

Martina Nicolls



The Sudan Curse



THE SUDAN CURSE

Martina Nicolls

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Chapter 1

THE RING

The Sudanese say that they can find out how a story ends, but they will never know where it really began.

It was opening hour at the Nile Hilton Rendezvous Casino—five o'clock in the afternoon. I was obligated to meet retired journalist, Henri Armand, a Westminster University friend of Albert Himmermann, my grandfather. The Qur'an explicitly denounces gambling. Consequently Cairo casinos catered predominantly to tourists. Strictly-monitored entry required presenting my passport as proof of nationality and age, although it seemed blatantly obvious that I was foreign and over twenty-one.

The portly security guard, with an up-turned mustache, tapped the gold kangaroo silhouette on my navy blue passport. Instead of gazing at a bronzed surfer chick, he was looking at a rosy-cheeked, freckle-faced English migrant. I was my mother's clone, not fortunate enough to resemble Karl Himmermann, my square-jawed, dark-haired, Teutonic father. At my birth, the midwife removed caul—the inner part of the am-

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niotic sac—from my face. My mother, Betty Craddock, pronounced caul a lucky sign. I would never drown, she said. After delivery, as tradition dictated, my mother fed me a nourishing mixture of old ale, oatmeal, sugar, and spices. The strawberry birthmark above my left eye was a curse, she believed, so, for thirty days, she licked it every morning after breakfast until it disappeared. She had observed that secret from the Jersey cows she had seen every day from her kitchen window. Fresh from the rolling hills of the magical English Midlands, my parents raised me with fairies and hobgoblins; knights and maidens; apple-bobbing and cherry-picking; bards and breweries; flower petals and yew trees. The sound of hammering smiths and church bells hung in the air and the smell of porridge and rosebuds lingered in my nostrils, hot and sweet. My mother wrapped me in stories and rhymes and my father shrouded me in cigar smoke to ward off witches. To cure whooping cough, my mother sent me to the gas works to inhale the smell. I learned to avoid walking under ladders and on cracks in the pavement. Aunt Phoebe swore it was advantageous to wear red in photographs and to throw apple peel over my shoulder because it was sure to land in an alphabetical shape, revealing the initial letter of my future husband. I learned a great deal in my youth, before my time. Betty and Karl migrated to coastal Australia, the land of employment and opportunity, where long, hot, dry summers; sunburn; and sea spray displaced grey days and frigid winds. That's when my romantic ideals ended and the harshness of reality began.

“Australians like gambling.” The security guard winked, and I couldn't deny it. The flat land bred an egalitarian nation in which everyone had the same opportunity, the same chance to win. To have a “fair go” was a birthright associated with risk-taking, over-optimism, and the illusion of control. Australians bet on everything and anything; horse racing, sporting games, and who would be the first to finish their beer. I gambled on the odds that my mother was right—that I would never drown—and subsequently became a damn good swimmer. But then, so was every Australian.

Already, foreigners in the Rendezvous Casino were pushing buttons on poker machines; automatically, robotically. A silver-haired, elegant man sat at a round table, champagne in hand. Spotting me first Henri waved and motioned the waiter for another drink in one swift, deft movement. A wide smile greeted me and I bent slightly to kiss him on both cheeks. He did not rise.

“Darling, it is so, so wonderful to see you after all these years. Is your grandfather well, as well as I?” Henri Armand looked ill. Pasty, sagging skin and dull blue eyes faded his appearance, but his movements were agile, his hands steady, and his eyes alert. His memory was sharp, recalling historical events with ease, linking them to periods in his life. I spoke little. A mere smile satisfied him. Kissing him again on each cheek as I rose to leave, we promised to rendezvous and reminisce again some day.

“Here, take the roulette chips, dear. I’ll only lose them,” he remarked nonchalantly.

I never gambled. I did not like the odds. “No thanks, Henri. There must be a thousand dollars here. Cash in your chips. Roulette’s a fool’s game.” He insisted, so I took the generous bundle reluctantly and stood by the roulette table.

The centrifugal lure of the roulette wheel was irresistible. It was a spectacle of mechanical engineering. Roulette was a simple game. The croupier placed a small white ball in a groove around the rim of the dish and spun it in the opposite direction. I watched the spinning wheel and the white ball as it bounced erratically from one metallic groove to another; the pea-sized pellet finally kerplunked into place in one of the numbered pockets. I examined the gamers’ faces. Were they thinking, plotting, scheming, or merely taking a stab in the dark, a lucky shot? Did they think they could beat the house playing a game of skill or were they followers, betting with the herd? Were they observers killing time or were they betting vicariously through others?

Roulette depended solely on luck. The wheel had no memory; therefore, no turn was dependent upon the previous one

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and no skill-set could predict the fall of the ball. The outcome was not in the gamers' hands. There were never any long-term winners. It was a game to avoid at all costs—if you wanted to win. Because the money was not mine, my strategy was simple: watch and wait; spot a trend; bet once and once only.

Keenly observing the play, I waited. What to bet: red or black; odds or evens; high or low? It was a European single-zero wheel and preferable to the American double-zero type. To a small degree it was indeed fortunate because it improved the chances of winning. I split the wheel mentally into its sections: *voisins du zero*, neighbors of zero, were the seventeen non-consecutive numbers from twenty-two to twenty-five; and *tiers*, the thirds, were the twelve numbers on the opposite side of the wheel from twenty-seven to thirty-three. *Orphelins*, orphans, comprised the eight numbers in the remaining two wedges: seventeen, thirty-four, six; and one, twenty, fourteen, thirty-one, and nine. Payouts were standard: 1:1 or 2:1 with combinations at higher odds. Six-number combinations offered 5:1, two-numbered combinations offered 17:1; and single numbers gave the highest odds of 35:1. The rules were favorable: a maximum limit of a thousand dollars. Watching the bobbing ball land, the trend became evident: red over black, *voisins* over the others, highs over lows, and equally odds and evens. There was no harm betting on a trend, particularly in roulette in which one choice was as good as any other.

Choice: it's a strange phenomenon. It can take a lifetime to make or it can take a nano-second; the minutest moment of time. Confidently I placed all the chips on black seventeen. Immediately spectators gasped—audibly and in unison. “No, no, no,” someone whispered in my ear. It was Henri Armand. “Red comes up more often than black, bet with the trend and not against it, and never ever, *ever* bet on a single number. Too late now. Bah! *Trop tard*. Suicide! Suicide!” He held his breath while the ball danced in and out of troughs—chink, chink, chink. The pea ball, spinning and careening, bouncing and jumping, chinked from pocket to pocket. Chink. Chink. Chink. The ball arched in motion. The anticipation was protracted and

intense. Decelerating, the cream pea eventually and finally settled on black seventeen.

“Mon Dieu! Miracle!” Standing behind me, Armand placed his broad hands tightly on my shoulders, shaking them with excitement. *“Manqué, non passé; impair, non pair; noir, non rouge; et orphelin, non tier ou voisins du zero. Merveilleux!”*

Swiveling my head to see his face, I smiled, iterating his sentiments, “Low not high; odd not even; black not red, and an orphan. Bloody marvelous, isn’t it Henri? You’ve just won yourself a lot of money.”

“Au contraire, Mademoiselle Himmermann! The money is all yours. You’re blessed!” He winked and walked slowly back to the table, shaking his head and laughing quietly to himself. “Some people have all the luck. *C’est la vie. C’est la vie.* We get what we expect.”

There was no clock in the casino, a timeless space, womb-like. Wads of notes filled my handbag and I stuffed more into my trouser pockets, flattening them smooth by patting my thighs. My heart palpitated, as large and as fast as Australia’s greatest racehorse, Phar Lap; his premature death in America rumored to be murder. My nostrils flared horse-like and filled with deep inhalations to calm myself. Concentrating on hiding the bulges and trying to appear nonchalant, I left the casino.

“Hey, Miss Himmermann!” Rafi Tarkhan caught me by surprise. “It’s my lucky day.”

“Yours too?”

“What? I meant that I’m lucky I bumped into you. What are you doing here?”

“Nothing much, what are you doing here? You know your parents don’t like you hanging around foreign hotels. Terrorists favor them, you know! Do your parents know you’re here?”

The teenager, gangly and tall, was unassumingly handsome and fortunate to be acne-free. He was neatly dressed in a grey uniform and maroon blazer. His scholarly looks resembled his father, a colleague of mine. Unlike his father, he had a more incisive mind, curious and probing, leaning toward the sciences

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rather than the arts or politics. I'd only been a consultant in Cairo for two months when I met Rafi's Pakistani parents working as long-termers in a health project. Rafi was the Tarkhan's only child. He wasn't out of place in the hotel. Coffee and cakes in the lobby café attracted private college kids after school, but they had begun to disperse.

"Of course they know!" he replied. In a softer tone he said, "Sort of." He smiled and said cheekily, "Besides, terrorists will target you, not me. Muslims, like me, *are* the terrorists! I was at the museum and came here for coffee, but I'm on my way home now. Are you going back to the Shepherd's Hotel? Can I walk with you?"

"Sure. Let's go then. I want to be back before it gets dark. Got a girlfriend?"

"No! No, of course not," he said defensively. To change the topic, he asked, "Are you packing tonight? Mum said you leave tomorrow."

"Yes. It won't take long though. I hear you're going back to London after your father's mission. Your mother's looking forward to it."

"Mmm," he mumbled. "The two-year contract finishes soon. Mum and Dad want me to finish my secondary schooling in London so I can get good scores to enter university."

"Is that so you can study science and mathematics like I did?" I pulled him into me tightly and playfully.

"Oh no! There's no use in that."

"Political science, then, like your father studied, or medicine like your mother?" I inquired.

"Well, Mum wants me to study medicine, but I'm not going to. Don't tell her though. I want to come back to Cairo to study Egyptology. I want to study the mummies." We exited the Nile Hilton, ambling along the Corniche El Nil with the river on our right-hand side. Rafi looked at his feet, except when he glanced occasionally at me. His dark eyes blinked rapidly, showing long thick lashes. I was envious of them.

"The mummy room closes at 4:45. You must have a girlfriend then."

“I told you, I went to see the mummies by myself. I spend most of my free time there, you know. Then I had coffee with friends. You’re worse than my mum, sort of.” The Egyptian Antiquities Museum was near the Nile Hilton, which was the first modern hotel in Cairo. The back door of the lobby led to a shopping mall on the right and, to the left, beyond hawkers selling papyrus, stood the pink façade of the museum, a popular attraction with foreigners. Since the early nineties, tourist venues also attracted Muslim militants who took responsibility for scores of fatal attacks aimed at shaking the economy in an attempt to bring down the government of President Hosni Mubarak. On February 26, 1993, a bomb ripped through the museum’s coffee shop, killing three—a Turk, a Swede, and an Egyptian—and wounding twenty. A month later, four buses near the museum’s entrance exploded from the force of a bomb. There were no injuries. In September, four years later, a shooting and bomb attack killed nine German tourists and their driver by the museum gate. The most recent terrorist attack at the museum was on April 30, 2005, when a suicide bomber detonated a nail bomb, wounding seven standing near the entrance. Running from the scene, the attacker’s sister and fiancée opened fire on a sightseeing bus in another suburb. Fortunately there were no injuries. The soon-to-be-groom turned on his fiancée and shot her to death before killing himself. Despite these incidents and others across Egypt, tourists were not deterred from visiting Cairo’s most famous attractions.

An additional fee, double the cost of the main entrance charge, enabled entry into the Royal Mummy Room, small and dimly lit, tomblike and claustrophobic. After the discovery of three cachettes in Thebes, between 1881 and 1898, twenty-seven royal mummies of pharaonic times were placed in the museum in 1902. Among them were Seqenenre, Ahmose I, Amenhotep I, Tuthmosis I, Tuthmosis II, Tuthmosis III, Seti I, Rameses II, and Rameses III from the Deir el-Bahari cachette. From the tomb of Amenhotep II were his mummy and those of Tuthmosis IV, Amenhotep III, Merenptah, Seti II, Siptah,

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Rameses IV, Rameses V, and Rameses VI. Due to skillful ancient embalming, careful interment of the bodies by priests, the tombs' stable temperatures, and their extreme dryness, the bodies remained remarkably well preserved. Their static and monotonous destiny was to be examined, x-rayed and to lie on their backs for eternity, gazing at an unadorned ceiling.

In September 1976, the deteriorating mummy of Rameses II was sent to Paris for conservation, with a passport describing his occupation as king (deceased). He was infested with *Daedalea biennis Fries*, a fungal species, and placed in a ventilated display case sterilized with gamma-ray radiation using cobalt-60. He was flown back to Cairo eighteen months later, fumigated but fragile.

In October 1980, President Anwar El-Sadat ordered the curator to lock the room, stating that the country's monotheistic faith was against the disrespectful public display of the dead. A year later President Sadat was assassinated and Vice President Hosni Mubarak succeeded him and, after another four years, he re-opened the Royal Mummy Room, which displayed eleven kings and queens. They respectfully earned their keep by attracting massive numbers of tourists with their invariable fascination.

The Egyptian Antiquities Organization of the Ministry of Culture—now the Supreme Council of Antiquities—remained concerned with the fragile body of Rameses II and the possible alteration of genetic information. In collaboration with the Getty Conservation Institute based in California, the Council embarked on a project to prevent the chemical and biological degradation of the entire mummy collection. The project had strict guidelines: the cases should be independent of any mechanical or electrical systems; maintenance should only be required every two years; developing countries should also be able to construct the cases; and the cost should be kept to a minimum. In March 1995, fanfare greeted the addition of ten decay-proof, hermetically-sealed glass caskets. The mummy collection had expanded to include almost all of the original cadavers. So there they lay, insulated from heat, humidity,

drifting desert sands, polluted air, fungi, bacteria, insects and camera flashes. A guard admonished visitors with a loud “Shush! Shhhh! Shush!” This was to urge people to whisper, lest their clamoring woke the dead.

I shuddered at the image of desiccated and sunken bodies, three thousand years dead, lying in varying states of preservation and perpetuity. Stained linen shrouded them like cocoons. Some revealed fragile brittle bones. The sight of deep-pitted orbs and gumless mouths with protruding crooked teeth was macabre and gruesome.

The teenager’s eyes flashed with excitement. “I love them,” Rafi said. “Well, not like that.” He giggled, “You know what I mean. Did you know that the embalmers removed the internal organs first? And the brain. Do you know how they removed it? They stuck a hooked instrument up the mummies’ noses and pulled out bits of their brain. True! They didn’t take out the heart though, except accidentally and then it had to be sewn back in.”

“Charming!”

“The bodies can tell people what life was like all those years ago. I heard a man in the mummy room say that the mummies continue to speak to us, and they do. We can learn a lot: like their diseases; what they ate; and how long they lived.” He lifted his face and looked me straight in the eyes as he spoke. He was transformed from an introverted student into a person with passion: a passion for the life and death of Nubian nobles. “And one of the mummies had his ears pierced. Another one had his testicles and penis embalmed separately. They would’ve had to chop his dick off to do that, wouldn’t they? Or maybe it just fell off because he masturbated too much. Ha,” he laughed. “Mum’s always telling me what will happen if I do it too much.” Raised in London, his inflection was softly refined without being aristocratic. His secret skill was imitating the accent of his parents, especially his mother. “Oh, no, no, no, boy, you must not do that,” he mimicked and shook his head like a bobble-headed dog, which I found terri-

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bly funny. “That’s stupid advice for a medical doctor to offer,” he resumed in his British voice.

“She’s your mother,” I said, still laughing.

“Why do mothers say stupid things? Anyway, one of the mummies has fake eyes. Have you noticed which one? I have.”

“I’m not sure I want to know that much.” Throwing the translucent shawl over my shoulder, I listened attentively to Rafi’s grisly description of the mummification process: cleaning the inner organs; their placement in jars; and the prayers administered for each extracted organ. Nails were tied to fingers and toes to prevent loss. Servants bathed the empty chests in Nile water before packing them with linen or sawdust. Nostrils and eye sockets were plugged with tampons of material. The surface of the body was anointed with oils, spices, and resin to prevent moisture loss. It was a slow process, up to seventy days, before wrapping commenced: each finger, toe, leg, arm, head, body part, and organ.

“The best-looking one is Seti I; he’s very handsome and noble. Rameses II has a fungus disease and looks awful,” he continued. “You know about the curse of the Pharaohs, don’t you—that tomb robbers were cursed to die? Actually, fungi in the tombs probably caused most of the deaths.”

“I don’t believe in the curse. Howard Carter and almost all of the people who entered the tomb of Tutankhamen lived long lives. Besides, there was nothing mysterious about Lord Carnarvon’s death. He died of an infected cut or something,” I rationally added. Deadly pathogens and molds, as well as toxic gases, had been found in several tombs.

“Mosquito bite.”

“Rubbish, he didn’t die of malaria,” I argued.

“I didn’t say malaria. They say he cut a mosquito bite while shaving and it became infected and he died of blood poisoning. He was old anyway and maybe the fungi in the tomb gradually affected his immune system. I don’t believe the curse, either.”

Our conversation terminated briefly as we darted across the road between the traffic entering and departing El-Tahrir Bridge—Lovers’ Bridge. In the twilight, under the protection

of police and lions, blissful lovers walked hand-in-hand or leaned against the railing gazing into each other's eyes. Even the police patrolled the pavement in pairs; rifles slung over their shoulders. They stopped intermittently to engage in friendly conversation. Two proud, granite lions, rumored to be named Yesterday and Tomorrow, sat on their haunches at the bridge's entrance, eyes transfixed upon the oncoming traffic.

Eventually I asked, "Did you know, Rafi, that Cairo is known as the Mother of the World? Anyway, I don't think that it has anything to do with mummies. But tell me this—why are males called mummies and not daddies, or something else?"

He shook his head and laughed. "That's stupid. Do you remember Otzi the Iceman? He's still a mummy because he froze in situ, in the ice. Mummy is from an Arabic word, *mumiyyah*, and it means bitumen, the black color of the skin of unwrapped mummies. Hey, Jorja, Mum said your next mission is in The Sudan. Did you know that President Sadat's wife was Sudanese? Are you going there straightaway or are you going home to Australia first?"

"No, I go to Washington, D.C., for two weeks first to meet my Sudanese-Canadian colleague."

Rafi's gaze dropped downward to his feet. "Working for the Americans again? They're so egotistical and bombastic. They blame Muslims for all the terrorism in the world, since 9/11, especially Pakistanis it seems. Arabs too." With his innocently sexy looks, humbled charm, and clean-shaven vulnerability, it was difficult to imagine mistaking him for a terrorist. Creamy olive skin made his appearance more Mediterranean than Asian. "Are you doing another short assignment? Dad likes the long assignments, but Mum wants to take a break. She misses our house in London."

"Americans again," I nodded. "They're okay. I've a short-term, three-month assignment coming up in Southern Sudan."

Rafi seemed pensive as he kicked the stones on the pavement. "I'll miss you," he said quietly. "Hey, here's a coin." He smoothed his hand through a crop of wavy hair and bent to pick up the money with his spindly fingers.

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“Find a coin and pick it up and all the day you’ll have good luck, or something like that,” I said as Rafi handed it to me. “No, no, you should keep it. It’s for your luck, not mine. I’ve had my share of luck for the day.” He slipped it into his pocket.

I felt blessed when I found a four-leaf clover in my backyard as a kid. If you’re into odds, as I am, that’s at least a one-in-ten-thousand chance. If you’re a believer of starry-eyed legends, also as I am, then the first leaf represents hope, the second is for faith, the third is for love, and the last is for luck. Being an optimist, I thought I’d have all four every day for the rest of my life, but three out of four were still reasonable odds.

An explosion with a thumping boom propelled shockwaves through the warm air. They reverberated against my eardrums instead of my legs and I intuitively looked upward. Rafi’s instinct was to pull me into his body and cover our heads. His chest, at first, smelled of vanilla soap until smoke seeped in between our bodies. “Car bomb,” he said as we unfolded and looked around. Screaming lovers ran along the promenade. “*Amriki!*” someone shouted. “*Yela! Yela!*” Charcoal smoke whorled into the air and reeked of chemicals. Following the rolling black clouds, they were thickest over the Nile. A barge, a mere hundred meters from us, had burst into flames. Tongues of fire spat out of metal barrels.

“It’s just a barge,” I said. “An accident, probably. The fire’s coming from oil drums, I think.” Two police boats sped toward the semi-blackened shell. The stench of chemical fumes burned my nostrils. Eeeeaah, eeeeaah, eeeeaah. My ears ached from blaring sirens and police whistles shrieking loud and long. Panicked people buffeted us with the sensitivity of rampaging rhinos in their stampede. Amid the bedlam, police shouted directions to clear the area, possibly because they expected further explosions.

Rafi was alert and clear-headed. Emerging from the layers of smoke and confusion, he was the epitome of his father; surveying the scene, assessing the risk, and taking charge. “Let’s cross the road to the hotel.” Rafi still had hold of my elbow.

“Come on,” he urged. “We’re not staying here. Keep close to me!”

The moment he released my arm, I thudded to the ground. Flat on my back, cold, hard concrete pressed against my spine. Winded, I hugged my chest. I thought I’d be trampled to death. At the very least I’d be steamrolled by the weight of corpulent men or perforated by women’s stiletto heels, but I couldn’t move. The pain was unbearable. Through watery eyes, Rafi’s face appeared among many others. Hands lifted me up. Hunched forward, I made an effort to stand.

“Miss Himmermann, Miss Himmermann, can you hear me? Jorja!” Someone brushed the dust and dirt from my clothes and I felt giddy with nausea. I closed my eyes. “Jorja, are you okay? Jorja! Look at me!” A blurred blanket of people stood around me. Not one woman came to my aid. They weren’t visible anywhere, not even as spectators. I couldn’t see Rafi and resisted the assistance.

“Rafi!” I called feebly.

“Here. I’m here, Jorja. Police officers have the offender, the one who knocked you over.”

Two white-shirted men, one generously proportioned and the other taller, slim and wiry, had a writhing manacled man between them. The older, heavier officer asked, “This is the man, yes?” Through misty eyes, all I could determine was a heavily bearded, dark-eyed young man in his early thirties.

“Yes, yes, that’s the man,” said Rafi.

“Madam, is this the man?”

Rafi and the surrounding strangers were impatient to remove me from the scene. My friend urged me to follow him.

“Madam?” The police officers waited. All the while, the captive stared at me.

“Er ... er ... I ... I’m not ...”

“Yes!” yelled Rafi, “yes, that’s definitely the man.” Rafi tugged at my elbow. People shouted around me.

“Madam?” asked the police officer.

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“Er, yes, yes ... it’s the man.” I knew I shouldn’t have apportioned the blame to the man opposite me as soon as I had said it. His eyes were menacingly, threateningly evil.

The knot of assistants guided me into the street. A man thrust out his palm to stop the oncoming cars, yelling instructions to drivers while the protective arms of others led me across the road. Car horns blasted and I wanted to vomit from the noise pounding in my head and the caustic smell from the burning barge. At the doors of the hotel, the strangers left. Rafi and the porter guided me around the security archway. The concierge rushed toward us and helped us to the café on the ground floor. “She needs tea, she needs tea,” he called out. “*Chai, yela!*”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” I said, sliding into the nearest chair at a table away from the window.

Rafi thanked his helpers and they returned to duty. The young Pakistani put a protective arm around me, surfacing my soreness. “Tea’s coming. What happened?”

“I don’t know. The man knocked me over.” I took short gulps of air and tried to straighten my torso, not certain whether my chest or my back ached the most. At this point, I couldn’t touch myself without wincing in pain. Then I panicked. “My bag, where’s my bag? Rafi, where’s my bag?”

“It’s okay. I have it here.” He placed it on the table and I rummaged through it. “What’s up?”

“My money! Where’s my money?” Relief eased the pain. “It’s okay, it’s okay. I think it’s all here. My pockets!” I patted both pockets and pulled out wads of notes.

“Shit!” Rafi’s eyes widened with alarm. “Where’d you get that? Put it away, the waitress is coming.” He grabbed a wad and stuffed it in my bag while I pushed a bundle back into my pocket. A tea tray landed on the shiny surface of the wooden table. I signed the docket and entered my room number then watched the young woman sway provocatively toward an American couple before re-opening my snakeskin bag. “Hell, I thought I’d been robbed, but I think it’s all here. Hey, what’s this?” It was a purple suede jewelry pouch.

Rafi poured two cups of steaming black tea. “What’s going on? Where did you get so much money? What is that? Is it a ring? Why did you buy a wedding ring?”

“I didn’t, Rafi. I won some money at the casino. That’s where the money came from, but I haven’t seen this before.”

The teenager gently took the ring and held it close to his face, peering into its inner circle. “It has writing in it. Arabic, I think. It must be. But it has hieroglyphics as well.” He rubbed it gently. Squinting, he looked more closely. “It’s beautiful. It’s so beautiful. Where’d you get it?”

“I don’t know.” The tea was scalding. “I really don’t know. Maybe someone put it in my bag when I was on the ground. Do you think?”

“Why? Why would anyone do that?” He thought for a moment and said, “Maybe someone stole it? The man the police caught. Perhaps he stole it and had to get rid of it so he put it in your bag. Do you think he deliberately knocked you over? What if he wants the ring back? No, the police have him now, so it should be okay.” He dismissed the thought.

“But I’m not sure whether it was the right man, Rafi. What if the real person was watching and comes looking for me? What if the ring is cursed?” The teenager’s eyes met mine. We stared at each other for a long time, thinking of the consequences of our statements.

“Shit!” Rafi’s eyes darted from me to the ring and back. “Shit, shit, shit!” Two black, furry eyebrows came together in a frown. “Hell!”

“What are we going to do with it?”

“How much money did you win? Why didn’t he steal the money? How much is this ring worth? What are you going to do?” He had no answers, only questions. “I’m glad you’re leaving the country tomorrow. Shit, I’m glad you’re leaving. Stay in your room tonight and don’t let anyone in. Perhaps I should call Dad. Shit no, that’s no good. He’d just tell you to go to the cops. You can’t do that.”

“Why not? Perhaps we should go to the police and give the ring back.” We eyed each other again, looking for answers, and

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then laughed. “We’re being melodramatic,” I said. “It’s just a ring and we don’t believe in curses.”

“Yeah, it’s just a ring. It’s probably a fake. These gypsters con people everyday. Besides, the police have the man in custody. They’ll book him for reckless running, keep him overnight, and let him go tomorrow. By then, you’ll be out of the country. So don’t worry. He probably stole the ring and deserves a lot worse.”

“What if the police keep him locked in prison?”

“No way! He won’t go to prison just for crashing into a foreigner. The police don’t know anything about the ring. Don’t worry. Let’s look on the bright side. You have a ring. Now you just need a husband.”

“Smarty! That’s not funny,” I said, but we both laughed. “Hey, I’m sure your parents are wondering where you are. Come on, finish your tea.”

“Shit, you’re right. I’ve gotta go. Don’t tell my parents about the mummies. It’s my secret.”

“You mean, don’t tell them about your girlfriend?” Rafi glared at me. “Okay, there’s no girlfriend. I won’t tell them about the mummies if you don’t tell them about the casino. It’s my secret. Or the ring. That’s definitely my secret.”

“Don’t answer the door to anyone, just in case. Have a safe journey to America and good luck in The Sudan. I’ll e-mail you.” Rafi moved closer to hug me. When I winced, anticipating the agony, he backed off and lightly kissed me on both cheeks instead.

From my hotel window, I could see the Nile; calm, serene, and inky black under the evening sky. Street lamps lit up the esplanade. The burnt barge had disappeared. Lovers had returned. I counted the casino win putting the wads of notes into piles on the bed, and I removed the gold wedding band from the suede pouch. It appeared to be genuine. Exquisite and unusual, it slipped perfectly onto my wedding finger. *All I needed was a husband.*

I telephoned Kaz Herat in Washington. When he didn’t answer, I wrote a text message asking him to confirm that he was

picking me up at the airport. What we had was a long friendship. What I wanted was sex, love, and romance.

In the bathroom, I splashed my face to wash away soot and grime. Two sharp knocks on the door startled me. Instinctively reaching for the ring, I pulled at it. It wouldn't budge. Three knocks on the door came in rapid succession. "Who is it?" I called. No answer. Another three knocks and again I asked, "Who is it?" No answer. With more force I yanked at the ring and, surprisingly, it flew off my finger, slipped from my grasp, and landed in the toilet. The banging continued. I shouted louder, "Who is it?" while staring down the toilet bowl thinking that now was a good time to vomit. Knock, knock, knock. Racing to the door, I yelled again, "Who is it?"

"Housekeeping!"

Housekeeping had never come to the room at this time of night before. I peered through the peephole. Remembering Rafi's cautionary words, I said, "No thank you. I don't need housekeeping." I raced to the bathroom, grabbed a towel, and placed it over the piles of money as I ran toward the door. *I'm not cursed, I'm not cursed, I'm not cursed.*

"Housekeeping!"

I peered again through the peephole and watched the male shift his weight from one foot to the other. "No thank you. You can go." He remained. He appeared to be housekeeping staff, but I wasn't taking any chances. I'd had enough luck for one day.

Running back to the bathroom, I thrust my hand into the toilet and pulled out the ring, dripping water down to my elbow, just as another knock sounded. Again, the knocker announced himself. I wiped the ring dry, slid off my shoe, and dropped the ring into it. Tiptoeing to the door barefoot and holding my breath, my eyelashes skimmed the glass aperture. The Egyptian was walking down the corridor. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Beep, beep. Beep, beep. Kaz's text message read "Babe, CU at airport, luv U, K." Again I exhaled a ton of tension.

THE SUDAN CURSE

Reflecting on the strangeness of the day, I had money and a ring. None of which were mine. None of which were honest gains. They were not rewards for hard work and effort, merely instant gratifications. Possessions. Blessings? Maybe curses. A man was probably in a prison cell right now because of me. I felt the excruciating weight of responsibility and guilt. To be truthful, I didn't aspire to material wealth. I preferred intangibles, like the symbols of the four-leaf clover: hope, faith, love, and luck. In addition, from that moment, I wished for the everlasting ability to make the right decision at the right time, forever, all throughout my life. If I had that, I couldn't fail. *I couldn't fail.*

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