get you into more tombs and I want to get you away from greedy brother-in-laws."

Chapter Twelve

They are the first off the tourist barge, on which there is no sign of anyone resembling Julian, male or female, when it docks on the West Bank. Mark directs their cab to the Temple of Hatshepsut, the queen who crowned herself pharaoh and is therefore considered the world's first feminist, and they leave their bags with the driver.

A long central causeway leads to the temple's upper court, where three levels of narrow rectangular columns, strikingly modern in appearance, are set into the face of a cliff. Inside the temple's second level there is another row of inner columns and beyond them a shadowy open space leads to yet two more rows of double columns, one to the left and one to the right of a ramp ascending to a third level.

Lucia has to peer over tourists' shoulders at the delicately etched reliefs on the western wall. Most of the paint has worn off and they are barely visible. Nevertheless, she is still able to make out the theme, which is Hatshepsut's expedition to the land of Punt, a kingdom rich in spices and other desirable luxuries imported by the Egyptians.

She tugs on Mark's sleeve and he follows her to the eastern chapel, where there are not quite as many bodies in their way.

"The divine birth," she informs him quietly. "The ram-headed god over there is Khnum shaping the queen's Ka on his wheel."

"The queen's what?"

"Her Ka. Everyone has a higher and a lower Ka known as the Ba. The Ba is your physical body, your Ka is the energy animating it, or manifesting within it. The Ba was usually represented by a bird with a human head. Your Akh is your spirit, independent of all form and personality."

"And who's the midget under the queen's bed?"

She smiles. "The dwarf-god Bes. For some reason he was associated with childbirth. He was supposed to be able to chase away infection, which might be related to his aspect as a god of music and dance."

"Just another way of saying exercise is good for you?"

She laughs.

"Come on, princess, I'll show you something more interesting than the divine birth."

Intrigued, Lucia follows him out of the temple's cool shadows into penetrating sunlight where the temperature nevertheless remains ideal.

"Feel like a jog?" Mark asks when they reach the bottom of the causeway.

"A jog? Where?"

"We don't have much time. Doug and Lori are meeting us at the rest stop at one o'clock. They're bringing us an empty backpack. We'll have lunch with them then drop our stuff off at the hotel and meet them back in the Valley before dark. What I'd like to show you is over there in that cliff. If we run we'll have time to see it. Can you keep up?"

"No problem."

They pick up a tail of laughing Egyptian boys as they run toward the cliff face but their curiosity doesn't last the distance. By the time they reach the rocky slope they are completely alone.

Mark barely pauses to let her catch her breath before he starts up a steep trail ahead of her.

The sandy path ends abruptly at the mouth of a cave.

"This is where the queen's construction crew had lunch," he tells her. "Come on."

The small cave is dark and surprisingly chilly but enough sunlight filters in through the opening to reveal smooth walls covered with ancient graffiti.

Mark homes in on a particular spot near the back. "Here it is. The not-so-divine conception."

He is referring to two figures briefly sketched in black. One is a woman bent at the waist, who braces herself on something as the man behind her grips her hips and prepares to enter her.

"Doggie style, princess, or should I say jackal style."

"It's beautiful," she replies soberly.

"I knew you'd like it. Hatshepsut's lover Senenmut was the architect who designed her temple and Doug says that's supposed to be them, but I think it's just two average Egyptians having fun."

"They're only stick figures yet they have such presence. It's been thousands of years but you can still feel that moment, can't you?"

"The moment right after would have felt even better, yet instead the artist chose to sketch desire just before its fulfillment."

She glances up at his profile. "You still haven't shown me any of your work, Mark."

"I will, don't worry."

She glances behind them. Only a rough circle of sky is visible from within this little womb in the earth. "Not many people seem to know about this place," she observes.

"No, most of the guides don't even know about it." Abruptly, he grabs the waistband of her jeans and unzips them. "Turn around," he commands and even as she obeys he yanks them all the way down to her ankles, along with her panties. "Now bend over."

His undertone affects her circulation like a low-grade frequency and centuries fall away as she resurrects the woman on the wall. Surrounded by sand and rock, she feels

even more exposed and vulnerable. She braces herself on the rough wall and glances up at the ancient couple. She knows exactly what the woman was feeling—a delicious anticipation and relief that for a while she will feel like a goddess, totally desirable and fulfilled and free from worries. With a rigid penis inside her, past, present and future all come together in its fleshly timeline and in her wet pussy, responding to its divine energy with civilizations of sensations... Mark grips her hips and his first thrust seems to find her body's magical core it feels so good.

"Oh God!" she cries.

"You mean gods!" He spans her as if to punish her for this sacrilege.

His cock is so incredibly hard it seems imbued with the spirit of the stone surrounding them.

"Mm, you're so tight, princess... You have such an unbelievable," he rams the compliment into her, "little pussy!"

She suffers the excruciating impression that he is impatiently shoving her vital organs aside to make room for his much more important erection. It stuns her how hard and fast he drives into her, so that she can hardly catch her breath.

"Mark, you're hurting me!"

"Am I? Would you like me to stop?"

"No!" she sobs.

"Maybe what you want is for me to fuck your ass instead—is that it? Do you want me to fuck your ass, princess?"

"Oh yes! Please!"

"Not until you tell me how much you want it. Come on, tell me how much you want me to fuck your ass."

She gasps the words, "I want you...I'm dying for you...to fuck my ass!" as he beats the totally humiliating confession out of her.

He removes his cock from her body with the cold suddenness of pulling out a knife and all he has to do is give her a gentle push for her to fall onto her hands and knees. Her jeans and panties, bunched up around her ankles, make it impossible for her to keep her balance after his violent strokes, which have left her feeling deliciously weak.

The sand is soft and cool, a refreshing change for her palms and a more than adequate cushion as she senses him fall to his knees behind her. She keeps her eyes on the entrance, even though if anyone were approaching she would hear them coming up the rocky path...and once he flicks his head between her pussy's wet lips to transfer some of its juices to her dry asshole she forgets everything else. They could have an audience of native guides and tourists and she would scarcely notice because the experience of a big hard cock forcing itself into her from behind completely fills both her mind and her body.

Her hair falls forward, hiding her face as she makes soft, helpless sounds of resistance mingled with acceptance. He penetrates her slowly but relentlessly, pushing

the envelope of her flesh until she is sure she can't stand to take any more of him. Yet she does and this time her dirty little hole responds by clinging to his erection with a mysterious feeling of triumph and inviting it in even deeper.

"Oh yes," he whispers, "give it to me, baby, let me fuck your ass like I really want to!" And he does. He bangs her from behind like a condemned man having his final fuck who has nothing to lose if he kills her with the intensity of his pleasure. Or like the ancient construction worker on the wall come to life with a hard-on he's waited two thousand years to get off.

* * * * *

Back at the foot of Hatshepsut's temple Mark fends off flocks of souvenir vendors as they make their way back to the cab. Lucia walks just behind him, using his body to shield herself from the noisy flocks of souvenir vendors. Her legs are feeling a little unsteady, although not from running. During the bumpy ride to the Valley of the Kings she remains silently introspective.

Respecting her mood, Mark leans over into the front seat and strikes up a conversation in Arabic with the driver. Inspired by his creative grammar, the Egyptian's constant smoky laughter makes her grateful for the open windows.

Doug and Lori are waiting for them at the rest stop, at an outdoor table overlooking the Valley.

Rising, Doug plants a moist kiss on Lucia's cheek and pulls a chair out for her. "This is absolutely the last day I'm wasting," he declares cheerfully. "We'll camp at the entrance to the tomb of Ramses III. It contains over thirty chambers. Only the first seventeen are open to tourists, since the rest aren't totally safe, but if we're careful..."

Lucia stops listening as her own thoughts possess her.

Julian is, for some cruel reason, projecting images of his dead brother. Richard has been beautifully embalmed by technology, wrapped in video bandages and mummified by light, what every ancient Egyptian would have given anything to attain. It isn't necessary to preserve the body anymore. It can be discarded along with the brain and yet you can still live forever in a few square containers no larger than the palm of your lover's hand.

Lori catches her eye and smiles knowingly.

Lucia smiles back at her anxiously. It was foolish of her to confess what she is really thinking and feeling about her late husband's soul to a close friend of Mark's but the other woman's gruff sympathy had caught her off guard.

"It's too bad we can't bring a telescope," Doug's wife comments. "But I guess it doesn't matter. The visibility out here at night is unbelievable. You can see things with the naked eye you'd never be able to see anywhere else."

A tense silence falls over the table.

Mark scrapes his chair back. "What would you like, Lucia?"

"Whatever you're having."

He hesitates a second before rising, as if unable to escape the gravity of her stare.

"I'd like another beer," Doug says.

"Can I get you anything, Lori?"

"No, thanks, Mark, I'm fine."

Doug is still describing Ramses III's tomb when Mark returns.

Lucia endures a greasy hamburger and a watery beer without comment. She is hungry enough not to care.

* * * * *

Doug provides them with an empty backpack and then he and Lori head back to the Institute to pack sandwiches, wine and everything else necessary for a hedonistic night in the desert.

Mark and Lucia catch a cab to their hotel.

The Habu is located directly across from Medinet Habu Temple dedicated to the King of the Gods, Amun-Re.

Mark was right. The Habu makes the Etap look like a five star luxury hotel. Their room in the old building is small and Spartan. She is glad they won't be spending the night there.

Inside the closet-like bathroom she uses the ancient pull-chain toilet and manages to coax a stream of tepid water from the sink, stained yellow as ancient ivory around the drain.

Mark takes his turn next then kicks off his sneakers and spreads himself out on the bed beside her.

Despite the hard mattress, she nestles with perfect comfort beneath his arm. "Let's visit Italy next," she murmurs.

"I'll have to sell some work first."

"Mark, for better or for worse," she feels relaxed enough to broach the touchy subject, "I have all this money and it would definitely be for the better if you would agree to travel with me for a while."

"Well, maybe." He consents lazily, drifting off, and it is the easiest thing in the world for her to follow him.

Lucia is the first to surface from a shallow sleep flooded with images like schools of colorful fish darting just below the surface of a river.

Mark turns his head away when she slips out from beneath his arm but doesn't wake.

She sits up and gazes down at him.

It makes her feel distressingly sober, how young he looks.

She gets carefully out of bed, walks over to the window and flips open the blinds.

She is confronted with the dramatically beautiful sight of the sun setting into the ruined temple.

After a moment, Mark groans behind her.

She returns to the bed and sits down beside him. "Get up, lazy."

"Fuck you."

Smiling, she reaches for a pillow to smother him with.

He grabs it from her and throws it across the room. "I don't have the energy to punish you right now, Lucia, so behave." He glances at his watch. "Damn!" He sits up. "Let's get moving."

She slips a violet sweater on over her black shirt and jeans while Mark folds the blanket over the bed into an amazingly small square and thrusts it into the backpack. "I hate to disappoint you, princess, but there's no room in here for whips or chains."

"What about black gloves? It's cold out in the desert at night."

He rummages through his overnight bag and tosses a pair of black leather gloves into their backpack.

She laughs. "I was only teasing."

"No, you weren't."

She gravitates toward the window.

The broken columns have become whole again in the slender black shadows they cast across the sand.

"Okay, so we've established that I have kinky tastes," she hears herself say. "Is there anything wrong with that?"

He comes and stands beside her. "Just tell me what you want."

"I want you."

"Then you're all set."

She glances down at the small wooden chair next to the window then up at his face, flushed by the setting sun. His features are so perfect he looks like a saint with a devil's eyes. "Do we have time for a quickie?" she asks softly.

He frowns down at her. "You're insatiable, you know that?"

She quickly unzips his jeans, "Yes, but it's your fault for having such a big, beautiful cock!" She grabs the shirt over his chest and moves him over to the chair. "I want to ride you, Mark."

He doesn't resist as she tugs his jeans and underpants down to his ankles and then pushes him down onto the narrow seat. He sighs patiently and kindly begins stroking his soft penis while lovingly cradling his balls. It doesn't stay soft for long as he watches her kick off her sneakers and peel off her own jeans and panties. She leaves on her

white socks and her violet sweater as she bends at the waist, keeping her legs and back straight, and takes over.

She grasps the base of his stiffening cock firmly with one hand and caresses him lightly and swiftly with the other as she twirls her tongue around his head. When he is more than hard enough she points him straight up like one of the columns outside and braces the top of his penis inside her moist labia as she prepares to sit on him. Her pussy feels as deep and dark as a shadow cast by the fact of his erection. She focuses on the setting sun, and its warm rays flowing across the flesh-colored sand feel magically embodied in his shaft as she sinks slowly down around it, moaning at the way it opens her up. She holds on to his shoulders as she impales herself on him and then doesn't move as she relishes the exquisite fullness of having him all the way up inside her.

"Come on," he urges, reaching up into her sweater to grab a hold of her hips.

"Let go!" She pushes his hands away. "And don't move!"

Surprise flickering in his eyes that she is dominating him for a change, he lets his arms hang at his sides and sits perfectly still. This is exactly what she wants, for him to turn into a statue her body can fuck as the sinister fingers of the shadows caress her soul. She rides him hard, driving his erection as deep inside her as she can bear, passionately stabbing herself with his increasingly rigid shaft.

Her suicidal pace is too much for him. He thrusts his hands back into her shirt, grips her hips and holds her down over him. "Oh yes!" he hisses and throws his head back as he explodes deep inside her.

She writhes desperately around his pulsing orgasm, working her clit against him as she keeps her eyes on the long fingers of darkness outside. And then for a blinding, transcendent moment her warm flesh becomes one with the glowing sky as she seems to rise out of her body, the intensity of her climax making thought itself feel like a mere shadow of what really is.

Chapter Thirteen

"We'll wait out here." Lori takes another swig of cheap red wine from a plastic cup. She is sitting on one side of the entrance to Ramses III's eternal home, leaning comfortably back against the rock face.

On the other side of the entrance, Mark's long legs are bent into a pyramid against his chest and he catches hold of Lucia's hand as she prepares to follow Doug into the tomb's luminous bowels. "Enjoy," he says, brushing the sensitive underside of her wrist with his warm lips.

She lingers over him, reluctant to leave both his stimulating company and their small fire's cozy blaze.

"Come on, Lucia," Doug calls impatiently from inside the tomb.

Mark lets go of her hand and she enters the rock face. She and Doug are both carrying flashlights with them to view the damaged and unlit chambers near the end.

"What you see here, Lucia," Doug immediately begins lecturing, "is the Litany of Re, where the king addresses the manifold forms of Re. The litany is a description of the modes and aspects of the One, or the creative principle, which manifests as the god whose actions and interactions create the universe."

Trying to muster interest in what she knows is going to be a lengthy tour, Lucia studies the section of wall he is describing. It is covered primarily with text, except for the forms of Re, which aren't much bigger than the hieroglyphs themselves, stark mummiform outlines wearing different crowns.

"'Homage to thee, Re, supreme power, Lord of the Caverns'," Doug translates as they move on, "'with hidden forms, he who goes to rest in the mysteries when he transforms himself into The One Who Joined Together. Homage to thee, Re, supreme power, this Becoming One who folds his wings, he who goes to rest in the Netherworld and transforms himself into He Who Comes Out Of His Own Members'."

"Wow."

"The flavor of ecstasy emerges from the translation but its simultaneous sense of science is completely lost on us. Yet if we look beneath the poetic and metaphorical mode of expression, Lucia, it's obvious the litany describes the modes and aspects of the One."

"Bohm's sea of energy or whatever he called it. This tomb thrusts straight into the earth?"

He holds her eyes. "Yes."

Quickly moving on, she comes upon four narrow niches in the walls, two on either side of her. She turns on her flashlight and carefully illuminates each one.

"The second corridor here continues the Litany of Re."

Spaces that are more secretive open up around them.

"These must be all the small chambers you mentioned." Reluctantly, she switches off her flashlight to conserve the battery.

Doug doesn't answer.

She glances back at him.

"I find you terribly exciting, Lucia," he confesses quietly.

"Are you going to show me the tomb, Doug?" She ignores the look in his eyes.

He literally shakes himself. "Yes, of course, lead the way."

The corridor veers abruptly to the right.

"This is the point where the ancient builders ran into another tomb."

"My God." She is surprised and distressed by this evidence of sloppiness on the part of Egyptian architects, who were always so precise with their measurements.

"The priests didn't keep very accurate maps," Doug admits.

"I guess not."

"The corridor straightens out again here."

She is glad it is an easy run back out into the night and into Mark's warm arms, because she already misses his eyes as much as she imagines a disembodied soul would miss the daylight sky.

"The fourth and the fifth hours from the *Book of What is in the Duat*!"

Doug's abrupt, stentorian tone startles her so much that she stumbles on the uneven floor.

"Careful!" He grabs hold of one of her arms. "Oh, Lucia!" He pulls her toward him.

"No, Doug!" She writhes out of his embrace as easily as a cat and runs deeper into the tomb, past two more dark, man-sized niches before she stops to look back.

Doug's slow gait as he follows her is reminiscent of a lion cornering its prey. "I love my wife," he explains hoarsely. "This has nothing to do with love. She's had her eye on Mark for years so I'll let her have her fun if she'll let me have mine."

"Mark is her friend, Doug, a really good friend – she told me so herself. He's like a brother to her."

"You know perfectly well that's what the ancient Egyptians called each other when they were lovers, Lucia. It's her little idea of a joke."

The lights in the tomb start flickering suddenly and die.

She hears herself scream just like a heroine in a movie.

"For Christ's sake, Lucia, just turn on your –"

She hears a dull thudding sound and then an unimaginable force grabs her by the shoulders and spins her around. The flashlight flies out of her hand and she loses her

balance. She falls to her hands and knees and curls up into a protective egg shape on the floor, her arms wrapped tightly around herself as she whimpers in terror.

It seems like a very, very long time before any coherent thoughts surface from her bottomless fear.

Finally she dares to raise her head and stare into the total darkness. "Richard?" she whispers.

An absolute silence answers her.

She has to reach deep inside herself for the courage to force her muscles out of an embryonic crouch. Her hands clenched in her lap and her head bowed like a geisha in the presence of a demon entertained by her fear, she calls, "Doug?" very softly, without much hope. "Doug, are you there? Are you all right?"

No answer whatsoever.

She has to find her flashlight.

Cringing, expecting something to grab her again any second, she gets to her feet, then very slowly straightens up, as though enacting time-lapse photography of human evolution. The effort of exposing herself to whatever is there in the darkness with her makes her break out in a cold sweat. Then she suddenly remembers the pit in the tomb of Thutmosis III and doesn't dare move from the spot on which she is standing.

Mark and Lori, drinking wine and wishing on the stars, won't miss them for quite some time thanks to Doug's in-depth tours.

Lucia refuses to even imagine what happened to the Egyptologist as she calls his name again softly, "Doug?"

Still no answer.

If Julian is behind all this, she forces herself to reason calmly, he is smart enough to have left the lights near the entrance burning so Mark and Lori won't suspect anything is wrong. Her husband's brother could conceivably have entered the tomb through the one the ancient builders ran into when they were tunneling and she fervently wishes Doug had remembered this architectural detail sooner. If he had, she is sure Mark would not have let her in here.

The thought of Mark gives her a glimmer of hope. She knows he will come after her eventually so maybe the best thing to do is stay right where she is.

"My love!" In the darkness directly before her, Richard's eyes possess all the shimmering beauty of distant stars. "Come to me, Lucia..." One of his hands rises and hovers before the pitch-black space of his chest, shining as if wet.

Her pulse feels like a butterfly trapped in amber as a profoundly sweet shock paralyses her ability to think.

"Remember this, Lucia?" Something hisses across the floor between them.

She thinks wildly that what she hears is the hiss of the evil serpent Apep but then she realizes it is the sound of a whip. Fear and desire penetrate her like a two-edged blade, forcing her to bend over and press her hands against the exquisite ache in her

womb. She is not afraid of what he intends to do to her—she is terrified that he is not really there. “Oh God!” she gasps. “You’re not real! You can’t be!”

“You disappoint me, my love. I thought you had more faith than that.”

“Oh my God!”

“Oh my *lord*.”

“I can’t breathe!” she tells the impenetrable darkness before her, because Richard is no longer there. She stares at the faint white spots floating in the space where he was standing only half a second ago—the pale ghosts of stars generated by her own visual cortex. She waits for him to reappear, like a firefly blinking on and off, but a minute passes then another, another and still there is only darkness. “I can’t take this anymore,” she thinks out loud. “I just can’t!”

“You don’t have to.”

The sun bursts out of the bowels of the night, Re triumphing over Apep’s shadowy minions and blinding her with his pure power.

Julian lowers the lamp. “Sorry about that.” He sets it down on the floor beside him yet he still remains nearly invisible in a black ski mask, turtleneck, pants and boots.

“You bastard!” she cries. “Where did you get those films of Richard?”

“From the man himself, he left them to me in his will, with instructions. You see, Lucia, haunting you was all his idea.” He adjusts a bulky black object attached to his belt. “He was so sure of your eternal devotion. He told me they didn’t make women like you anymore and he wanted to reward you. He wanted to make you feel better by proving to you that his soul had survived and that one day you two would be together again. Only your boyfriend spoiled everything by getting all suspicious and thinking I was trying to hurt you or something.”

“Oh my God, you didn’t hurt Doug, did you?!”

“I gave that wimpy Egyptologist a little knock on the head is all. He’ll live.” Julian steps behind her abruptly and quickly ties her wrists together against the small of her back with a thin cord that digs painfully into her skin. “I guess it’s my charming brother’s way of making me work for my money. You know better than anyone else what a sadistic bastard he was. Is that too tight?”

“Yes!”

“Too bad, I’m not as good at this sort of thing as Richard was.”

She does her best to sound unconcerned, “What are you going to do, Julian?”

“I’m going to have a little fun, Lucia. It’s the least I deserve after flying halfway across the world to fulfill my dead brother’s last perverse wish.” He picks up the lantern again.

The light crests over a row of smiling figures walking deeper into the tomb in the direction of the burial chamber.

He shoves her ahead of him. “Move.”

"Mark will come looking for me any minute now – you know that."

"I don't think so, honey. You see, Lori slipped a little something into his wine. That's right. But you're not half as surprised as I was when she approached me at the hotel and offered to help me. I guess Mark told her how he felt about you and she got desperate. She's stupid enough to hope their friendship will blossom into love once she gets a divorce. I guess she hasn't looked in the mirror lately. That's why she encouraged you to believe Richard really was appearing to you, so you'd remain the inconsolable widow and dump Mark."

"But Mark will realize she's the one who drugged him."

"She'll blame Doug, of course. Don't you get it yet, Lucia? Let me explain it to you. When Doug made a pass at you, you hit him over the head with your flashlight and just then all the lights went out and you ran deeper into the tomb by mistake."

They enter a spacious chamber held up by four pillars and crowded with life-size gods and goddesses forming a beautiful procession along the walls.

In the middle of the room, Julian sets the lamp down again and then snaps open the thick belt around his waist and very carefully sets the object attached to it on the floor beside the light.

She looks away from the strange black box when Richard suddenly seems to step right out of the wall to her right. His body is a solid shadow in black clothes as he crosses his arms over his chest, leans casually back against Hathor's bright red dress and stares over at her, his expression intensely sober contrasted with the goddess' smiling profile. He looks so real she can't take her eyes off him.

"What is that thing, Julian?" She unwillingly shifts her gaze back to the box that resembles a huge die, covered with luminous white circles.

"A holographic projector," he answers proudly, "courtesy of some geeks at M.I.T. Richard invested a shitload of money in their project so they let him have a prototype. Isn't it something?"

She glances longingly back at her husband, who is now looking around the room, a soft smile on his lips.

A fresh sorrow slices through her. "Then he really is only a hologram."

"You got it."

"And it was you in the temple last night." She wonders how on earth she could have mistaken Julian's bony frame for Richard's solid body.

"What are you talking about? Oh never mind, just be quiet!" He yanks off the ski mask, grabs her arm and leads her over to one of the pillars. Standing behind her, he unties her wrists and then pulls her sweater off over her head. She isn't wearing a bra and he makes a small sound of approval as he pushes her against the column, crushing her soft breasts against Ramses III's unyielding chest.

Cheek-to-cheek with the smiling pharaoh, Lucia meets Richard's eyes. She feels irrationally reassured by the mere illusion of his presence because he would never have let anyone hurt her.

"Hold your arms out straight," Julian instructs and promptly ties them together again on the other side of the pillar by stretching the rope taut across it. Then he steps around behind her again.

"I've always wondered what was so special about you, Lucia, that my brother couldn't get enough of you." He moves in tightly against her. "He had women throwing themselves at him right and left," the bulge in his pants finds a welcoming niche in the small of her back as he slips his hands between her body and the pillar to unzip her jeans, "yet for some reason, he was completely faithful to you." He yanks them down around her knees along with her panties. "Nice ass," he remarks, pausing on his way back up to kiss it. "Mm, very nice." He gives one of her cheeks a hard smack and then licks it, soothing the burn with his tongue.

Richard looks their way.

There is nothing she can do to stop Julian so she lets her eyes feast on the illusion of her husband's presence. His dark hair is cut short on the sides but is fuller and slightly unkempt on top and his goatee looks more sinister than ever.

Julian gives her other cheek the same treatment, a vicious smack then a lingering lick. "Richard was my brother, you know, Lucia, so maybe you'll like my cock as much as you liked his. What do you think? Should I fuck you while he watches?"

"Yes," she whispers.

"I thought you might enjoy that."

She feels him step back away from her.

"But there's something else you want me to do to you first, isn't there, Lucia?"

He sounds so much like his brother that her body is growing excitingly confused, listening to him while looking at Richard. Her pussy is getting wet—she can't help it. "Yes," she hears herself say again softly.

"You want me to beat you, don't you, honey?"

She knows he is deliberately imitating his brother's tone and suddenly she is nothing but grateful to him for doing such a good job of it. "Yes," she answers fervently, "please!"

"It would be my pleasure. And I see your new boyfriend had some fun with you too. Those look like beltmarks to me."

She can't answer as Richard seems to look straight into her eyes.

A whip's cruel tongue licks her bottom now.

The sharp crack echoes through the sacred chamber and she welcomes the pain that surges through her body and darkens her mind, so that for a precious moment she forgets her sorrow.

Julian's next lash is more assured and twice as agonizing.

His third searing stroke extinguishes her awareness for a hot second, yet her fear that Richard will disappear if she takes her eyes off him is worse than the pain. When she is able to focus again he is still there, thank God, his arms still crossed contentedly over his chest as he watches his brother whip her.

The whip lands on her upper back. "Oh God!" she sobs as it seems to slice through her skin to her heart. "Oh, Richard!" She can't run from how she feels anymore—she has no desire to live without him.

He uncrosses his arms and holds her eyes as he turns and steps into the wall with the gods.

"Get away from her now!" Mark's command reverberates through the room with shocking power.

"I'm only giving her what she wants," Julian protests mildly.

Mark quickly pulls her jeans and panties back up then snaps open a pocketknife and cuts the ropes stretched between her wrists.

As though withdrawing her homage to Osiris, she lowers her arms and wraps them around herself, clinging to her warm, living body.

Mark zips her jeans closed. "Are you okay?" he asks gently.

She nods.

He picks up her sweater.

Trembling and not a little disappointed to have been rescued from an illusion that was turning her on so much, she slips it back on.

Mark walks over to where Julian is standing with an infuriating little smile on his face, grabs a fistful of his shirt, slams him back against a wall and punches him in the face.

Blood streams from her brother-in-law's nose as he slides to the floor, his eyes fluttering up into his skull. She derives a keen satisfaction from the fact that he no longer resembles Richard at all.

Mark returns to her side.

"Is Doug all right?" she asks.

"He's out cold but I don't think he's hurt." He picks up the flashlight he apparently brought with him.

"But Julian said Lori put something in your wine."

"She did and she's fast asleep. I switched cups on her when she wasn't looking."

"What about...that?" Part of her desperately wants to keep the holographic projector yet she knows she can't, not if she wants to hold on to Mark.

He rests his right foot on it. "Take this, you bastard." The sound of crunching metal is almost sickeningly organic, like the shell of an evil black scarab being crushed. "She's mine now."

Chapter Fourteen

Doug is still lying where Julian left him.

Mark crouches down beside him and gently places two fingertips against the side of his neck. "His pulse is steady." He shines the flashlight directly in Doug's face and gives him a gentle slap.

Doug's eyes snap open. "What?" he croaks and shoves Mark away from him. "Turn that thing off!" He gets up without letting Lucia help him. "What the hell happened?"

Mark gives him a skeletal rundown of events since Julian hit him over the head, then says, "Lucia and I are leaving Luxor, Doug. Tonight."

* * * * *

The moon is three-quarters full and as regal as a queen in a luminous blue veil, fervently courted by the stars around her.

It feels like a miracle to Lucia that a cab is waiting for them in front of Tutankhamon's tomb.

She rolls her window down to continue admiring the seemingly eternal heavens.

Mark doesn't say a word, not to her or to the driver, who apparently knows where to go.

A dim copper light flows out from the lobby of the Habu hotel through the open doorway and Mark literally has to pull her inside she is so enraptured by the eternity of love and desire promised in all the diamond wedding rings of the stars visible overhead.

Up in their humble room she tries not to remember how good Richard looked with a goddess' red dress pooled behind him like the blood no longer flowing through his body. Because he was nothing but a three-dimensional trick of light, nothing but an impotent hologram.

Mark hangs his camera around his neck. "Ready?"

"Ready."

Down in the lobby he disappears into the night with their bags while she stops at the front desk to pay the bill.

"Madam," the clerk calls after her, "this signature does not match the name on the card."

"Excuse me?" She glances at the yellow receipt in her hand.

The confident flourish of the "R" and the "T" leap out at her like cobras.

She's signed Richard's name instead of her own.

The now-suspicious clerk takes his time making another imprint of her small piece of plastic, worth as much as the contents of an ancient tomb in its day.

Mark appears in the doorway. "What's the holdup?"

"Nothing, I'll be right out." She impatiently snatches the pen from the man's dark hand and carefully signs her own name this time.

Their cab takes boldly off into the moonlit darkness again.

"Is there a boat waiting for us, Mark?"

"No, I thought we'd just swim across."

She forgives him the sarcastic retort. "Why didn't you tell me you knew something was going to happen?"

"Because I wasn't sure anything would happen. It just never hurts to be prepared."

"So we're leaving Thebes tonight?" She tries to sound indifferent.

"Yes, on the train to Cairo. When we get back to the Etap pack your stuff as fast as you can."

His gesture was wonderfully romantic but when he destroyed the holographic projector he'd also crushed all her hopes of ever seeing Richard again. Until that moment she hadn't truly faced his loss, and doing so feels like waking up from an intensely sexual dream just when she was beginning to climax. His appearances had been like mysterious caresses, each one a little more intimate and lingering, arousing her soul and exciting her with the possibility that their love was powerful enough to defeat time and space. Yet now nothing will ever come of them.

"I'm sorry, Lucia, I don't mean to snap at you. None of this is your fault. Part of it's actually my fault for betraying your confidence."

"Mark, don't even think of blaming yourself for anything."

They fall silent.

Less than ten minutes later they are following the narrow path of a flashlight's beam to the river's edge and the fact that there is a boat waiting for them in the darkness seems much more like magical synchronicity than forethought.

As they glide across the water, Mark politely converses in broken Arabic with the vessel's owner over the motor's quiet hum. The man is nearly invisible in his black robe. All Lucia can see of him where he crouches at the helm is an occasional glint of moonlight in his eyes and the lifeless ghost of cigarette smoke rising like steam from his shapeless black form, like a lump of coal just disgorged from deep in the earth. When they reach the East Bank, he remains on the boat as she and Mark hurry up a steep flight of stairs to the Avenue.

The current of bodies walking up and down the sidewalks comes as a shock after the utter stillness of the Valley. It is easy to understand how for the ancient Egyptians the Nile served as a palpable line between life and death that enabled their thoughts and feelings to cross naturally back and forth between them.

Mark hails a carriage and they take it the short distance to the Etap.

With Mark helping her throw things into her suitcases, she is ready to go sooner than she would have believed possible.

A group of native men is already waiting out in the hall to help them carry everything downstairs.

Once again she settles the bill with her gold card then, outside, steps up into a carriage piled high with their luggage, where Mark drapes a warm arm over her shoulders and holds her close just as the moon disappears behind the western mountains.

Richard had often arranged incredibly elaborate sensual games for their enjoyment and he had played with her one last time, fulfilling her supernatural fantasies in order to free her of them. Yet the truth is that the holographic paintings he left her of himself, combined with ancient Egypt's enduring magic, have made it even harder for her to lay him to rest in her heart. She must accept the fact that for as long as she lives Richard Taylor will never truly die. And maybe that was what he intended all along...

* * * * *

Their carriage makes it to the train station just in time to catch the Wagon-Lit express to Cairo.

The German train is state-of-the-art. When it begins moving Lucia feels the slight tug mainly in her heart as she prepares to leave Richard physically behind for the second time.

They are told all the sleeping compartments are occupied.

Mark begins doling out the baksheesh like a young god with flowers blooming out of his hands and the door to a private car closes behind them a few minutes later.

Two native men literally fling her black suitcases into the room like rocks spewing from a volcano. Navigating around them, she falls onto the dark-green shore of the seat, as silently wrapped up in her thoughts as a mummy.

Mark kicks a bag out of his way and drops down beside her.

"I'm broke," he announces. He leans his head back against the tall seat and closes his eyes. "Tonight wiped me out. It's amazing how much a quick getaway costs."

"I'll cash some traveler's checks," she says listlessly.

"Thanks. I'll be paying you back."

"Excuse me, but *I'll* pay *you* back. If you hadn't come when you did..."

"That was too easy." He leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees as he looks up at the dark window. "And I don't think I like the fact that no matter what happens you still love that dead bastard and think he can do no wrong." He meets her eyes. "I think Richard would have had you buried alive with him if he could have, but since

that isn't socially acceptable anymore he had to be creative. It's my theory that he was trying to get you to kill yourself so you could be with him again, forever."

She leaps to her feet.

He follows her up and steadies her against him when the train gives a slight jolt. "This isn't over, Lucia." His tone is even harder than his grip. "It won't be over until you face the truth, that your husband was a sick bastard and yet you insist on burying the rest of your life in the past with him." He releases her abruptly and carefully stows his laptop and camera bag in an overhead compartment.

"You're right," she says tightly.

"Forget it." He runs the fingers of both hands through his hair. "I didn't mean to push you."

"No, Mark," she says urgently, "I need you to push me. I can't keep deluding myself. I'm sick of it!"

Chapter Fifteen

The following morning, Lucia sweeps open the curtains of a hotel room.

The three pyramids of Giza cut sharply into the sky, pointing away from her old life into the future. She can't imagine it but it doesn't matter because the perfect clarity of the atmosphere is the enchanted bubble of the present moment.

* * * * *

They have breakfast on the porch of the Mina House Hotel, which boasts a marvelous view of the only remaining ancient wonders of the world.

After enjoying their usual artery-clogging fare, shunning the healthy alternative of fresh fruit, they sit back to savor a second cup of American coffee.

"What are you thinking about?" Mark asks her.

"Not about Richard, if that's what you're thinking."

"I wasn't thinking about anything."

"That's not possible."

"Try me."

Smiling, she looks over at the pyramids again. They are such a magnetic presence that her head keeps turning irresistibly in their direction.

"Lucia, will you marry me? Don't worry, I'll sign a prenup—we just won't tell Julian that."

She stares at him, wide-eyed as a sarcophagus containing a mummy on whom the Opening of the Mouth ceremony has not yet been performed.

"Okay, forget it." Now he looks over at the pyramids. "I'll ask you again some other time, more romantically."

"No...I mean, no, I won't forget it. I love you, Mark, let's do it... And I won't make you sign a prenuptial agreement."

"You'd be stupid not to," he says mildly, his eyes still on the pyramids. "You're way too trusting for your own good, Lucia. I know you can trust me," he meets her eyes, "but how can you be so sure?"

"My intuition?"

"Right!" He pushes his chair back. "We'll talk about this later."

* * * * *

Alone in the spacious bathroom, Lucia undresses and pins her hair up as she fills the tub then she sits back to relax in the almost painfully hot water, her body invisible beneath white clouds of bubbles.

What is troubling her isn't whether Mark truly loves her, or if it is her money he is attracted to. She is willing to live in this gray zone for the time being. What disturbs her is her stubborn belief in Richard's good intentions, the fact that no matter what, her faith in his love for her refuses to die.

Mark pokes his head into the bathroom. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Yes, thank you."

"I'm going out for a while. The Sound and Light Show starts at seven. I'll meet you down there. Save me a seat."

"Where are...?"

He closes the door.

She trusted Richard with her life. She still trusts him with her life and now she longs to trust Mark in the same way even though she knows that will never be possible because she does not feel about him the way she felt, and still feels, about Richard and she knows she never will. Yet love, trust and respect all form a single orbit around her heart, inseparable in her sensual system.

* * * * *

Just behind the Mina House Hotel, folding chairs have been lined up in neat rows facing the Sphinx, which stares straight over them with benign indifference.

After the Sound and Light Show at Karnak, Lucia isn't expecting much. She is, however, looking forward to seeing Mark again. She doesn't let herself speculate on his whereabouts.

Seating herself next to the aisle in the back row, she sets her purse on the chair to her right. The makeshift auditorium is filling up rapidly but there is no sign of Mark yet.

Every minute or so she glances over her shoulder, hoping to catch sight of him emerging from the hotel, but everyone around her remains a stranger.

An expectant hush falls over the crowd as the lights dim but the chair beside hers is still empty. She tries not to become anxious, reassuring herself with the thought that he could easily have been delayed by Cairo's infamous traffic.

Pompously majestic music fills the night and a dramatically reverent voice rises into the universe as colored lights are beamed up over the pyramids. The cheap technology does not succeed in capturing the immensity of the monuments, much less their mystery. When the lights wash over the Sphinx, his smile takes on a sinister quality, as if he knows something she doesn't, or won't dare to face...

Ten minutes into the show Lucia picks up her purse, gets up and walks slowly back into the hotel, searching the shadows outside it for Mark.

She nurtures the hope that he is up in their room changing but she finds the suite as empty as she left it.

She retraces her steps, hoping he is outside looking for her now.

Walking behind the last row of seats, studying the undulating silhouette of the spectators' heads, she ends up at the bottom of a dark road that ascends alongside the Sphinx toward the Great Pyramid.

A small, hot light sparks suddenly in the night to her right.

She turns toward it and watches a distant sun being born as a tall silhouette takes a long drag from a cigarette.

She allows herself to become half hypnotized by the glowing red sphere's rhythmic death and rebirth as a ghostly hand lowers and raises it. Then it careens into space, the silhouette steps toward her and the darkness takes form as a hard arm slipping around her waist and a hand cradling the back of her head. When a mouth opens over hers like a black hole she is too stunned to resist being sucked into a passionate kiss.

"Whore," he says mildly. "I thought you loved me. The only part of Osiris' body Isis couldn't find was his penis, Lucia, yet she remained faithful to him."

"Oh God." She can hardly breathe from the length and depth of the kiss he just gave her, not to mention from shock. "This can't be happening!"

"It's all right, just take a deep breath," he urges gently, letting go of her.

Still trying to catch her breath, she watches him light another cigarette like a beautiful devil breathing the spark of life into a slender white body he will enjoy for a while and then casually discard.

"Julian told me you were wasting away with grief for me," he goes on casually. "All that time I was laid up in the hospital I wondered, pictured, how you'd react when I rose from the dead, and you didn't disappoint me, my love. You really believed I had the power."

"Oh my God!" She can't think of anything else to say.

"No, I'm not, but I appreciate your faith in me." He gently thrusts the end of the cigarette between her lips. "Here, it'll help you relax."

She takes a long, soothing drag of smoke and, closing her eyes, exhales two long years of misery.

"I'm sorry, Lucia, but it was much better this way, believe me. The doctors weren't sure I'd ever be able to walk again. It was touch and go for a while and I didn't want to put you through that." He caresses her hair and makes her take another drag. "I couldn't have lived as a cripple—you know that."

"You were too proud to tell me," she gasps. "You didn't want me to see you that way!"

"I was dead to you anyway, Lucia. I couldn't fuck you." He slips the cigarette between her lips again to quell her retort. "Yet by the time it was obvious I'd recover it was too late. I couldn't just come home one day. So all that time I lay in bed, or

agonized in rehab, I looked forward to preparing you for my resurrection with the ultimate fantasy—watching you give yourself, body and soul, to my all-powerful disembodied force.” He tosses the burning stub away. “I knew you’d enjoy it as much as I did, my love. Don’t pretend you didn’t. You know you never have to pretend with me.”

She breathes, “It was you that night! You came to me that night!”

“And God did you feel good! It had been so long, Lucia...”

Before he can kiss her again, she turns and runs.

Chapter Sixteen

The Sound and Light show has just ended and Lucia finds her headlong flight blocked by all the bodies milling leisurely back into the hotel.

Caught in the current flowing through the dining room into the lobby, she desperately attempts to digest what just happened in the shadow of the pyramid and simply cannot. Yet the truth is that she had deliberately followed the secretive path of the Sphinx's smile into the darkness and even as she searched for Mark, she had remained open to the haunting possibility of Richard's presence, still refusing to believe he was gone forever. Now she must somehow grasp the fact that he had never been dead at all.

"There you are." Mark is standing before the dresser, slipping a black belt around black Dockers beneath a mock turtleneck the dark gray of storm clouds. "Sorry I missed the show." He picks up his comb and runs the fine teeth through his thick hair. "Did you enjoy it?"

"No!" She closes the door behind her and leans against it like Pandora pressing down on the lid of her box even as another part of her makes sure it doesn't lock. "Where were you, Mark?"

"That, princess, is a surprise." He tosses the comb down and approaches her. "You look beautiful. That's an awesome dress."

"Elizabeth was right about you, wasn't she, Mark? Richard coached you from the beginning, telling you everything you had to say and do!"

He stops a few feet away from her "What the hell are you talking about, Lucia?"

"Stop pretending, please." She flings her purse on the bed. "I know Richard's alive." Her stomach aches from the abortion of one reality and the birth of its demonic twin.

"You saw him again?"

The door opens again.

"And felt him."

Richard steps into the room. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'd like my wife back now."

Mark reads the impossible truth in her eyes before slowly turning to face the deep voice.

"I appreciate your taking care of her for me." Richard pulls out his wallet. "A thousand dollars a night seems reasonable. After all, she's hard work." He tosses some bills onto the small table beside him. "There, that should cover it."

For the second time that day she is silent as a mummy waiting for a priest to perform the magic ceremony that will enable her to think, speak and move again. The problem is there are two men with power over her in the room and only one possible heaven.

"Lucia, tell this boy to leave, please."

She stares at the man she mourned without consolation for almost two years. Memory had smoothed out the fine lines around his eyes and mouth, which looks thinner and harder than she remembered it, probably from the intense pain he must have suffered after his accident, she realizes. "Mark, you weren't part of this?"

"No, he wasn't," Richard answers. "He just happened to walk onto the stage and deliciously complicate the plot."

"I'm sorry, Mark," she glances at him, "but when I realized Julian had only been doing everything Richard told him to, I thought that was how you seemed to know me so well, because you were part of it."

Dark with emotion, Mark's eyes are tarnished silver in the lamplight. "Is that what it felt like?"

Richard kicks the door closed behind him before she can answer. "My wife seems to have grown fond of you, Mark." He slips a pack of cigarettes out of his breast pocket. He is wearing a black jacket over a black turtleneck, black jeans and black boots. "What can we do about that, I wonder?"

More than anything on earth, she had longed to see him again, yet she can hardly bear the sight of him, as though she has been starving and is presented now with a feast from which she can only take painful, tentative bites at first in order not to get sick.

"You never smoked before!" She accuses him of everything through this one manageable fact.

"I promise I'll try to quit after tonight, my love." A smile smooths away the new lines on his face and fully resurrects the man she loves more than life itself.

She falls into the chair behind her as if hit by a laser.

"Excuse me, but what's going on here?" Mark's scorn is desperate. "Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

Following her example, Richard seats himself beside the table onto which he threw the money and calmly smokes his cigarette as he once again describes his brush with death. In his pitch-black clothes, with his black hair and goatee and smoke flowing out of his nose and mouth, he is as handsome as one of Lucifer's followers.

Mark asks, very quietly, "You mean to tell me you played God with her feelings?"

Richard crushes his cigarette in a white alabaster ashtray. "It was better than making her suffer along with me."

"You actually believe it was better to let her think you were dead all this time?"

"Yes, to let her remember me as I was," he smiles again briefly, "strong and virile."

"What you did was unbelievably sick! Pretending to be dead was bad enough but then to play your own ghost and fuck with her head like that."

"Lucia always enjoys it when I fuck with her. Don't you, my love?"

Mark says to her, "I'm going."

She gasps. "What?"

He quickly throws some things into his bag, hangs his camera around his neck and picks up his laptop, all in less than a minute.

Richard remains seated, his knees together and his hands lightly gripping the arms of the chair like a modern statue done in the pharaohic style. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Mark."

Mark heads for the door.

She manages to get up out of the chair but her body inexplicably refuses to follow him. "Mark?"

His hand on the doorknob, he looks over his shoulder at her and holds her eyes. "*Sa-eeda*, princess." He walks out, slamming the door behind him.

The hissing foreign syllables the sound of her heart deflating, she falls back into the chair.

Richard speaks so softly she barely hears him, "I'm sorry, Lucia. I know my being alive is a shock to you but I've been trying to prepare you."

She stares at the coffin lid of the door behind which her new life just vanished.

"You're a beautiful woman, Lucia, but you must realize it was your money he was after. That's why he gave you up so easily, because he thinks it's all mine again."

"Then why didn't he take what you offered him?" she asks listlessly.

"Probably because it was an insulting amount compared to what he had his heart set on." He rises. "And maybe he's proud. Maybe he didn't want to admit, even to himself, why he was so utterly taken with you."

She closes her eyes. "Stop it." Her head falls back, stretching and exposing her neck as if for execution. "Just stop it!"

"It's all right, Lucia, at least you can be sure I love you."

Her mind is suddenly as blank as the moon about to be swallowed by a black cloud as he approaches her. All she knows is that she will lose sight of everything once he takes her in his arms. Once again caught in the inescapable force of his will, body and soul she will reflect only his desires with her own.

She feels him move behind her chair.

"Lucia..." One of his hands lightly grips her throat and slowly caresses it up to her chin. "It's me, Lucia, I'm here." Two of his fingertips gently part her lips.

As if the gesture throws a mysterious switch inside her, all her thoughts go out like lights and with her eyes still closed she turns in the chair, throwing both her legs over one arm and leaning back against the other so her head hangs back off the edge. She is

dreaming—she must be. All she can do is keep her eyes closed and pray that nothing wakes her. Her hunger for him is so intense and so deep she is barely aware of the chair beneath her as she feels herself falling into the darkness of her own soul, waiting for him to give her what she needs, what she can't live without. She moans when his hands catch her, gently cupping her face for a moment before he lets the tip of her tongue savor what she missed so much—the uniquely delicious taste of his head, so promisingly full of the cool, inexplicably rich flavor of his whole cock. She thinks she hears him whisper her name again far above her but the wave of joy and longing that hits her is deafening as it rushes through her blood. Fortunately he understands and quickly fills her gaping mouth with his erection. Her teeth, her tongue and the muscles in her throat all make way for him happily, welcoming him home. He doesn't say anything, just makes a soft sound deep in his throat. His fingertips rest lightly on her cheeks so he can feel himself sliding in and out of her, slowly and carefully at first but a little faster and harder as her jaw relaxes around him.

The terrible emptiness of the last few months vanishes as he fucks her mouth just as he used to, only it is so much better than she remembered, so much more overwhelming and dramatically difficult for her to endure, which makes her pleasure border on the mystical. The physical release is all his and, sensing it approach, feeling him pulsing between her lips as his warm, suffocating groin buries her features, fulfills her like a divine sacrifice. She is taking nothing for herself—it is all for him as the borders of her flesh seem to dissolve and she experiences his pleasure as her own. The only parts of her body he is touching are her cheeks, her lips, her tongue and her throat yet her cunt is so wet that when he suddenly reaches down to lift her dress and presses two fingers firmly against her clitoris, it feels like electricity surging through water. An orgasm's pure charge arches her back and spreads through her whole body, burning through her veins and out into her nipples, which feel like hard little flames against her cool dress. She wants desperately to find some release for the beautiful agony in a scream. She can't, not with her mouth full of cock, but her throat opens up with the desire, letting him thrust even deeper, and the feel of his cum pouring into her goes some way toward soothing her. Her eyelashes flutter against his groin and her nostrils flare so she can breathe as she presses her lips firmly around the base of his pulsing erection, sucking all of him into her.

Chapter Seventeen

Wearing a short violet dress and white high-heeled sandals, Lucia is standing dead center in the lobby of the Etap Hotel, surrounded by over half a dozen black suitcases of varying sizes.

Richard is at the front desk, settling the bill and ordering a car.

How could Mark have let her go so easily?

The question feels like a knife stabbing her in the chest over and over again and she can't stop turning it over and over in her mind and torturing herself with it.

Something soft and warm brushes past her ankles.

She looks down.

A slender black cat is weaving itself around her luggage and possessively scenting each piece.

"Oh, baby," she cries softly, "you're nothing but a skeleton!" She crouches down to pet it. "We'll have to find you something to eat, now, won't we?"

"You must be she!" The smiling face of an Egyptian boy perches on the horizon of her garment bag like the hieroglyph for "eternity" written as a circle on top of a line. "Lucia Taylor, *aywa*?"

"*Aywa*." She smiles back at him.

He thrusts a small brown fist toward her and opens it to reveal the slip of paper folded inside it.

She reaches for it.

He pulls his hand back, grinning.

She fishes a handful of Egyptian bills out of her purse and he promptly snatches up the astronomical sum, tossing the slip of paper at her feet as he runs off.

Crouching behind her suitcases like a little girl in a play fortress, she reverently folds open the ruled sheet of paper, frayed on one side from where it was torn out of a spiral-bound notebook.

Sa-eda also means hello.

It's your decision, princess.

I love you.

Bon Voyage,

Mark

A golden ankh ring is taped below the neatly printed words.

The black cat meows urgently.

She looks up and sees Richard approaching.

She quickly throws the note into her purse and stands up.

"I see you've found yourself another handsome little stray, Lucia."

Native men begin whisking away their suitcases.

"Can I keep him?" she asks inanely.

"Don't be silly."

"But he's starving."

"Then I'll set up a trust fund for him. Boy!" He commands the attention of a native youth. "Here, boy, this money's for you and this money is for you to buy food for this cat. The ancient Egyptians worshipped cats and I trust you to take care of this one the same way your ancestors would have. If you use this money for anything other than cat food, Bastet will haunt your dreams in her fierce and terrible form of Sekhmet the warrior lioness. Understand? Now run along and take the animal with you. There, are you happy now, my love? Your cat will eat very well for at least one of its nine lives, or for a day or two, whichever comes first."

A "modest" white limousine is waiting for them outside.

She glances over a sentinel row of palm trees at the pyramids on their hill, the same warm gold of Mark's skin between the open folds of a blue shirt...

The limousine pulls away from the curb with the smooth silence of a whale diving into a sea of smaller fish rushing frantically around it.

She looks out her window but the pyramids aren't visible from this angle. "Isn't it impossible, not to mention illegal, to fake your own death?" she asks casually.

"Not if you're impossibly rich."

"That explains why all of a sudden your lawyer had gray hair."

"I made it well worth his while."

"I'm sure you did. He was so convincing I really believed it was your will he was reading me. That's why Julian didn't let me see your body and why he insisted on having you cremated. But if you've been alive all this time," she goes on as if it doesn't matter, "how could you have let me sleep with another man?"

"I couldn't very well stop you without confronting you and you weren't ready for me. I must say, you surprised me. I was counting on you remaining faithful to me just a little while longer at least. Obviously you weren't, but I forgive you. After all you did believe I was dead. And I suppose you deserved a little reward for being so very unhappy without me."

"And what about you?" She can't look at him. "Do you expect me to believe you've been celibate all this time?"

"You don't seem to understand how seriously injured I was, Lucia."

"You must have been half dead!"

"By the way, what did that boy give you?"

"What boy?" she asks, even though she knows it is hopeless — she was never able to keep anything from him.

"What did he give you, Lucia?"

She finally catches sight of the pyramids again. "My fortune," she improvises.

"How quaint. What lies in your future, if I may ask?"

"A divorce, on the grounds of psychological abuse and mental anguish."

"How amazingly specific. And they say astrology isn't a science."

She laughs — she can't help it.

He reaches for her hand and holds it lightly in his on the seat between them. "If that's what you want, but first let me tell you that the control I gave you over a large sum of my money while I was playing dead is real and permanent. No one can take it away from you, not even me."

She reclaims her hand and rests it on her purse, guarding Mark's note like the key to love's inscrutable hieroglyph.

"If you leave me, Lucia, it will only give me the pleasure of winning you again."

"But you're still officially dead, aren't you?" She smiles at him.

He stares soberly into her eyes. "Whatever turns you on."

It is a long moment before she replies, staring out her window, "That's a very dangerous thing to say." Yet, as always, his words seem to caress her soul.

"You enjoy a touch of danger, my love."

"But I loved you so much," she whispers, meeting his eyes. "How could you just disappear from my life like that?"

He turns his profile toward her. "I explained why."

"I should have been there with you, Richard, helping you get through it."

He looks out his window. "I didn't want your help."

"Why not?"

"Don't delude yourself, Lucia, if you'd seen me the way I was..."

"What? I would have stopped loving you? I'm sorry you believe that but the truth is your pride meant more to you than I did! I would never have stopped loving you!"

"That's not the kind of love I want from you," he replies coldly.

"What the hell do you mean by that? Love is love, for Christ's sake!"

"No, it isn't."

"Do your parents know you're alive?"

"Yes, they always knew."

"I was the only one close to you who thought you were dead? How could you do that to me?"

He finally looks at her again. "You would have sat by my bed day and night, holding my hand and crying and telling me how much you loved me. That would have gone on for a few months at most and then you would only have been there during the day because at night you would have been out getting laid by young studs like Mark."

She whispers in order not to scream, "How dare you say that? I thought you were dead for nearly two years before I even looked at another man!"

"And yet you still wanted me. Even when you were with him, you still wanted me. And do you know why, Lucia? Because I wasn't trapped in a half-paralyzed, useless body. I possessed all the power of the unknown and there was always the exciting possibility that I would come to you in the night if you wanted me enough. It would have been a much bigger betrayal of the nature of your love for me to drag you through hell with me. Do you know what hell is, Lucia? I'll tell you what hell is. Hell is being totally dependent on others for everything. Hell is being completely, fucking impotent. That's what hell is. The man you loved was dead. But now he's alive again. And you were so wet for me last night, Lucia, I thought I'd drown."

"Would you like to know what Mark said about fucking me? He said the harder he fucked me the sweeter and tighter my pussy got."

He grabs a fistful of her hair and says in an undertone, "You're going to tell me everything he did to you, Lucia, every way he had you. Did you suck his cock?" He looks her straight in the eye. "Answer me."

"Yes."

"Did he come in your mouth?"

"Yes." She closes her eyes. "I thought you were dead, Richard." She sighs. "I thought you were dead!"

He lets go of her hair, takes a deep breath and sits back. "Later, you're going to tell me everything he did to you. Right now you're going to show me what that boy gave you."

She quickly opens her purse and hands him the heavy slip of paper as she looks out her window again.

Trapped inside the limousine's luxurious belly, she can barely hear the rush of the traffic around them.

"A distasteful mix of languages," he remarks disdainfully, tearing the ring off the paper, "and a cheap gift. These rings are a dime a dozen at the bazaar. It would turn your finger green." His arm pins her back against the seat as he reaches for her door.

The window slides open.

"What are you doing?" she cries.

He flings the ring out into traffic and the dark glass rises again swiftly, once again sealing them in a tomb-like stillness and silence. Then he reaches into his breast pocket

for his silver lighter and, her ability to react mysteriously frozen, she watches as he burns Mark's note then casually rubs the ashes into his black jeans.

* * * * *

When the limousine comes to a stop, Richard tells her to wait inside.

Her body perfectly supported by the skin-soft, bone-colored leather, Lucia relishes being left alone for a moment.

She gazes out at the sparkling blue water of the Nile visible through one window. The dusty shells of parked cars are framed in the other.

Shock is weaving a numbing, soothing cocoon around her feelings.

Her door opens eventually and she steps out into the atmosphere's clinging warmth. It is another beautiful morning in Egypt.

"I've booked us a suite on the Sistrum," Richard informs her. "A Nile cruise is just what we both need right now to get reacquainted. Wasn't a sistrum an ancient Egyptian instrument?"

"Yes, similar to a tambourine. It was played by temple priestesses, especially priestesses of Hathor."

"By whores."

"They were priestesses," she snaps.

Smiling, he takes her arm as they walk toward the pier together. "They were consecrated to the goddess of love and pleasure, the priests' playthings."

"Whatever."

The Sistrum's polished wooden decks are elegantly appointed with shining brass railings.

"How many other people will be on board?" she asks.

"No more than ten, I imagine. There are only five cabins."

Of course, Mark could never afford a room on the Sistrum, assuming he was even able to get a reservation on such short notice. Yet he had known Richard was taking her on a cruise, — he had written *Bon Voyage* at the end of his note. She wonders how much baksheesh it cost him to find out where they were headed and to make sure the boy waited until she was alone to hand her his note and begins cherishing the unlikely hope that he is planning to follow her up the Nile.

* * * * *

Their cabin is surprisingly spacious and furnished with antiques that give it the Victorian elegance enjoyed by wealthy travelers over a century ago, when Europe was obsessed with everything Egyptian.

She takes refuge in the bathroom, much longer than necessary because she wants to be alone. When she finally emerges Richard has nearly finished unpacking.

"There you are. Now I remember how you always took forever in bathrooms."

Her pulse trips over his smile. "Richard," she whispers, suddenly amazed to find herself standing there as if nothing miraculous had happened. "Am I dreaming?"

He drops a neatly folded shirt and rushes to her side. "No, my love," he says gently. "I'm here." He takes her in his arms.

She relishes the feel of his thick shoulders, overwhelmed by the feather-soft caress of the hair at the nape of his neck and the blessedly familiar scent of his skin, which invariably makes her think of a northern sea with just a hint of salt in the air. "Oh God, you're alive," she whispers in awe. "You're alive!"

"Yes, I am and no more drinking and driving, I promise."

She laughs to catch her breath. "We're on a boat!"

"Hmm, so we are."

She is holding his warm, breathing, undeniably living body in her arms yet she can't believe it. "Oh, Richard..." There is only one way she can really prove to herself that grief didn't drive her mad and that she didn't just imagine last night... She grabs the shirt over his chest and pulls him over to a chair. Its delicate frame barely looks strong enough to hold his weight but she doesn't care. She wants to ride him like she did Mark, only now her soul won't be somewhere else.

"No, my love," he says. "Come here." He slips an arm around her shoulders and leads her over to the bed.

"Oh, Richard," she whispers, "it just hasn't sunk in yet."

"I thought it sank in pretty good last night."

She laughs again breathlessly. Her chest is so accustomed to heaving sobs that this new feeling of joy is like pure oxygen pumped straight into her lungs. It is making her so strangely lightheaded she feels on the verge of fainting, which makes her welcome his steady grip on her arms even more.

"Look at me, Lucia."

She stares at his chest in a black button-down shirt, unable to obey him.

His hands slip down her bare arms, grasp her hands and squeeze them painfully.

"Oh!" She cries and looks up into his eyes. Their storm-gray depths arrest hers, making it impossible for her to look away.

"I'm here," he whispers, pressing her hands again gently, reassuringly. "And when it comes for real, death will make us one."

Her gaze falls to the hard line of his mouth. His long, thin lips feel like the edge of a blade against her heart and his stare is the sharp point penetrating her. All her feelings flow into his hand like blood as he promises her eternity and her soul believes him. With a small moaning breath, she sets about trying to express how he makes her feel.

She wrests her hands out of his and rips his shirt open. She can't possibly bother with buttons now, she has to get at him. Fortunately, like last night, he understands and shrugs the shirt off casually, as if it isn't the black dirt of the grave from which she is passionately reclaiming him.

Resting her hands on his hips, she runs her tongue up the center of his body from his navel to his chest. She buries her face between the gentle slopes of his pecs, closing her eyes to lose herself in the slightly rough, sparse forest of his dark hair. She licks and sucks one of his firm nipples then moves hungrily on to the other one, catching it between her teeth and biting it as she runs her hands up his back. She wants this man so much, more than anything in the universe. She plants her palms against his chest and slides them up to his shoulders, savoring the feel of his flesh envelope as she stands on tiptoe in her high-heeled sandals and sinks her teeth into the vulnerable hollow between his neck and shoulder.

She moans and moans in a fit of rapture as she sucks on him, tempted to bite him hard enough that she punctures his fine skin and draws his blood up into her mouth.

He allows her to feast on him while reaching behind her and unzipping her dress. Then he pushes her away.

She quickly pulls the slight garment off.

His mouth looks even harder as he takes in the white satin bra and panties. Her torso is still a creamy rose but her arms, chest and most of her legs are a lovely golden hue.

She tosses her long hair behind her so nothing obstructs his view. She is aware of her breasts rising and falling as her breaths come faster the longer he stares at her while very slowly and deliberately undoing his trousers.

She is about to pounce on him hungrily and yank his pants down.

"No," he says firmly and forces her to watch him undress. He bends over to remove his shoes and socks then straightens and gives her a penetrating stare as he pushes his slacks down and pulls them off along with his black underpants. His movements are so relaxed that when he abruptly yanks her bra cups down to expose her breasts and pulls her to him, her head is flung back. She gasps with perfect pain and pleasure as he sucks viciously on one of her nipples. He bites it, pulling on it with his teeth and caressing it with his tongue.

"God, I missed your nipples," he mutters, transferring his attention to her other rosy nimbus, which was aching with jealousy and now blooms with exquisite sensations between his hard lips.

"Oh, Richard!" She grips his head with both hands and presses his face into her breast, crushing its tender fullness with his hard features while relishing the contrast of his hot breath on her skin and the soft, cool flow of his hair between her fingers.

He shoves her breasts up and together. "That's where I want to feel my cock first," he informs her.

His erection knocks against her belly, causing a minor flood between her thighs, soaking her panties with how much her pussy wants it.

Falling to one knee as if genuflecting in church, he pulls her panties down.

She steps out of them.

He snaps her bra open in front but she is too impatient to slip it off before sinking to her knees and fervently giving him what he wants – the sensation of his cock cocooned between her soft breasts. He bends his knees and his hands rest on her head as he slides the length of his shaft slowly up and down between her breasts. She digs her chin into her chest as his head comes close enough to her lips that she can flick her tongue passionately over his beloved glans.

It is his turn to moan as he masturbates himself with her breasts, his fingers tightening into talons around the egg of her skull.

She loves the feel of his excitement growing between her breasts but other parts of her body are desperately longing for the same honor. So when he finally straightens up and slips his erection firmly into her mouth the sudden pleasure blinds her. Yet she barely tastes him before he withdraws the gift and pulls her painfully to her feet by the hair.

His eyes push her back across the bed without his having to say a word. She raises her legs for him and he positions her sandaled feet on his shoulders. Then he slips his hands beneath her hips and his swift, hard thrust arches her back as he forces her tight wet depths open around him. When he pulls all the way out of her again, she feels emptier than she ever has in her life. She clutches the bedspread in an agony of disappointment and anticipation, her heart and soul so excitingly penetrated by his stare that her body writhes in torment at being left out.

“Please!” she begs. “I need you!”

His hands still under her, he pushes her knees down toward her chest as he bends over her. Gently, his head parts her slick lips before he abruptly drives his whole cock into her again, shocking her to the core of her being with pleasure.

It is such a relief to have him filling her again that she sighs and closes her eyes.

“Look at me,” he commands.

She obeys him of course, and his unrelenting stare seems to open her body up for him even more. Lifting her hips slightly off the bed, he sinks in all the way, planting himself so deep in her cleft she can hardly bear how good it feels. Then he begins grinding against her, wetting his balls with the juice flowing from her pussy blooming open around his long, hard stamen. He is fulfilling her completely and yet also torturing her because she doesn’t want to climax yet. She wants to come with him as he pumps in and out of her, giving her pussy the full glorious experience of his cock caressing her innermost flesh. Yet the deep, violent stabs he subjects her to kill her resistance. She simply can’t stop herself from working her mound against him. She whimpers in mingled ecstasy and despair as her clit responds as much to the

mysterious pressure of his stare as to his excruciatingly delicious massage. She can't possibly resist this double penetration.

"Stop!" she pleads. "I don't want to come without you!"

"Did you come for that boy?"

"Just once."

He raises an eyebrow. "Just once?" The expression on this mouth whips her soul.

"And only because I thought of you!"

"Is that so?"

"Yes!" She gasps, desperately fighting an orgasm. She has just reached the point of no return when he suddenly straightens up and pulls out of her, plunging her body into despair as he abandons her right on the brink.

"Turn around," he says.

She drags herself up a little farther onto the bed and rolls over onto her stomach.

He grabs both her hips and jerks her up onto her hands and knees. "Did he fuck your ass too?" He smacks one of her cheeks with his unbelievably hard open palm.

"Yes!"

"And I'll bet you loved it."

Her voice drops to a shamed whisper. "Yes."

Digging his thumbs into her soft skin, he pulls her buttocks open and lets the mouth of her anus feel the threat of his head. She is bracing herself for pain, so when his cock surges back into her cunt pleasure flows through her like a divine blessing.

He drives into her without mercy, fucking her violently from behind. Then he pulls her remorselessly hard up against him and stops moving, suspending her on his erection. It pulses like a second heart deep inside her, telling her how close he is to coming inside her and she simply can't take anymore. She reaches beneath her with one hand and crushes her clit beneath her fingertips, rubbing it furiously. "Oh yes," she cries. "Oh God, yes!" An explosive orgasm lays waste to her insides with its searing power as she feels his flesh join hers in the ascent and her second, equally intense climax is stoked by the breathless sounds he makes as he pumps his sperm into her, his fingers branding themselves into her skin.

* * * * *

They don't emerge from their cabin until twilight.

She felt it in her body when they set sail that morning yet it still comes as a slight shock to see nothing but empty, cultivated fields all along both shores.

Mark is far behind her in Cairo, out of her life forever. He gave her the chance to choose and she chose her husband.

Bon Voyage.

She walks over to the railing.

The setting sun is about to dip into the silver water which looks more like liquid mercury, mysteriously deadly in its beauty. For a few moments the glowing red sphere touching the straight line of the river forms a living hieroglyph spelling the ancient Egyptian word for eternity.

She expects Richard to step up beside her but he doesn't and after a moment standing there by herself feels too much like being back on the balcony of the hotel, longing for him, and she turns around anxiously.

He is still standing in front of their cabin, staring at her, his hands in his pockets.

"I should hate you," she says mildly.

He shifts his weight onto one foot and leans against the doorframe. "But you don't. Instead you love me even more for using you the way you were made to be used, body and soul. Your feelings are the ultimate mixed media, my love."

"I need a drink."

"I'd like one myself. Come," he takes her arm like a gentleman, "let's go meet our fellow passengers."

The high heels he insisted she wear make her grateful for his support. "I'm not feeling very sociable right now and I feel cheap in this dress."

"On the contrary, you look very expensive."

"I do hate you."

"It's classic Egyptian. It clings beautifully to your curves and the straps barely cover your lovely breasts."

"The Egyptians didn't wear black."

"Wrong. Haven't you seen those statues of Tutankhamon with his skin painted black? It was a symbol of the divine, which is how you look in that dress."

* * * * *

"Our first stop is...what was that place called, Adam?"

"Beni Hassan, dear."

"Oh yes, that's it, Beni Hassan! What does the guidebook say about it?"

"Middle Kingdom tombs," Lucia replies, plucking the olive from her martini and savoring it.

"Middle Kingdom, that's right!"

"The age of the Nomarch," Richard throws in. "Men who enjoyed all the power of feudal lords."

"Nomarchs?" Ellen looks at him expectantly.

"The men in charge of the provinces into which Egypt was divided," Lucia explains. "They were considered the physical embodiment of their Nome, you know,

like Arthur, the land and the king are one and all that. They cut their eternal homes straight into the limestone cliffs at Beni Hassan. The tombs are not in very good condition but they're still supposed to be very impressive." She finishes her drink. "They're full of scenes of daily life just like Old Kingdom tombs but they're also full of metaphysical material like wrestling scenes between men painted black and white to represent the eternal battle of light and dark, good and evil."

"Love and desire," Richard adds helpfully.

"Oh, Mr. Taylor!" Ellen giggles.

Considering the fact that she is not attractive and at least fifteen years older than him, Lucia forgives her for so obviously flirting with her husband.

"Well, you certainly seem to know what you're talking about, Lucia." Ellen's husband Adam is a retired divorce attorney.

"That's because my wife thinks and feels like an ancient Egyptian," Richard explains. "Metaphysically."

"Metaphysically?" Ellen stares at him, ostensibly lost in admiration of his mind.

"One definition of meta is beyond or transcending," he kindly elaborates. "Thus metaphysics is the study of the first principles of being and the essential nature of reality."

"God came before the physical universe," Adam states, as if he tried the case of Creation himself.

Lucia pushes her empty glass away. "You mean an old man with a white beard?" she asks sweetly.

Richard strokes her hair like a cat's back. "It's not wise to get her started on this subject," he warns.

"I thought we were talking about Beni Hassan," Ellen declares.

Adam says, "Didn't the Egyptians worship animals, which constitute part of the physical world? So I don't see what you mean, Lucia, when you say they were metaphysical."

"They didn't actually worship the animals." She has no desire to pursue the conversation but two martinis have effectively sabotaged her self-control. "They used animals to express —"

"Used them?" Ellen's eyes widen. "You don't mean...?"

Richard laughs.

"To express metaphysical principles!" Lucia snaps.

"Oh my, there's that word again."

"I think what my wife is trying to say, Ellen, is, for example, that the cat goddess Bastet stood for the pleasure of the senses, for the mystery of spirit taking form or, in more contemporary terms, of energy becoming matter."

Adam adjusts his glasses. "They saw all that in a dumb cat?"

"All that and much, much more," Richard assures him. "I wonder how our little adopted one is doing, my love?"

"Oh," Ellen exclaims, "you've adopted a baby?"

Lucia pushes her chair back. "If you'll excuse me, I think I'd like to take a walk on deck before dinner."

Richard follows her up. "I think I'll join you."

She hisses under cover of the wind outside, "I'm not sitting with them at dinner!"

"Of course not, we still have three other charming couples to meet."

"I don't feel like meeting anyone else. I'm also freezing. I'm going back to the cabin to change."

"It's not cold in the dining room and you're staying in that dress. It's simple form-fitting cut and thin straps are completely ancient Egyptian. I like you looking like a priestess of Hathor."

She turns away.

Romantic gaslights have been lit along the deck but the breeze that seems to be coming from every direction easily finds a way into their glass armor, forcing the flames to struggle for life and to give birth to a host of shadows. She walks defiantly away from her husband as quickly as she can in her torturous high heels, all the time hoping he will follow her and knowing that he won't. She has a key to their cabin. She doesn't need him to come with her. She doesn't want him to come. Yet the silence and emptiness behind her is the pressure of a vacuum forcing her to keep moving away from it so he won't see how it tears her apart inside. The way he behaves sometimes makes her feel as though the atmosphere is being sucked away. She can hardly breathe and it makes her furious with herself, how vulnerable she is to the weather of his moods.

"Hey, what's the rush?" a relaxed male voice inquires from the direction of the water.

Surprised, she stops and looks toward the railing but all she can make out through the dancing shadows is what appears to be the sun's spectral afterglow.

"Beautiful night."

"Yes," she agrees and lets herself be drawn toward the quiet voice. What she mistook for remains of the sunset is really shoulder-length red hair. The rest of him remains invisible in an ankle-length black coat, an unlikely garment to come across in Egypt but stylish nonetheless.

"You look like you were running from something," he comments.

The struggle between light and dark on the deck behind her lets up for a breathless moment during which his smiling face comes into focus. "I was," she admits.

"You *have* to be Lucia."

Her breath catches. "How did you...?"

"We need to talk." He looks quickly up and down the deck. "In private."

"I was just on my way to my cabin to get a sweater."

"I'll come with you."

She suffers a disturbing feeling of déjà vu, unlocking a room with a strange man standing behind her, and guilt begins nibbling through the alcohol's pleasant haze. It sinks its teeth into her womb in earnest when he closes the door behind them.

She moves away from him to the center of the room, illuminated by the soft glow of a brass lamp on the Edwardian desk.

"As you've probably guessed, Lucia," he looks carefully around him, "I'm a friend of Mark's." He moves over to the desk. "You're here with your husband, Richard Taylor?"

"Yes."

He lightly touches the marbled red pen resting on top of a black leather journal and then abruptly slips his hands into his coat pockets, as if resisting the urge to look inside the book.

"What did Mark say to you?"

He turns to face her and his smile tells her the cursive of her figure in the ink-black dress is more interesting than anything the journal might contain. "Mark called me last night and told me an incredible story. I see now that he wasn't exaggerating when he described you, so maybe it's all true."

"Why don't you just tell me what he said?"

His eyes are an impenetrably dark green. "He says he loves you."

A sweet rush of triumph makes her feel weak. "Is that all?"

"I'm a reporter, Lucia."

"A reporter," she repeats flatly.

"If what Mark said is true, this is a great story and a hell of a lot more interesting than an election in Cairo."

"Get out, please. I'd like to change."

His tone is so coolly objective it is almost intimate, "He told me everything, Lucia."

"And I don't even know your name."

"Ian McNeil and it's a pleasure to meet you, Lucia. I'll leave now but I'll be around."

Chapter Eighteen

When she returned to the dining room after changing into a less revealing dress, Ian was not there. Nor did he make an appearance at breakfast the next morning, where she brought up the subject of his worldwide resurrection with her husband.

He promptly shot it down. "This cruise is about us, Lucia. How you feel about my being alive is all that really matters right now."

After breakfast the Sistrum's handful of passengers assembles on deck. They are docked at Beni Hassan, where arrangements were made in advance for a bus that will drive them to the tombs.

"We could rough it and ride donkeys over," Richard suggests.

Ellen giggles again and smiles at him as if they just shared a delicious secret.

"I'm sure Lucia wouldn't mind," he adds. "She likes doing things the rough way. Don't you, my love?" he throws the conversational ball at her.

"Actually, stubborn asses don't much turn me on." She tosses it right back.

Adam clears his throat. "What the devil's the delay?" he glances at his huge, space-age watch yet again. "We should get going before it gets hotter than hell out there."

"Watch your language, dear. Oh."

Longing for the chance to lose everyone deep inside a tomb and surround herself with the powerful figures of Nomarchs in scanty loincloths, Lucia follows the direction of Ellen's gaze.

Ian is walking along the deck toward them. The soft morning sunlight brings out the gold in his red hair, a stunning contrast to his light-blue button-down shirt with elbow-length sleeves and cream-colored khaki slacks.

"Who is that?" Ellen wonders out loud.

"His name is Ian McNeil," Lucia has the satisfaction of informing her, "and he's a reporter."

"A reporter?" Adam looks skeptical. "What's there to report about around here?"

Ian casually changes course and wanders over to the railing. His hands in his pockets, he stands gazing out at the forbiddingly arid shore.

"He wasn't at dinner, or at breakfast," Ellen states the obvious. "Where did you meet him?"

Lucia looks at her husband. "I ran into him last night on my way back to our cabin to change."

He smiles grimly. "So your handsome little stray has claws after all."

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

"Sorry because he's fighting dirty for you?" he says just as softly. "Introduce us to him, please."

"Ian!" she calls.

He looks her way, smiles and approaches their little group.

"Ian, I'd like you to meet Adam and Ellen Steinberg. And this is my husband." She doesn't need to mention his name.

"It's a pleasure to meet you all." Ian shakes Adam's hand, kisses the back of Ellen's hand like an old-fashioned gentleman then focuses on Richard with a transparent smile in which she senses a powerful current of determination.

Adam removes his neon-orange baseball cap. "Who do you work for, young man? Lucia tells us you're a reporter." He wipes his bald scalp before slapping his hat back on with a self-conscious frown.

"*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, sir," Ian replies with a pleasant drawl in his voice.

"Oh, then you're a southern boy," Ellen exclaims, fondling the petal-shaped trim of her low neckline.

"I was born in Charleston, madam, but my family's from Ireland."

"It could be worse," Richard mutters.

"Now, Mr. Taylor, what is the matter with you this morning?" Ellen's pale chest resembles a slice of turkey breast served up well beyond its expiration date.

"Nothing at all." His smile is as dazzling as a baby's.

"He was just born again," Lucia thinks, feasting on the sight of him.

"Why don't you join our little group, Ian?" Richard suggests.

"Thanks," his smile at once deepens and softens as he looks at Lucia, "don't mind if I do."

The Sistrum's captain, a tall, fine-featured Egyptian, probably a Copt, finally appears on deck to supervise their brief journey off the boat into the waiting bus.

Walking beside Richard, Lucia wonders why he chose the Steinbergs as their companions, although admittedly there wasn't much of a selection. Disembarking along with them now is a prim old couple from London, retired professors of science and mathematics and a younger, big-boned German twosome who speak not a word of English. At least with them they could simply have grunted and smiled and not been forced to make superficial conversation. Apparently Richard finds Ellen's girlish behavior morbidly amusing and he is punishing her for Mark by forcing her to endure Adam's company. The addition of Ian to the group is a little too stimulating for comfort however. The specter of Mark walks beside him and the desert's sun-scorched heat combined with Richard's smoldering jealousy is not an enjoyable prospect for the day.

"We should have gone home," she tells him. Adam and Ellen have fallen behind with Ian, who as a reporter deserves to be condemned to their meaningless banter for a while. "I'm sick of Egypt."

"No you're not."

"How do you know how I feel?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

"No. I realize you think my feelings are an open book to you."

"Ah, but the plot keeps thickening."

"It's not my fault Mark called a reporter. Yet he seems nice enough and you can't stay dead forever."

"Do you have any idea how much your boyfriend told him?"

"Everything."

"Wonderful."

"He needs to hear your side of the story, Richard."

"You mean the way I played with you and why? That is the juiciest part, isn't it? The whole world will label me a sadistic bastard because I led you to believe I was dead and then impersonated my own ghost. No one will understand I was protecting our love."

This statement makes her long to put her arms around him and just hold him. Instead she has to settle for boarding the bus.

During the bumpy ride through mazes of rock outcroppings, the only distinguishing feature of the barren landscape, their driver attempts to rally their enthusiasm for the tombs they will be seeing by way of an obnoxiously loud intercom.

Probably wishing he was back in Georgia, Ian rides by himself across the aisle from her, staring out the window, while Ellen keeps turning around in her seat to chat about everything and nothing.

* * * * *

The first of the four tombs open to the public is that of Khety. While everyone else follows the guide inside, Richard and Lucia make their way alone into the tomb next to it.

The detailed reliefs carved into the limestone bedrock are, in a way, much more powerful than the life-size paintings produced in the Valley of the Kings and Queens dynasties later.

"I've always preferred Old Kingdom tombs," she remarks. "And this one is just as...what's the word I'm looking for here?"

"Virile?" Richard offers helpfully.

"Yes! There's nothing soft about these drawings. These people were in complete..." She searches for the right word again.

"Command of themselves?"

"Yes, exactly."

"Virile, hard and in command, just your kind of men."

"You know what I mean. They really believed in the eternal energy animating their bodies. Their sensuality was completely profound, if that makes any sense." She moves over to another wall. "Come here. See this dog giving birth?"

"I see it," he says patiently. "What about it?"

"See her tail? That's Set's erect, forked tail. But she has a collar around her neck, which means that chaos and darkness, or matter, devoid of spirit, has been brought under control."

He caresses her hair, which she wore down to please him despite the heat. "Is that what I'm doing whenever I put a collar around your throat, my love, taming your Sethian nature?" He grabs a handful of her soft brown mane and pulls her over to the wall covered with copulating animals. "See this?"

"When are you going to stop resenting me for something that was entirely your fault?" she asks mildly.

He lets go of her and moves over to a vibrant scene of acrobats and dancers.

She follows him, her feelings in a similar state of upheaval.

The rest of the tomb appears to be devoted to inventory and accounting scenes, which bore her but which Richard seems to find quite interesting, either that or he is simply concentrating on ignoring her.

Despair begins carving out a hollow space inside her. "I'll see you outside," she tells him and he lets her go, again.

Everyone is emerging from Khety's tomb when she steps out into the unforgiving sunlight.

She slips on her sunglasses and quickly starts up the path toward a third opening in the cliff face above her.

The day is still young but the air is so dry it sucks the salty moisture out of her before it can even manifest as sweat. A fine white dust swirls around her ankles like a ghostly wraith.

Her heart rate already higher than normal from fighting despair, she runs up the last steep stretch of the path.

"What's the rush?" Ian smiles at her from where he is perched on a convenient rock next to the dark entrance. "Running away again?" He tosses his cigarette away and brushes limestone powder off the seat of his pants as he rises.

"I just felt like being alone for a moment."

"Then I'll get out of your way."

"You're not in my way... Are you in touch with Mark?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I'd like you to give him a message for me. Tell him it's over. Tell him I love my husband."

"And that you're afraid of him?"

"You only know Mark's side of the story, Ian. He seems to think I'm a battered wife or something and nothing could be further from the truth."

He approaches her. "Don't move."

Her cry as he grabs her arm and pulls her to him is lost in a deafening sound like the ground beneath their feet suddenly splitting open.

"It's okay," he says, cradling her firmly against him with one arm. "I got it."

"Got what?" she gasps, clinging to him.

"The mess there," he points with a small black gun, "that a second ago was a scorpion going for your leg." He drops the weapon back into one of the deep pockets of his slacks as she stares down at the abstract little canvas of blood and guts decorating the sand. Then he lets go of her abruptly and she sees Richard running up the path toward them.

He immediately spots the blood gleaming like fresh paint a few inches from her feet. "Jesus."

Morbidly fascinated by the eerily intact tail, Set's tail, she can't look away from the scorpion's remains until Richard draws her gently into his arms and holds her close. Then she relaxes, knowing nothing can harm her while she is surrounded by the horizons of his arms.

"I owe you one, Ian," he says without a trace of sarcasm.

"Well, you know what you can do for me. I've got Mark's side of the story, now I'd like yours."

"Are you the ape that guards the balance?" Simon asks soberly. "Do you plan to weigh each version against Maat's feather?"

Ian's silence indicates he has no idea who Maat is.

"Richard," she separates herself from him to look up into his eyes, "let's just tell him the truth." She turns in his arms and leans comfortably back against him. "The truth is I knew my husband was alive all along, Ian. I was only pretending to be a widow. We've always enjoyed playing games with each other. At first we just wanted privacy while he was recovering, that's why we let the world believe he was dead. And all that time in the hospital, we entertained ourselves planning this trip. We knew Egypt's dry climate would be the perfect place for him to finish healing and the little fantasy we planned gave us something to look forward to. Mark made it even more exciting but his part is over now and now I have to be punished for being such a bad girl." She lets her head fall languidly back against Richard's shoulder. "Don't I?"

"You'll wish you were dead by the time I'm finished with you," he assures her tenderly.

* * * * *

Richard and Lucia are dining by themselves at a small table privately situated in a corner of the dining room. The Sistrum's hedonistic little universe pulses with candlelight in which silverware gleams like distant lightning and the white china plates are full moons against the black tablecloths.

"Do you think Ian believed me, Richard?" she asks.

"Hell, even I believed you."

Smiling, she takes another sip of her martini. "You know, shaken not stirred really does make a difference. I guess it's true what they say, the devil is in the details. I love that expression."

Sitting across from her, Richard ignores his drink. "They also say God is in the details."

White crumbs rain down from the roll she splits in half and create a faraway galaxy on the black tablecloth. "What are you looking at?"

"At the mess you're making."

"Sorry." She moans with pleasure biting into the cloudy mass of enriched dough.

"I've never seen a woman eat as much as you do. Where the hell do you put it all?"

She shrugs. "I really need to start working out again soon. I haven't jogged or weight-lifted or done anything except walk since I came to Egypt."

"And fuck."

"Yes, but Mark did most of the work."

"Touché."

She is feeling in rare form tonight and has no intention of letting his jabs get to her. She is getting back into the rhythm of his relentless verbal fencing and not allowing him to make an emotional mess of her. All she has to do is remind herself that he loves her and that, paradoxically, he put her through hell in order to spare her feelings.

"You know how much I love good food," she continues. "Everything the earth has to offer. I think eating is one of the main reasons we incarnated in the first place. Digestion is a miracle, if you think about it. It's not just a mystical concept that everything is somehow part of us. We put all this stuff in our mouth and our body makes use of it, or disposes of it, in an amazing system."

"You'd better stop talking about things you like to put in your mouth before I get mad."

"Fine, you say something. You're just sitting there, staring at me."

"Am I not allowed to look at you?"

She glances shyly over at the other diners. "I thought Ellen was going to pass out when she saw what was left of that scorpion."

"It's a good thing she didn't. After my accident, I'm not allowed to lift more than two hundred pounds."

She laughs. "Ian must eat dinner in his cabin or with the crew. He's never here."

"Or he's a bloodsucking vampire who doesn't need food. I don't much like the fact that I'm indebted to him now."

"You had to face the press eventually, Richard. Now at least it'll look like I was in on it with you and that I spent all that time helping you recover, which would have been the normal thing to do."

"The day I do anything even remotely normal, feel free to shoot me."

"Would you care to order now?" Their waiter is a dignified old man in an immaculate white robe and turban whose wrinkles possess the mystery of dried-out riverbeds in the candlelight.

"*Aywa, shukron*," Richard answers respectfully and orders roast duck for both of them, as they agreed, along with a bottle of red wine.

"Do you have any idea how many women I'd been with before I met you, Lucia?"

"I can imagine." She frowns.

"And yet why is it that I asked you to marry me and not someone else?"

"I don't know." She glances across the dark room at the other diners. None of them look as though they are enjoying interesting conversations. "Why did you?"

"The chemistry between us, for one, and because from the very first moment we were best friends. I could express myself with you. I could talk to you like I couldn't talk to anyone else. I could tell you everything and anything and you understood. We think alike, you and I."

"Which may come from living together for so long."

"We've been together this long because we feel things so similarly. It isn't habit or children or financial necessity or mere lethargy that keeps us together."

She sweeps breadcrumbs into her hand. "I thought it was love." She tosses them into the basket.

"I didn't say it wasn't. But what is love? You might as well try to define God."

"I believe they're the same thing."

"Maybe they are."

"I'm starving." She sighs happily.

"That's my girl, always hungry for something."

She laughs. "I'm a voracious user."

"I'm going to hurt you, my love," he promises quietly. "Really hurt you."

The excitement she experiences feels like her soul feeding on her spine like the candle flame on the wick.

"And by the way, I've asked our good-looking reporter to join me for brandy and cigars later. I might as well get it over with."

"I wouldn't mind some brandy and a cigar myself."

"I'd rather talk to him alone if that's all right with you."

The candle sputters in an unseen draft as anger flares up inside her. "So the whole world can know more than I do about the seventeen months you were dead?"

Even in the soft light, she sees his eyes harden. "Don't use that tone with me, Lucia."

Reflected fire burns steadily in her dark eyes. "I'm sorry, it's just that I can't forget how miserable I was without you and I keep expecting to wake up from this dream."

"Hopefully you won't," he says gently. "Not for a very long time."

* * * * *

Lucia leaves Richard with Ian out on the deck, a faint bluish smoke weaving above their heads like djinns released from their lamps after centuries of imprisonment. Ian is getting something he wished for, a sensational story, and Richard already has everything he wants. The brandy in their snifters is a warm, molten gold in the trembling light from the gas lamps.

She strolls leisurely away from them. The night is so beautiful she can easily believe she is inside a virtual reality simulator looking up at a make-believe sky. The multitude of stars burning through the atmosphere is at once humbling and reassuring. With the heavenly host enjoying so many hydrogen and helium cigars, the dimmer lights of mortal dwellings along the shore are hardly worth noticing.

She pauses to lean over the railing and listen to the river lapping against the hull as she watches the slow-moving constellations of other boats traveling up and down the river around them. The subliminal echo of their motors merges with the deep hum of the Sistrum's engines so that the soft swell of the shoreline takes on the mysterious look of a cat curled up between heaven and earth, purring contentedly.

With her own fulfilled body digesting the remains of a duck that once bobbed on the currents below her, her mind languid from the wine washing over it in her blood and years of sunshine and rain captured in a bottle playing themselves out inside her, Lucia finally lets herself think about Mark.

Compared to Richard, remembering Mark is like catching sight of the moon during the day, the white fingernail of the crescent tearing through the atmosphere's veil scratching at her heart. During the night of her grief, Mark had seemed as intensely beautiful as moonlight in the Dark Ages.

She stares down at the river's dark, heaving mass filled with an abundance of marine life, bacteria, chemicals and garbage. In that moment she feels that Richard was right to let her have Mark. Sexual pleasure relaxed her enough to withstand the shock of the man she thought was dead abruptly entering her life again, then guilt diluted her anger at his deception. It was as if he had used Mark to prime her in every way.

She looks up and down the deck to make sure no one is approaching, namely Ellen. The woman's aimless chatter is more frightening than the pit in the tomb of Amenhotep III.

"Mark," she whispers. She wonders if he is still in Cairo and what he's doing. There is no denying the fact that she cares about him and that Richard knows she cares. He knows better than anyone else how she gives herself to a man.

She stands there leaning against the railing for a long time. She is remembering everything. The energetic play of Mark's tongue in her mouth. The look in his eyes the first time he spread open her thighs. The feel of his cock everywhere he could possibly put it inside her and that she let him put it. The teasing quality of his smile when he described what she was eating... She lets herself remember everything.

With a sigh, she turns back in the direction of her husband and the reporter interviewing him. She wonders if Richard can tell she is attracted to Ian and realizes that is a silly question. Richard literally knows her better than she knows herself.

As she catches sight of the two men beneath the gaslights, she can tell right away that the interview has burned out along with the cigars. The cognac is still flowing however, which pleases her because she would like a taste herself.

As though his pulse is attuned to the sound of her high heels, Richard is the first to look up. Then Ian looks at her and their silent focus makes her feel shy and beautiful and strangely weak.

She ignores Ian's regard as she walks up behind Richard's chair and rests her hands on his shoulders. She squeezes them briefly, to alleviate her own inner tension as much as to soothe his physical ones. "How did it go?" she asks, finally looking at Ian.

He is leaning forward in his chair, the snifter cupped lightly in his hands. The flames above him do incredible things to his hair as he stares up at her. His intensely sober expression surprises her and catches her off guard, she is so accustomed to his casual smile.

"It went very well," Richard says and she can feel his quiet voice rumbling gently up from deep in his chest as she lets her hands slide down from his shoulders then up again. She still isn't convinced that he's real. She constantly has to reassure herself by touching him, or at least by being as close to his strong warmth as possible. "And what have you been up to, my love?" He catches one of her hands in his as he raises the snifter of cognac to his lips and drains it.

"Just walking along the deck looking at the river and the sky and thinking."

"And what were you thinking about?"

Her pulse stumbles over the question. "Nothing in particular."

"She's a terrible liar, isn't she, Ian?"

The reporter smiles briefly and, sitting back in his chair, drains his glass.

She slips her hand out of her husband's grasp and moves around him, intending to pull up a chair beside him, but he abruptly sets his snifter down on a small table and rises.

"If you'll please observe, Ian," he says mildly, but his fingers brand themselves into the skin of her upper arm as he pulls her roughly over to the railing.

"What are you doing?" she asks in a small voice, possessed by the irrational fear that he can see all her thoughts of Mark as clearly as a pornographic slideshow flashing straight from her mind into his.

He stops her about two feet away from the railing. "Lean forward and brace yourself on it," he orders in that tone of his that brooks no argument whatsoever.

Her confusion is like a cloud in which a lightning of excitement flashes against her will as she obeys him. And her arousal moves in like a storm when behind them she hears Ian scrape his chair back and get up. She longs to ask Richard what he's doing but she doesn't dare and when he begins lifting her long white dress up out of his way, she can't believe it. He has never taken her in public. The deck is deserted, the rest of the passengers are in their cabins, but anyone could appear at any moment. And then there is the small matter of another man's presence. She more feels than hears Ian walk up to the railing to her right.

She tosses her hair back away from her face and glances at him. His back is to the gas lamps so she can't see his expression but she doesn't need to. She feels his full attention concentrated on the pale, shapely length of her legs as her husband exposes them, slowly raising her dress and tossing it casually over her back. She is wearing a white lace thong, so nothing mars the smooth curve of her bottom, which is both soft and firm.

"You see." Her husband sounds as though he is politely settling a discussion, using her body and its compliance to his slightest word and gesture as evidence.

"I see," Ian replies quietly.

Richard laughs beneath his breath as he squeezes her ass approvingly and painfully.

She moans beneath his hard grip. She doesn't understand what is going on and she doesn't care that she doesn't understand – she just wants it to go on...

"She'll do whatever I say," Richard continues. "She'll let me fuck her right here in front of you if that's what I want. She likes being watched while she's fucked and I like watching her while she's fucked."

It doesn't matter to her that he's lying. At that moment she sincerely believes him. He is doing this to make Ian buy their story but it disturbs her that she is starting to buy it herself. She feels exposed in more ways than one when Richard slips her panties down her legs just as slowly and deliberately as he raised her dress. She steps out of them helpfully, like a whore she thinks, ashamed. Yet she is unable to stop herself from gracefully following the mysterious choreography of her nature. But she isn't acting alone, she is responding to his lead, so why should she feel bad about herself? She is obeying him, as she always does, paradoxically being a good girl as she behaves like a very bad girl.

She doesn't look at Ian again but she is completely aware of him. And as he watches her submit to her husband's desires, she realizes this is what she wants. This is all she wants. Consequences don't matter. All that matters is her submission to Richard's will,

the profound pleasure she takes in it only intensified by another man observing her willingness to do anything he says.

It is a definite reward for her compliance when Richard thrusts two fingers up into her ready, yielding pussy. She makes a small breathless sound, her long hair falling forward on just one side of her face so that Ian has a clear view of her profile as well as her body. She is enjoying Richard's fingers thrusting deep into her cunt, probing her as if searching for something, but it is Ian's invisibly penetrating stare that is really turning her on. The idea of one man finger-fucking her while another man looks on excites her mind so much that her body can't help but respond.

"Mm, Lucia, my love, you always got nice and wet for your Master, but lately you're the Nile in flood."

Ian makes a sound that could be amusement or desire. She would like to think it is desire and the possibility turns her on so much her pussy feels almost painfully deep. But then she forgets it as Richard pulls out and stabs a finger up into her anus, remorselessly pointing out all her weaknesses to the other man as he comments, "She likes it up the ass just as much."

Despite his slightly disdainful tone, she senses that he approves of her perfect passivity and she wants so much more of him than just his idly exploring finger. Moaning, she tightens her grip on the railing and, bending her arms a little more, arches her back as much as she can, pushing her ass up into his palm. She'll take him anywhere he wants to give it to her. But the only thing that fills her is despair as he removes his finger and simply rests his warm hands lightly on her ass again. This frustrates her so much she nearly straightens up and lowers her dress so he can't continue humiliating her. A proud part of her wants to do this but the rest of her doesn't move a muscle. She is tense with need yet also growing more and more exquisitely languid by the second as she surrenders her body to his will. And it makes her submission even more meaningful that apparently what he intends is to tease her and not fulfill the need he is building in her. Yet if she submitted to him with the knowledge that she would receive pleasure from it every time, it wouldn't mean anything because she would only be serving herself.

This realization affects her like a penetration and she gasps from the power of the insight. She has always loved him but in that moment her respect and need for him climax into a feeling of worship that makes her knees weak. After that she waits almost peacefully for him to decide whether or not he is going to bury himself inside.

He lets go of her and she lets out a soft cry as he gives her ass a hard smack. The sensation of her burning cheeks is delicious, caressed by the cool breeze coming from the water.

"Stand up straight and lower your skirt, Lucia, but leave your panties on the deck. That way our handsome reporter will have all the evidence he needs."

Disappointment and desire cleave her soul in half but she obeys her husband and her Master, careful not to look at the other man while she does so.

"She's very obedient," Ian agrees in a tight voice. "Thanks for the show."

She stands as close to Richard as she possibly can without touching him, afraid to do so, but now she can't resist looking over at Ian.

His hands are thrust deep into his pockets and his legs are planted firmly on the deck, as if he isn't going anywhere.

Richard slips her arm in his and starts walking in the direction of their cabin. "You've got your story," he says. "Good night."

Chapter Nineteen

The Sistrum sails past Tell el-Amarna, the desolate site where, for some inexplicable reason, the heretic pharaoh Akhenaten chose to build his new capital. After his death, when Egypt promptly returned to the old religion, the city was torn down and every trace of Akhenaten's monotheistic ideas destroyed. Consequently, there is nothing left to see now except painfully empty desert.

Always having disliked what, in her opinion, is the degenerate artistic style Akhenaten initiated, Lucia is not sorry to leave Tell el-Amarna behind. Feeling slightly hungover, she is glad to just stay on the boat and relax.

The sun is at its zenith, beating down on both sides of the deck, when she spreads herself out on one of the chairs in front of their cabin, into which she can beat a hasty retreat should she spot Ellen approaching.

There is no cool, caressing breeze today and it is not very peaceful on the Sistrum's gleaming deck. The hot orange light behind her closed eyelids is alive with the steady drone of the engines and the occasional high-pitched buzz of a mosquito. She might be listening to a cosmic generator, a reminder that the sun is not immortal, that it will burn out in the end and take the entire solar system with it like an ancient king buried with all his nobles.

She is drifting off, her brain sinking into a more fluid realm of perception like a fish slipping off its hook, when the sound of footsteps speeds up her heartbeat and causes her to surface abruptly. She clutches the arms of the chair and prepares to flee. Then she observes that it is Ian walking toward her, smiling as he studies the shapely pyramid of her bent leg.

She takes off her sunglasses to better appreciate the stunning view of his fiery hair flowing into a black button-down shirt tucked into ivory Dockers.

"Hello," he says.

"Hello."

"Where's your husband?" he asks bluntly.

"Inside, writing. He doesn't enjoy lying out in the sun like a stupid lizard on a rock, as he puts it."

"He seems to have a firm opinion on everything."

She laughs. "That's the understatement of the millennium."

"Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all."

He perches on the edge of the chair beside hers.

"You should be happy," she tells him, turning her face up toward the sun and closing her eyes again. "You got what you wanted."

"Not everything."

She suppresses a smile as she squints over at the substantial rays of his hair. "Really, what more do you want?"

He reaches for his heart. "I want you," he slips a micro cassette recorder out of his shirt pocket, "your perspective. I know what Mark thinks and I know what Richard says but I don't know how you feel, Lucia."

"I feel great, Ian."

"You look great," he agrees fervently.

"Thanks, you're not so bad yourself." In fact, she can't take her eyes off him.

He presses a button and asks casually, "So it's true that your husband enjoys watching you with other men."

"Turn that thing off, please."

He holds her eyes. "Which one?"

She smiles. "The one in your hand."

He doesn't return her smile as he switches off the recorder.

"If you want me to talk to you, Ian, you'll just have to remember what I say."

"Fine." He drops the instrument back into his pocket and exchanges it for a battered pack of cigarettes.

"But I really don't have anything to say," she teases.

"I don't believe that." Rising, he thrusts a hand into his pants pocket, finds some matches and sits down again. "Okay," he has no problem lighting the cigarette in the hot, motionless air, "I'm ready." He blows an impressive stream of smoke toward the river.

"Ready for what?" The thought is nibbling at the back of her mind that she will miss looking at him when he gets off the boat, which he undoubtedly will when they reach Luxor.

"Anything." He stares into her eyes as boldly as a gardener thrusting his spade into the earth to see what turns up.

"Anything?" she repeats, buying time. The soil of her feelings is so rich with desire and so fertile with fantasies, she knows it is a dangerous thing to open herself up to someone, especially an attractive man, if she doesn't want something to happen between them.

He blows smoke over her head, waiting.

"The Egyptians often depicted the soul as a bird with a human head," she begins in a detached voice. "Which, to pursue the image, makes our thoughts a juicy, writhing confusion of worms. All of us have thoughts we're ashamed of, impulses we would never act on and yet which a part of us thrives on. I mean, if we're not honest with

ourselves inside it's like a bird starving itself to death because it thinks bugs and worms are disgusting. Acknowledging our hungers is, paradoxically, the only way to nourish and master ourselves, body and soul."

"Interesting." Looking down, he blows a thoughtful stream of smoke between his legs. "But now get to the point." He looks straight into her eyes again. "Do you indulge all your impulses? Does your husband?"

"No, we're not swingers, if that's what you're thinking. A bunch of people crowded into some ugly living room fucking each other like worms in a jar is, in my opinion, the death of real desire. There's no mystery in it."

"But...?"

"But what?"

He glances up at the sky. "Let's pull this conversation back down to earth." His eyes narrow like a cat's as he takes a hard drag. "Stop talking in metaphors." The cigarette's burning end is the same color as his hair, a striking contrast to the cool black space of his shirt.

"You wanted to know how I feel, didn't you, Ian? Well, very often the only way I can understand my emotions is by way of metaphors and analogies. If I didn't have poetic images with which to contain them I think I'd implode from how intensely I experience everything and from how much...desire I feel." She can't manage to come up with another, safer, word.

"Then it's true?"

"What?"

"That Mark was just a big, juicy worm you fed on before flying back to your cozy little nest with Richard?"

"No...I mean, yes, but it wasn't as cold-blooded as you make it sound."

He gets up and tosses the cigarette overboard. "You're lying." He sounds pleased. "You believed Richard was dead," he resumes his seat, "just like the rest of the world, and you fell in love with Mark. But it turned out you were married to Dracula and he's had his teeth in you for so long you imagine you like sleeping in the dirt with him. Yet lying in your kinky coffin at night you dream about Mark."

She smiles at him, impressed with the limberness of his mind. "You're confusing my husband with his work, Ian. He's not evil and he's suffered a lot. He was entitled to his privacy."

"Don't you mean 'we' were entitled to our privacy? Look, Lucia, I can find out where he was staying while he recovered and whether or not you were there with him. You know I can. So why lie to me?"

"I don't think we should continue this conversation."

"Because Richard will be angry with you?"

"Haven't you heard the expression 'where angels fear to tread'?"

He gets up again. "Okay," he thrusts his hands into his pockets and looks down at her, "I'll give you more time."

A protest perches on her lips and flutters away on her pulse as she stares up into his eyes, desperately wanting to understand the truth herself, but Richard has spun such an intense web around her heart with the threads of death and resurrection that he has more power over her than ever before.

"I'm not just doing this for the story, Lucia. Mark cares about you and he's a friend of mine. But even if he wasn't..." His mouth hardens as he swallows the rest of the thought.

"I appreciate your concern, Ian." It pleases her to think she can keep him on the boat if she really wants to. "Did you give Mark my message?"

"Yes. Are you sorry?"

The sudden pressure in her chest prevents her from answering right away.

"Don't worry, he didn't believe you meant it. He's hopelessly smitten."

"Or he's broke and really needs my money."

"Do me a favor and don't insult my friends, please."

"I'm sorry, Ian."

"You've got to stop hiding behind the idea that Mark just wants you for your money, Lucia." He reaches for his cigarettes again. "If you're going to forget about him, at least do it for the right reasons." He strikes a match. "See you later." He tosses it behind him as he turns away, leaving her with a pungent whiff of sulfur.

* * * * *

Abydos. Seti I. Pure power. Other pharaohs contributed to the beautiful temple but for Lucia, who spent countless hours as a little girl pouring over picture books of Egypt, it will always be Seti's temple.

The Sistrum docks and its wonderfully spoiled, relaxed passengers disembark. All but one. Richard's back is bothering him and he is deep in the final chapter of a new book he began in the hospital so he has decided to remain onboard. She begged him to come with her, extolling the virtues of this site over all others but to no avail. He couldn't have cared less that the temple still possesses its original roof and that the reliefs carved into its walls and columns are some of the finest in Egypt.

"You're going to make me go all by myself?" she demands.

"I'm sure Ellen will be delighted to listen to you describe how handsome Seti was."

"That's not even funny!"

"And Ian will be there with his gun."

"I hate you."

"Mm, yes, I love how much you hate me. It's your fault my back hurts this morning."

"Oh is it?"

"Yes, it is. It's your fault for having such a sweet, welcoming little hole. God knows how I lived without it for so long."

"I missed you too, Richard."

"Let go of me and get out of here. I'm trying to write and you'll miss the bus to your precious temple."

She is the last to board the decades-old vehicle.

"Oh," Ellen exclaims from her front row seat, "Isn't Richard coming with you?"

"Not today, sorry."

Smiling, Ian cocks his head at the empty seat beside his in the back of the bus.

Lucia sits gratefully down beside him. "You keep saving my life."

"I can think of worse things to do with my time. So your husband's staying on board?"

"Yes."

"Working on another best seller?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to hear something funny?"

"Please."

"I've read all his books. There's some pretty kinky shit in there."

"And you love it."

"Lucia..."

"Yes?"

He looks out the window. "Never mind."

* * * * *

Other small groups of tourists are milling around in the temple's outer courtyard.

"Let's start at the end," Ian suggests. "And work our way out against traffic."

"Excellent idea." She leads the way, wishing Doug was beside her now. Yet Ian's company is much more stimulating if not as enlightening. He follows just behind her. His hands are tucked into the pockets of dark green khakis that bring out his eyes, his hair as softly brilliant as fire reflected in snow against a white shirt.

This is the first roofed temple Lucia has been in and the thick stone provides a natural form of air conditioning that makes her regret wearing only tight khaki shorts and a form-fitting black tank-top.

Arcane scenes of transformation envelop them in an evocative silence.

"My God," she whispers reverently.

"You mean gods," Ian corrects her mildly.

Inside a broad doorway, where Seti I is depicted on either side of her, she cannot resist stopping again to admire his broad shoulders, slender waist and powerfully long legs. Dressed in a sage green shirt with a golden sash and a long white loincloth, Seti offers a libation to a goddess wearing a skin-tight red and black dress.

"Ian, look. See how the oil he's pouring is drawn as a continuous stream of tiny circles?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's what a flowing liquid really looks like when it's magnified. It only looks like a continuous stream to the naked eye."

"And you want me to ask how the Egyptians could possibly have known that."

"Do you have any idea?"

"Not a clue."

They pass through two more halls of columns before coming to the seven sanctuaries at the temple's heart, which Lucia recognizes from the description in her guidebook.

The florescent light on the wall across from the last shrine dims and brightens, flickers on and off with a dangerous-sounding electric crackle. The god-lined corridor might very well be a virtual reality set fraying at the edges with real space—a magical fourth dimension—just beyond it.

It suddenly feels strangely quiet behind her. "Ian?" She turns around and discovers that she is alone with Horus, depicted on the wall beside her in his form of a man with the head of a falcon...who suddenly catches her from behind, his talons digging painfully into her arms as he pulls her into the shrine.

Mark kisses her angrily, his tongue wrestling with hers and forcing her mouth wide open beneath his until she feels as if their jaws are about to dislocate like those of two snakes swallowing each other whole.

She manages to wrench herself away from him. "What are you doing here?" she gasps, literally breathless.

"Kissing you." Dressed in a white T-shirt and shorts, he almost resembles an ancient Egyptian prince. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

"But how did you get here?"

"I rented a car in Luxor."

Ian appears in the doorway. "No one's coming," he says.

"So." Mark grabs her face with both hands and makes her look at him. "You only pretended to be a widow? You only pretended you'd fallen in love with me? Did Richard have a camera installed in your room? How many times have you two done this anyway? How many other men have fucked you up the ass while he watched?"

Ian enters the shrine and Lucia suddenly feels as though the earth is opening up beneath her and she is falling too fast to stop herself.

"That's enough, Mark." Ian comes between them.

"You don't get it." Mark steps around him. "If you're nice to her she doesn't listen."

She closes her eyes when he grabs a fistful of her hair but it doesn't stop her from seeing where she wants this to go and the desire shames her.

"Look at her," Mark says gruffly. "She wants this."

"You're taking advantage of her weakness," Ian argues very quietly.

"Did you hear that, princess? He thinks you're weak because you like taking orders from men." He rests his hands on her shoulders and easily forces her down to her knees. "I just think you're beautiful."

Ian gently grips one of her arms and pulls her back up to her feet. "I'm sorry, Lucia, I didn't realize he planned to..." His voice trails off as he stares into her dark eyes like an astronaut floating off into deep space when his line suddenly breaks.

Mark's smile is grim. "See what I mean? You're wasting your time," he unzips his shorts, "and you're wasting her... Come here, sweetheart."

She falls to her knees before him again.

"That's it," he weaves his fingers possessively through her hair, "suck me."

"Jesus!" Ian whispers, but doesn't look away.

Her lips slowly and reverently sheathe Mark's silky force. Blind with the pleasure of it, her eyes open for an instant just to catch a glimpse of his tall, lean body towering over her. The view excites her so much that her guilt at betraying Richard is temporarily crushed by the depth of the fulfillment that washes through her every time Mark dives selfishly into her mouth. He holds her head firmly in his hands, making it impossible for her to resist him when he goes for her throat so that even when he slips out of her mouth for a moment a spider's thread of his pleasure dangles between her lips and his head... Until Ian puts a finger beneath her chin and breaks it as with one hand he turns her face toward him and with the other reaches for the zipper of his pants.

"No," she breathes.

He hesitates.

"Slap her," Mark instructs. "She wants you to because it helps her stop thinking. She doesn't want to think. She just wants to be fucked as hard and as often as possible. Trust me on this."

The tips of Ian's uncertain fingers flick uncomfortably near the corner of her eye, threatening her sensual trance and frightening her because if she stops to think now...

"Harder!" Mark says urgently.

This time there is real feeling in Ian's blow. Guilt and desire battling inside him, he takes it out on her, and she has the thrill of experiencing his discovery of how good it feels when her skin becomes the battleground.

She gazes up at his face, letting him know with her eyes that she wants him, that she wants both of them. He quickly unzips his pants and his hard features are framed

by his hair's fiery aura as the forbidden fruit of his head slips between her lips...and then it's too late, she might as well let his whole cock into her mouth, what the hell.

She doesn't regret it. He tastes just as she had imagined he would, clean and smooth. She forgets all about Mark as she concentrates on making Ian as hard as she wants him. But first she has to be able to get at him, she needs all of him in her possession. He isn't wearing underpants but his pants are still in the way. She pulls them down around his thighs and takes his entire erection into her mouth, hungrily kissing his firm body with her soft lips.

Groaning, he threads his fingers through her hair but doesn't take control of her head. He seems willing to let her have her way with him.

Thrilled by his surrender, she holds on to both his thighs as she starts moving her head up and down his shaft slowly, embracing his erection tightly with her lips while giving her tongue the freedom to savor him.

After what feels like no time at all, Mark says, "My turn again."

"Mm!" she protests, relaxing her jaw so that Ian's head can kiss her throat for a lovely moment before she has to let him go.

Mark grabs the hair at the back of her head, pulls her face away from the other man and shoves his own impatient cock into her mouth.

She braces herself on his thigh with one hand while with the other she grasps the base of his erection and pumps him hard and fast while sucking on his head, impatient for it to be Ian's turn again. The Irishman's skin is more like Richard's, pale and almost delicate over his beautiful cock. He was so delicious that Mark suddenly tastes disappointing. He is also too big, there is barely enough space between her tongue and the roof of her mouth to accommodate his greedy hard-on.

Ian's normally pleasant voice is hoarse with passion, "Give her here!"

Mark laughs beneath his breath but thankfully empties her mouth and steps aside.

Holding his cock, Ian gently insinuates it between her lips again as she turns her intensely dark gaze up to his face. He meets it with his own deep green stare while slowly planting his cock in her warm mouth and, as always, she is unable to resist this mysterious double penetration. She reaches down and unzips her shorts, desperate to get at her clit and make his pleasure her own.

"Mm, good idea," she hears Mark comment as he moves behind her.

Ian sinks to his knees as though she is sucking the life out of him, draining him of his strength, and she doesn't even notice scraping her bare knees on the stone floor as she shifts her center of gravity back, aided by Mark as he grabs both her hips and lifts them. Her eyes close beneath a flood of pleasure and anticipation such as she has never known then as he tugs her tight shorts, followed by her cotton bikini panties, down as far as possible. She is then excitingly torn between awareness of her exposed bottom and the immense satisfaction of Ian's cock passionately embraced by her lips.

"What if..." His voice catches as she concentrates her tongue's efforts around the base of his head. "Somebody comes?"

"Nobody's coming except us," Mark replies shortly.

She wonders if he plans to fuck her ass again but then feels him center himself at the slick entrance to her cunt. Surprised, she moans from the profound pleasure she experiences when he thrusts into her. He penetrates her deeply, opening her tight depths up around him as his lean, strong hips move back and forth swiftly, selfishly, and the vibration of cries rising up from her throat subtly contributes to Ian's stimulation. She has never experienced anything like this, her mouth and her pussy both so full of cock that she almost feels sick from the intensity of the fulfillment. Like a little girl gorging on candy, she doesn't care at all that she will be punished for this later because all that matters is the unbelievable sweetness of having one cock driving into her pussy and another cock fucking her mouth. Her hands slip from Ian's firm thighs onto the hard floor to brace herself and she makes a purring sound deep in her laboring throat as she crouches like a cat on the temple floor.

Her knees are screaming, her hipbones ache where Mark's thumbs and fingers dig into her skin as he rides her, Ian's semen-slick head seeking her throat's caress forces her into a serious battle with her gag reflex, yet nothing has ever felt so good as this relentless stroking from every possible direction. Suspended between two men intent on getting themselves off, two men plugging all their energy into her wet and welcoming flesh, her discomforts dissolve in the flood of satisfaction surging between her womb and her throat.

Ian comes first, pumping his hips in her face and controlling her head to keep her face riding up and down his throbbing penis as he fills her mouth with sperm.

Mark declares, "Now it's my turn."

She quickly swallows the evidence of Ian's pleasure as he yields his place to his friend.

"Come on, baby." Mark grabs her head and shoves his cock between her lips, trusting her to remove the barricade of her teeth, which she does even though she resents having Ian's arousing taste suddenly replaced by the flavor of her own juices. He fucks her mouth without restraint, going for all the sensations in her throat. Her whole being centered on the excruciating exercise, she doesn't realize Ian has knelt behind her until his still-rigid cock suddenly dives into her soaking cunt. It is such an unexpected blessing that when he slips his hand around to her clitoris and starts rubbing it she begins coming. She puts her mouth on autopilot for Mark as she focuses on the feel of Ian's still-firm penis sliding in and out of her as he generously lets her brace her unfolding climax on him.

Mark empties her mouth abruptly. "Oh yes!" he hisses and proceeds to decorate her face with white hot streaks of sperm just as her own orgasm crests around Ian's deep strokes and crashes through her. The intense pleasure ebbs gradually, leaving her feeling totally wiped out and breathless. Then a second climax overwhelms her when

Ian starts thrashing inside her like a drowning man, coming again as Mark breathlessly finishes baptizing her features with the foam of their combined pleasure.

* * * * *

"Jesus!" Ian zips his pants back up and smoothes his hair back away from his face as if trying to see straight. "Fuck!"

"You know what they say," Mark gently wipes the corners of her mouth with the end of his shirt as though she is a child they just fed, "that Mary Magdalene was his lover."

Gripped by a sense of unreality, Lucia is afraid to separate herself from his solid warmth. Her life is over and yet, horribly enough, she has also lost her soul. She forsook the eternity of Richard's love for a mouthful of worms. "Oh God!" She clutches Mark's shirt and buries her features in his chest.

"It's all right, baby." His arms come around her protectively. "No one's throwing any stones at you. Did you enjoy that?"

Her voice is muffled against him. "Yes."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Everything!"

"She's right, Mark, everything's wrong with what we just —"

"Stop sounding like a fucking Catholic schoolboy. You just came inside her and now you're feeding her this guilt shit. Give her a break."

"I'm sorry, Lucia."

She rests her cheek against Mark's chest and looks over at Ian. "There's no reason for you to be sorry."

The sudden anger in his green eyes looks dangerous as a spark deep in a forest. "But aren't you afraid Richard will find out about this?" he asks cruelly.

"Personally," Mark says, "I'm counting on it."

"Even though, as an unfaithful wife, she probably won't be entitled to a cent of his money?"

"She's rich anyway...but that's not even the point. I told you I didn't give a fuck about her money didn't I?"

"Yes, you did, Mark. I guess a small, cynical part of me didn't believe you."

"If any part of you is going to be small," she remarks, "better it be the cynical part."

Mark laughs and tightens his hold on her. "God, you're beautiful." He almost sounds angry.

"It's not true, Mark," she confesses abruptly. "I wasn't using you. I didn't know Richard was alive."

"Fucking bastard," Ian curses beneath his breath. "Why the hell were you covering for him, Lucia?"

"Because she was in shock," Mark explains.

"What the hell happens now?" Ian demands.

"That's up to her. She can either go back to Richard or she can come with me."

Lucia struggles to recapture her desire to live in the vacuum created by the thought of truly losing Richard, forever this time. "I can't just leave all my things behind," she protests.

"Why not?" Mark says. "They're just things."

"Don't push her." There is nothing casual about Ian's assertiveness. "She'll do what she wants to."

"The hell she will. She'll do what I tell her to. She lost her willpower a long time ago. It's dead and buried and there's no bringing it back. Believe me, I tried."

"What the fuck are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I intend to replace Richard's will with mine. She'll answer to me now because I'm the one who really loves her."

"You're as bad as he is."

"Not really, but I can pretend to be, for her sake."

"You mean you'll cut her dose of abuse down to less dangerous levels but still keep her addicted?"

"Until she doesn't need it anymore."

"I'll meet you in Luxor, Mark," she desperately grabs for the reins, "I need time to...end things."

"That settles it," Ian's tone brooks no argument. "I'm taking her back to the boat now."

Mark doesn't let go of her. "No way, I'm not leaving her again. He might really hurt her this time."

"She'll be all right—I'll see to that."

Richard will never forgive her for what she just did. Her betrayal is so complete however that it transcends any possible jealousy on his part. He will simply cease to love her. And if he no longer loves her he might not feel compelled to kill her. Yet the loss of his love will only want to make her kill herself.

"I shouldn't have walked out on you that night, Lucia." Mark strokes her hair as if gently waking a dreaming child. "I'm sorry. But I needed time to think and to deal with the fact that your husband is still alive. But I'm sure now. You're mine."

* * * * *

Lucia and Ian make it out to the bus just in time to casually follow everyone back onboard. Her knees ache a little from kneeling on the temple's stone floor and her emotions are in such an upheaval she trips on one of the steps.

Ian is right behind her. "Steady there." His hands fall lightly on her hips for a moment that Ellen, sitting in the front seat, does not fail to notice.

Lucia takes refuge in a windowseat at the very back of the bus.

Ian sits down beside her, on the aisle, and respects her silence as the bus starts moving slowly away from the temple.

She stares out at the smooth flesh of the desert and relives those impossibly hot and elusively transcendent moments when her lips seemed to take on the power of the world's horizons by completely capturing two men's souls between them.

After about five minutes Ian leans gently into her. "Are you okay?"

She turns her head to look at him and the exciting proximity of his mouth shocks her like a live wire. "I don't know," she answers truthfully, but a subtle fire radiates up from her womb as he holds her eyes for a delicious moment that makes her forget the fear chilling her to the core.

"I've never done anything like that before, Lucia," he says, glancing up the aisle, but no one is paying any attention to them and he adds in a whisper, "I want to kiss you."

His yielding firm lips press against hers then his breath teases her desire like wind in a sail as he sits back in his seat again.

"Have you ever been to Atlanta, Lucia?" He reaches into his shirt pocket.

"No." She watches him light a cigarette, entranced by the shine of the flame reflecting back from his hair. "I think you'd like it." He tosses the match away carelessly. "I've got a condo in Ansley Park, rolling hills and hundred-year-old trees in the middle of the city. Used to be Indian territory."

"Sounds wonderful."

"Ellen just gave me a look," he murmurs, "and so did that fat frau. I guess they don't approve of my filthy habit." He flicks ashes defiantly into the aisle. "Seriously, Lucia, if you need to get away, I live alone and *mi casa es su casa*."

She falls hard against him as the tire directly beneath her sinks into a pothole then spins out again with a lurch.

"Thanks, Ian."

He holds her eyes again through the smoke. "I feel like I'm helping to ruin your life."

She doesn't know what to say, or even think.

"I've known Mark for years," he looks away again, "at least I thought I did. I'm not so sure anymore." He stares down at the cigarette in his lap. "If I was in love with a woman," he takes a drag and exhales it thoughtfully, "I wouldn't share her."

She had managed not to look directly at this thought but, forced to confront it, her emotions just seem to stop running and let despair catch up with her like a predator there is no hope of fighting.

"Look, Lucia, if you decide you want to stay with your husband I'll convince Mark to keep his mouth shut. Don't let him rush you into anything. Take all the time you need to think about things and make your own decision."

"It's not my decision to make anymore, Ian. I've never kept anything from Richard and I'm not about to start now. It's not possible anyway. He'll know," she sighs. "He'll just know! I love him too much to hide anything from him."

"I think," he lets the cigarette fall to his feet and steps on it, "I want to kiss you again."

Chapter Twenty

Lucia spends the rest of the day crying.

After asking her six times what is wrong, his tenderness and patience gradually drying up, Richard finally leaves her alone in their cabin.

Once the dam breaks she can't stop herself as all the reasons for her misery keep crossing her mind like debris carried by a flood. There is the tree, roots straining tragically up into the sky, of her marriage, which her actions that morning have fatally uprooted. She can no more save her relationship now than she can replant an eight-hundred-year-old oak. Richard's heavy granite urn also keeps floating by behind her eyes, empty except for her grief and the shattered egg of his car and the lightly bobbing black scarab of the holographic projector...

She realizes she was wrong to believe she had assimilated it all, wrong to think she had accepted what he did and forgiven him for it. She hadn't forgiven him, not at all, and she had punished him by betraying him. She never would have done what she did if he hadn't let another man use her. And this is the real root of her boundless misery, the fact that she had lost her faith in him.

When at last she sits up, there is a dark wet spot on the pillow and her temples are throbbing.

The cabin is disturbingly silent and she realizes the engine has been cut. For some reason the Sistrum seems to have come to a dead stop.

She cannot put off facing Richard much longer, yet there is no way a description of what she did can pass through her lips in his presence. It would be easier to stare at a knife and stab herself in the womb with it.

"What am I going to do?" She pushes away the damp hair clinging to her hot cheeks. "What am I going to do?!"

* * * * *

Taking temporary refuge in a hot shower, Lucia imagines they are docked at Dendera. She can sense Hathor's temple, with its columns crowned by a woman's head morphed with the floppy, oddly stylish ears of a cow.

She quickly dries herself off and flings the towel away.

"That's all I am, just one of Hathor's whores."

She takes a long time putting on her makeup, doing her best not to wonder where Richard is or whom he might be talking to.

With the reverent sense of standing at an altar, she begins by caressing a moisturizer equipped with sunscreen into the skin of her face, neck and chest. She follows it with a fine coat of liquid foundation and a dusting of powder, including her lips and eyelids. Then, with a thick brush, she applies a dark blush to her cheekbones and with a dark brown pencil defines her eyebrows, extending them slightly to form a defining arch over her eyes. She smoothes dark gold powder over her eyelids, accents their creases with jade-green and further deepens her gaze with a translucent white shade just beneath her eyebrows. She draws a black line inside her lower lashes then finally outlines her lips with a pencil and fills them in with a deep burgundy color.

She is brushing out her hair when the cabin door bursts open.

She cries out in surprise and turns to face Richard's faceless silhouette, drawn against a stunning violet sky.

She always wanted death to look like this.

He slowly enters the dark room and closes the door behind him. His eyes are invisible as he stares at her where she stands motionless as a statue in the bathroom's luminous little shrine. "Is there something you need to tell me, Lucia?" His voice is scarcely audible.

"Yes... I saw Mark today. He was at the temple."

"I know." He begins walking toward her. "Ian and I had a long talk."

She asks faintly, "You did?"

"Yes and something he said confirmed my suspicions. I would owe him another favor for coming clean but I think you've done a nice job of paying him back already."

Words fail her completely.

"Get dressed."

She can't seem to move.

He grabs one of her wrists and pulls her into the bedroom. "Get dressed," he repeats coldly. "We're going out."

"Out?"

He slides open the closet door. "Here," he flings a long black dress at her, "wear your priestess of Hathor dress."

"Richard."

"Don't say a word, Lucia. Just do as I say."

She unzips the garment and steps into it but she can't close it without his help. Praying he will realize this, so she doesn't have to disobey him and speak, she turns her back on him.

He zips her up as swiftly as lightning ricocheting off the earth. "Wear the highest heels you've got. You're not running from the truth anymore."

What truth? She wonders numbly. First it was true that he was dead now it's true that he is alive. Maat's feather of truth is soaked with the blood of her heart.

Her back still to him, she puts on a pair of black sandals with treacherous stiletto heels and then she turns and watches him slip on his watch and thrust his wallet into a back pocket.

He seems ready to go so she reaches for a small black purse on the nightstand.

He snatches it out of her hand and flings it across the room. "You won't be needing that."

"But —"

"Don't you understand the effort I'm making right now, Lucia? Don't say another word."

"Richard, I can't live without you. I can't, not again."

His face as expressionless as a funeral mask, he says quietly, "Let's go."

* * * * *

The Sistrum has come to a dead stop in the middle of the Nile and its tall, handsome captain is standing at the railing near the bow, fidgeting with the collar of his dark jacket like an ancient nobleman forced into strangely uncomfortable clothing.

Lucia discovers that shutting down her mind intensifies her senses to the point where they bleed into her feelings and she can't tell the difference between them. The subtle yet all-pervasive scent of the river is the smell of her own fear and the oppressive stillness of the air is the freshly laid out corpse of her happiness.

Without a word the captain opens a small gate in the railing and, clutching her arm, Richard forces her to the edge of the deck.

She lets out her breath only when she sees a small boat bobbing like a cork on the water below her.

A native man clad in the evening's deepening shadows reaches up for her and she lets him lift her down into the boat. He immediately lets go of her as Richard jumps on board and keeps her from losing her balance by pulling her down onto the hard seat beside him.

They glide slowly toward the East Bank and she feels the Nile might as well be the river Styx as she floats toward the hell of a loveless future accompanied by the deathly quiet shade of the man she once loved.

"Where are we going?" she whispers desperately.

Her husband's silence is the emotional equivalent of stone.

By the time the boat docks his silence has seeped into her blood like a cold anesthesia, numbing all her emotions, which for the moment is a blessing because they were all painful.

He leaps out onto the wooden platform while she balances awkwardly on the gently rocking surface.

"Give me your hands," he orders.

She lands against his chest as he pulls her up out of the boat and his closeness awakens her for an agonizing moment to what she has lost. "Oh God, Richard."

"Don't say a word." He makes her walk ahead of him across the wooden platform.

She assumes the scattering of lights ahead of them is a village and suddenly she no longer feels protected by the twentieth century, as though she has been transported back to a more brutally honest past where men dealt very harshly with unfaithful women like her.

When a car abruptly catches them in its headlights she stumbles on the uneven ground. He was obviously expecting it however because he walks straight into the light without hesitating and opens one of the back doors for her.

She quickly slips into the car before he has the chance to push her in. She catches the young driver's oily black eyes in the rearview mirror and sees them ignite with angry lust at her shameless attire.

Richard slams his door closed, mercifully killing the light exposing her. "Luxor," he commands. "*Dilwaattee!*"

Their driver floors the accelerator and turns the wheel sharply to the right at the same time, throwing her into her husband's arms.

She quickly slides away from him. "You said," she dares to speak, "Ian confirmed your suspicions." She has no idea how much English their driver speaks and she doesn't care. "Would you mind telling me what suspicions?"

He stares out at the formless darkness as if she hadn't spoken.

"This was all your fault," she accuses him, but she might as well be stabbing a corpse. His love and his anger have both died and she is nothing to him now. The possibility that Mark loves her is no comfort at all. It is a useless balm over the fatal wound of her loss. Richard's anger had been an excruciating, yet also mysteriously cauterizing, heat. His indifference now is the hopeless peace of the grave.

"Why?" she pleads. "Why are you reacting like this when you're the one who let another man keep fucking me?"

"Because," he informs the stars, "by the time I found out it was too late. You were fucking him before I even got to Luxor. It isn't easy playing dead and it's even harder to legally resurrect. When you left for Egypt I was hip deep in paperwork so I sent Julian on ahead of me. I arrived three nights after you did and only a healthy fear of Arab prisons kept me from killing Mark, or from at least maiming him in the right place. Did you really believe I would let another man touch you, Lucia? To let a complete stranger violate what I consider my sacred space?"

She gasps as if shot through the heart. "But you said..."

"I know what I said." His voice is deeper than normal. "It was my pride saying it. There was no way in hell I was going to give Mark the satisfaction of knowing he'd snatched you from me just days before we would have been together again. You probably think it was Fate getting back at me for putting you through hell, Fate

punishing me for cutting you out of my life because I was too proud to let you see me that way and maybe you're right."

"But why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell me, Richard!" She imagines this is what bleeding to death must feel like. Fingers can't staunch the vital flow and she can't think of anything to say that will help at all. "Why didn't you tell me?!"

"You keep repeating yourself, Lucia. Just like this morning, when you betrayed me twice."

"If you had told me how you really felt," her voice rises hysterically, "I never would have."

"You never would have what?" he finally looks at her. "Come on, let me hear you say it. I think I'm entitled to a blow-by-blow description."

He slides across the seat toward her and drapes a heavy arm over her shoulders. "Come on," he yanks her dress down to expose her breasts and give one of them a painful squeeze, "tell me what you did this morning. Give him all the juicy details."

Their driver yells "By Allah!" and hits the break.

"Keep driving," Richard commands, but he lets go of her.

"Why are we going to Luxor?" she finally dares to ask, avoiding the driver's eyes in the rearview mirror as she hides her breasts again.

"To pay my little brother a visit."

"Julian's still in Egypt?"

"Yes."

"Richard...is it over between us?"

"What do you think?"

"All I know is that I love you more than anything."

"Too bad you didn't remember that this morning."

"I would never have done...what I did, if I had believed you really cared."

"Or maybe that's just the excuse you needed to be yourself."

"Maybe. But I also know that I love you and that I'll never love anyone else the way I love you."

"How sweet."

"It is over then."

"It'll never be over between us, Lucia. I may leave you, you may leave me but it'll never be over between us. I'm sorry about this, I realize you must be starving. You haven't eaten since this morning, have you?"

"Stop it!"

Their driver glances anxiously back at her.

Richard unbuckles his belt. "Come here." He unzips his pants and pulls his soft cock out through a slit in his black underpants. "I know how frustrated and miserable you get when you're not properly nourished."

With a faint sob of grief and gratitude, she lets him grab her by the hair and pull her face down into his lap.

"Don't stop," he commands.

She knows he must be speaking to their driver because nothing could stop her from breathlessly savoring what she thought was lost to her forever. She doesn't give their captive audience another thought as her lips slowly slide down his limp, seemingly indifferent penis. She nurtures him lovingly on her warm tongue as he swells like a magical seed, his feelings rooting themselves in her open mouth. She feels intense relief that she can still arouse him. Even after all the times she has sucked him, it still gives her a profound thrill every time she feels him stiffening between her lips. When he is fully erect she caresses him more passionately, slipping the tight red ring of her lips up and down his full length, making his pale skin rosy as she rubs all her lipstick off on him. She pauses only to suck on his head now and then like a baby on her bottle, blind with contentment. She holds his underpants open with both hands to savor every last bit of him, not satisfied unless she takes absolutely all of him into her mouth every time. He doesn't speak or touch her with any other part of his body. Only his cock punctuates her wordless expressions of devotion with pulses of pleasure, an inexorable physical response that hardly means he still loves her. Nevertheless, as always, she takes a profound pleasure in making him come. Tonight, especially, she longs to purify herself with his uniquely satisfying joy juice, the mysterious formula of her happiness.

"Mm, very good," he finally deigns to address her. "I can tell you've been practicing. You give much better head now."

The cold compliment brings hot tears to her eyes that flow down her cheeks and mingle the salty depth of her love for him with his sweet semen.

"That's right, show me how much you love me, Lucia. Choke on me! Did they both come over your face like in some cheap porno movie? Answer me and tell me the truth! I'll know if you're lying to me!"

She lets him slip out of her mouth just long enough to gasp, "No!"

"They both..." his breath catches, "they both came in your mouth?"

She moans.

"God," he grips her head with both hands, "you whore!" Burying her face deep between his thighs, he nearly drowns her with his climax.

* * * * *

When their cab pulls up in front of the Winter Palace hotel in Luxor a little over an hour later, their driver leaves the engine running and sits staring into space, both hands gripping the steering wheel. Richard has to shake him to get him to accept an

impressive wad of Egyptian money, which he manages to do without making eye contact, as if he has decided they are both demons that will capture his soul if he looks at them again.

People are walking up and down the avenue but no one notices them as they get out of the cab, except one man standing at the foot of the steps leading up into the hotel. He tosses his cigarette away and approaches them.

Richard says, "Tell me they haven't seen you."

"They haven't seen me," Ian replies just as tensely.

"But they're here?"

"In the bar."

Taking hold of her arm, Richard cuts rudely through a flock of nuns in knee-length blue dresses who are innocently blocking their way into the hotel.

Lucia glances over her shoulder to make sure Ian is following them. She can hardly believe he and Richard have become allies and it excites her even beyond hunger and despair to be swept along between them. That they seem to have something planned thrills her. Maybe Richard isn't planning to leave her after all. Sucking on this small morsel of hope is all she has the energy left to do. After the past thirteen vitally draining hours, the confrontations about to take place are too explosive for her to contemplate.

Ian falls into stride beside her.

"What are Mark and Julian doing together in the bar?" she asks him, hoping he will be more forthcoming than her husband was.

"Getting drunk, I suppose."

The bright marble expanse of the lobby ends as abruptly as the desert giving way to a softly carpeted, shady realm grown up around alcohol's timeless flow.

"Over there," Ian says and immediately she spots two tall, slender figures leaning against the bar facing each other.

Mark and Julian.

She can't be sure but they seem to be smiling at each other.

Richard lets go of her arm. "Should we pat the mice around a little and watch them squirm?"

"Just get it over with," Ian says impatiently. "Lucia's been through enough already."

"What's going on?" she demands.

"You mean you haven't explained it to her yet?" Ian walks over to a column in the lobby, out of sight of the bar, and they follow him. He thrusts his hands in his pockets, closes his eyes and rests his head against some gaudy hieroglyphs. "Tell her," he says wearily.

"You know what a bright and greedy young man my little brother is, Lucia." Richard doesn't look at her as he speaks. "Well, he figured out how to get back at me

for keeping him on a tight financial leash and how to supplement his income at the same time."

She knows what he is going to say. She had glimpsed the truth that night in another dark bar.

"He also had the pleasure of unmanning me and getting back at you for getting half my money in one neat blow. He resented that I made sure you were taken care of in case I didn't live. I didn't want you tied up in legal battles with my relatives because we were never legally married."

"You should have been," Ian comments without opening his eyes.

"I suspect Julian approached Mark the morning after he slept with you. He might have prevented it from happening in the first place, for my sake, but he didn't. And maybe watching you with Mark that night in the dining room is what gave him his idea. I don't know. In any case, you were right. Mark was coached almost from the very beginning on how to treat you, but not by me. Julian groomed him to be your perfect romantic hero and, as long as I didn't find out, he had nothing to lose and everything to gain. He'd still have my allowance if you left me for Mark, who'd pay him and keep on paying him for not telling anyone the truth about how he landed his rich wife. And even if I found out and cut him off he'd still have access to your money through Mark."

Still leaning against the column, Ian looks as pale as if he just crossed a vast stretch of desert at night and suffered a bad case of moonburn. "It was something Mark said this morning. He said, 'she's rich anyway'."

"How could Mark have known that, Lucia?" Richard asks her. "You didn't even know it yourself until just before we boarded the Sistrum. I thought maybe you'd managed to get in touch with Mark after that."

"No." She concentrates on the meaningless hieroglyphs to the right of Ian's head. "This morning was the first time I saw him or talked to him since we left Cairo."

"You could have mentioned it to Ian and he could have told Mark."

"But she didn't and I didn't."

"Which means," Richard concludes, "that Mark found out from Julian that you were wealthy in your own right now. And why would my little brother give a guy who had punched him in the face such a valuable piece of information? That whole show in the tomb was designed to keep me from suspecting they were working together and to put you in Mark's debt for saving you from a fate worse than death. Julian wasn't supposed to threaten you, Lucia. He wasn't following my script."

"Yet you can't prove they've been working together from the beginning," she protests, finding the uncertainty worse than anything. "Maybe they just recently decided to gang up on you."

"Maybe," Richard says harshly. "But I doubt it."

"He used me." Ian's eyes open. "He lied to me to get to you." He straightens up. "And I don't appreciate that one bit."

"What do you want to do about this, Lucia?" Richard meets her eyes. "You're the one who's been fucked from every angle here."

Ian protests, "I didn't mean..."

"I'm sure you didn't."

"I have to know for sure," she says. "If we just walk over and confront them they'll deny everything and I'll never know for sure."

Richard says, "I'll do anything you say."

* * * * *

"Mark!"

He turns away from the bar. "Lucia, my God, what happened to you?"

Her long black dress torn on one side all the way up from her ankle to the top of her thigh, her hair windblown and her cheeks flushed. She clings to his shirt and gasps when she sees Julian. "What is he doing here?"

"It's a long story. First tell me what happened to you."

She whispers miserably, "I killed him!"

"What?"

"What?" Julian echoes.

"I killed him!" she breathes, looking around the bar to make sure no one heard her.

Mark reaches back and carefully sets his beer down on the bar. "Killed him?"

"Killed who?" Julian demands.

"Richard!" she whispers. "I killed Richard! I had to! I had to defend myself!"

Julian sounds more astonished than anything, "You killed my brother?"

"In self-defense! You have to believe me!"

"We can't talk here." Mark says carefully. "Let's go up to the room."

* * * * *

"I don't believe this! I don't fucking believe this!" Julian's hair is literally standing on end from his creative use of gel. "She killed my brother! The bitch," he strides toward her, "killed my brother!"

Mark comes between them. "Put a lid on it," he says coldly. "The last thing we need to do right now is panic."

"But she killed my brother!"

Mark shoves him down into a chair. "Last I heard you couldn't stand your brother."

Sitting across from Julian on the edge of the bed, she lifts her face out of her hands to relish the sight of him crying.

"That's not true!" He wails like a lost little boy. "I hated him but I loved him too!"

"Shut up," Mark says in disgust. "I'm trying to think."

She winces, seeing the reflection of her own feelings in Julian's expression as he looks up at Mark's face then down the length of his perfect body. Her initial stab of disgust bleeding into sympathy, she leaps to her feet. "What am I going to do?"

Mark turns toward her. "You need to tell us exactly what happened, Lucia."

"I told you. Ian gave me his gun for protection and when I told Richard I was leaving him he...he got so angry I..."

Mark catches her as she falls and lifts her up into his arms.

"She fainted?" There is a jealous sneer in Julian's voice.

Mark lays her across one of the double beds.

"You know what this means, don't you?" Julian suddenly sounds like himself again. "It means she's going to jail and that I'm rich. All his money goes to me now and so does hers."

"Doesn't she have any relatives?"

"I don't think so, but even if she does it doesn't matter. She killed her husband. Her relatives aren't entitled to a dime if they put her away." He concludes reverently, "I'll get it all."

"She's not going to jail," Mark says firmly.

"What do you mean? She killed someone. Of course she's going to jail."

"She killed her husband in self-defense. I'll testify on her behalf, they'll acquit her and we'll get married."

"Are you fucking crazy? She would have made you sign a prenuptial agreement for sure. It's much better this way."

"No." The mattress dips to one side as Mark sits down beside her on the bed. "She loves me."

"I love you too, Mark."

"Maybe, yet legally I'll never be entitled to a cent of your money. Wake up, sweetheart," he shakes her gently by the shoulders, "I need you to tell me what happened so I can help you."

She pushes him away and sits up. "Richard!" she cries.

The door leading out into the hall bursts open beneath a violent kick.

Richard walks into the room. "I just can't seem to stay dead," he says.

She runs to him and attempts to melt into his ribs as he slips an arm around her.

Ian follows him into the room. "Thanks for the story, Mark." He contentedly lights a cigarette. "I think I've got it straight now."

The End

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