

assumed she was joking. 'Good one!' he'd said. 'I'm Tutankhamun!'

He looked at him with those ridiculously green eyes.

'Cleopatra, Queen of the Nile, had a thing for Caesar? I'm King Tut . . . the boy pharaoh . . .' He laughed on, even though he knew that the second time he was playing a joke you might as well tattoo L for liar on his forehead and go home.

He even blinked.

He suddenly clapped his hand over his mouth. 'Oh, my God, tell me your name really is Cleopatra?'

'Of course not,' she'd said stiffly, before turning away to look at her points of Ancient Egyptian funerary texts. She was the only one who wasn't a total idiot.

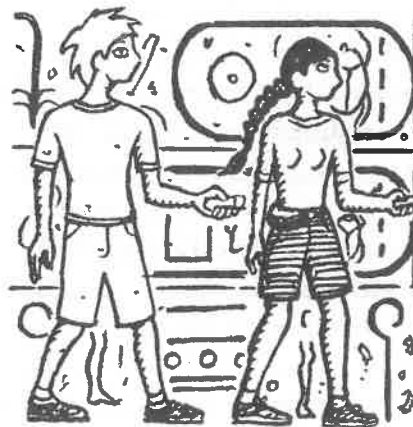
He was staring at him again now, blinding him with his green eyes.

He tried to switch it off but he missed and jabbed her in the eyes instead.

She blinked, but finally she spoke.

'I know where the Benben Stone is hidden,' she said.

CONFESSION



CLEO SUSPECTED THAT the tall, gangly boy with the disorganized sand-coloured hair was making fun of her again.

All she knew about him was that he was the son of Julie Flint. Julie was the only journalist allowed on the dig, because she was working for the Danny Farr Foundation which was funding the project. On the one occasion they'd met, he'd laughed at her name. And now he'd nearly taken her eye out. But if she didn't get *someone* to listen to her theory she was going to explode.

'We've been looking for the Benben Stone in the wrong place,' she said.

The boy raked his floppy fringe off his forehead and twitched one eyebrow. 'How do you make that out?' He looked as if he were about to burst out laughing at her again. *I should have kept quiet*, Cleo thought. *He might actually be psychologically unstable*. But she'd started now ...

'Do you know what the Smenkhkare Confession is?' she asked.

'Du-uh!' the boy groaned, rolling his eyes, even though, as far as Cleo could see, it was a perfectly reasonable question. 'Of course!' he said. 'It's why we're all here. Here, in this tomb, I mean, not like why we're all here on the planet and what's the meaning of life and stuff.' He grinned, as if expecting her to say something, but Cleo didn't know what he was talking about so she just waited. 'It's the papyrus document that was found in the sarcophagus,' the boy said eventually. 'The one where Smenkhkare fesses up to stealing the Benben Stone.'

Cleo nodded. At last the boy was making some sense! 'That's right. Smenkhkare admitted that he stole the Benben Stone from the Mansion of the Phoenix in the Great Sun Temple of Heliopolis and installed it in his tomb as an offering to Osiris. He hoped it would gain him passage to the afterlife. He must have needed something extremely impressive to make up for the fact that he had committed, in the words of his Confession, a *double abomination*.'

The boy frowned. 'A double abomination?'

'It means a terrible crime,' Cleo explained.

'I know what *abomination* means!' the boy laughed. 'But what on earth did Old Smenkers do that was so bad?'

Old Smenkers? Cleo thought. It was hardly the way to talk about a pharaoh, but she let it go. 'We don't know. The

Confession doesn't give any details. It just says this double abomination was *so terrible that it would never be spoken of in the Two Lands*. That means Upper and Lower Egypt,' she added.

'So it's a mystery,' the boy said.

'Everything about Smenkhkare is a mystery,' Cleo agreed. 'We think he reigned for a short time just before Tutankhamun came to power but that's not certain. One theory even says he was Queen Nefertiti in disguise. That reminds me,' she interrupted herself. 'What is your name? I'm guessing it's not *really* Tutankhamun?'

The boy shrugged and pulled a face. 'Yeah, sorry, that was my lame attempt at a joke. I'm Ryan.'

Cleo held out her hand. Ryan stared at it as if he'd never come across this form of social greeting before, before giving it an over-hearty shake.

'Anyway, that's why this tomb is so important,' Cleo said, getting back to the point. 'As well as the Benben Stone and the other grave goods we should find here, we hope for all sorts of clues about Smenkhkare's life. Then we can fill in a missing chapter of history.'

'The Abominable Pharaoh and his Secret Life of Crime,' Ryan said. 'Wow! That would make quite a headline.' He grinned. 'And *you're* the one who discovered the tomb in the first place, aren't you? Mum told me the story: how you nosedived in through the roof and landed on this thing.' He slapped his palms on the sarcophagus they were leaning against. 'Solid granite. That must've hurt a bit.'

Cleo winced at the memory. 'More than a *bit*, actually!'

'I heard you broke your ankle?'

'It wasn't a break,' Cleo corrected. 'It was a complex

bimalleolar fracture. Plus significant ligament damage, obviously.'

'Obviously!' Ryan repeated. For some reason he seemed to think this was funny. 'This may be a silly question,' he said, 'but how come you were wandering around in the Valley of the Kings by yourself in the first place?'

It was, Cleo thought, a perfectly logical question. 'I'd been helping Mum and Dad excavate a small mortuary temple in the valley. I went out for a walk along the ridge to get some air and I ended up going farther than I meant to ...'

'You mean you got lost?'

'Of course not!' Cleo protested, although she *had* strayed a little way from the path and got her bearings *slightly* muddled. Her voice tailed off as she remembered how the earth had given way beneath her feet. Eyes screwed tight, hands clamped over her head, she'd hurtled headlong down a landslide of loose rock, rolling and tumbling until, at last, her feet slammed into a hard surface ...

'And you crash-landed right into this tomb?' the boy prompted.

Cleo nodded. 'I didn't know where I was at first. I couldn't see through the clouds of dust. My ankle was in agony. I tried to sit up. Some rubble fell away from the stone block I was lying on and suddenly I was looking at two cartouches carved into the surface. That's when I knew it was no ordinary stone block!' Cleo stood up, reached across the smooth dark granite of the sarcophagus lid and traced the sequences of hieroglyphs enclosed within their oval frames with her finger. 'I knew straight away, of course, that the mummy inside this sarcophagus had to be a pharaoh!'

'How?' Ryan asked scrambling to his feet.

'These oval cartouches were only used to frame the names of royalty,' Cleo explained. She pointed to the top one. 'This is the throne name. The sedge and the bee symbols mean *King of Upper and Lower Egypt*. The lower one, with the duck and the sun symbols, is the birth name: *Smenkhkare-Djeserkheperu*.'

Cleo repeated the names under her breath, reliving the incredible moment she'd first set eyes on them. The pain in her ankle had vanished; the excitement had been stronger than any anaesthetic. She'd always dreamed of making a Highly Significant Discovery – and they didn't get any more significant than this!

Ryan waved a hand in front of her face. 'Hello! Earth calling Cleo!'

Cleo snapped back to the present. 'After I was rescued we opened the sarcophagus. The mummified body was clutching a scroll of papyrus ...'

'The Confession!' Ryan whistled. 'That's so cool!'

Cleo pulled a printout from her folder and opened it, using the sarcophagus as a table. 'This is a photograph of the original.' The unfurled papyrus looked like a large strip of bark, the fibres dark brown with age and ragged along one edge. She ran her eyes over the neat, close-packed lines of hieroglyphs. 'I've been going through this again and ...'

'Whoa!' Ryan laughed, throwing up his hands as if a runaway horse had just charged into the tomb. 'Let me just stop you there. You mean you can read *hieroglyphics*?'

'You mean you *can't*?'

'Er, no-o!' Ryan laughed. 'I must have been off school that day!'

'It'd take more than a day to ...' Cleo began. Then she realized that Ryan was joking. Now she thought about it, they probably didn't study ancient writing systems in ordinary schools. Not that she'd ever been to school herself. She'd always travelled the world with her parents, and they were her teachers too. If an extra subject took her interest – like Russian philosophy or nanotechnology – there were always online university courses she could sign up for. 'Sorry,' she said. 'I spend a lot of time around Egyptologists. I suppose we're not exactly ...'

'Normal?' Ryan interrupted with a grin.

'I was going to say *typical*.' Cleo glanced across at her mum, who was pacing up and down talking to herself, mostly in Ancient Egyptian, and her dad, who was dangling from a stepladder trying to fix the spotlight, his red hair glowing like copper wire under its faltering beam, while at the same time happily discussing infectious skin diseases in mummies with his graduate student, Alex Shawcross.

Maybe Ryan has a point, Cleo thought. But she had to correct him on one thing. 'It's *hieroglyphs*, not *hieroglyphics*,' she explained. '*Hieroglyphic* is the adjective, not the noun.'

Ryan slapped himself on the forehead. 'Of course! I feel such a *fool*!'

Cleo smiled, pleased to have been of help.

'So,' Ryan said, offering her his bottle of water, 'where do you think Old Smenkers really hid this magic stone then?'

Cleo untied her old cotton scarf, tipped water onto it and dabbed the back of her neck. 'We all thought that the Benben Stone would be in the third chamber because Smenkhkare says it *resides in the third house on the journey to the realm of Osiris*. The realm of Osiris was the Underworld, of course,

which the Egyptians believed to be in the west, where the sun sets.'

Ryan nodded. 'And the main passage runs due west ...'

'Which means the Benben *should* be in the third "house" along it,' Cleo pointed to a symbol on the papyrus. It was composed of three small lines. 'This is the sign for *third*. But if you look carefully, there's a crease mark that could be obscuring another faint line ...'

'Using my razor-sharp powers of deduction,' Ryan cut in, leaning over her shoulder and squinting at the symbol, 'if *three* little lines means *third*, then *four* little lines must mean *fourth*!'

'Exactly!' Talking to Ryan hadn't been such a bad idea after all, Cleo thought. He was a good listener. And she was starting to realize that he wasn't really laughing at her *all* the time; his mouth just naturally turned up at one corner as if he'd thought of something amusing. 'So that's my theory,' she said. 'I think Smenkhkare's telling us the Benben is in the *fourth* chamber along.'

'Just one teeny-tiny problem,' Ryan said, pinching a centimetre of air between his thumb and forefinger. 'The passageway comes to a dead end right after that third chamber. It's solid rock.'

'A-ha! What if it's a false wall?' Cleo's words came out much louder than she'd intended, but she was so excited to be getting to the crux of her theory at last that she couldn't help it. 'It could have been built to fool tomb robbers.'

Ryan nodded slowly. 'That makes sense!'

Cleo beamed at him. 'It does, doesn't it?' But her excitement suddenly evaporated. It was one thing to convince a newcomer like Ryan, but how was she going to get anyone else to take

her idea seriously? 'The trouble is,' she sighed, 'my parents are certain the passage stops in a dead end because that's what it shows on the builder's plan for Nakhti's tomb...'

'Hang on!' Ryan laughed, holding his head in his hands. 'I was keeping up when it was just a case of counting to four. But you've lost me now. Who's Nakhti?'

Cleo shook out her scarf and knotted it back around her neck as she began to explain. 'This tomb was *recycled*. It wasn't originally built for Smenkhkare.' She ran her fingers over the cartouches on the sarcophagus again. 'You can see the damage where the name of the original owner has been hacked away and Smenkhkare's names have been carved over the top.'

Cleo passed Ryan another sheet of paper from her folder. 'This is a copy of the plan for the tomb of a high official called Nakhti. It was found on an ostrakon – a flat shard of limestone – in a tomb-builders' workshop not far from here. It's in the British Museum in London now. When Mum saw it, she was convinced that it was the plan for *this* tomb. The dates were right and the layout matched – a main burial chamber and a steep passage heading west with *three* small chambers off to the side. Then a dead end.' Cleo tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and looked up at Ryan. 'But what if this *isn't* Nakhti's tomb and it wasn't built to this plan...'

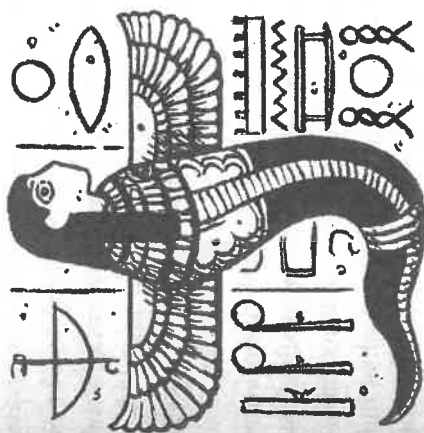
'In that case there *could* be a fourth chamber...'. Suddenly Ryan broke off. He stabbed his finger at the heading on the tomb plan.

'Do those hieroglyphs say *Nakhti*?'

Cleo nodded. 'Yes. It means *Strong One*.'

'That's not all it means,' Ryan said. 'It also means your theory's right. This definitely *wasn't* Nakhti's tomb.'

DEAD END



'**HOW COULD YOU** possibly *know* this isn't Nakhti's tomb?' Cleo demanded, her dark eyebrows bunching up as if she suspected this might be another joke she didn't get.

But Ryan *wasn't* joking this time. 'From this,' he said, pointing up at the offering scene on the wall. 'I've been staring at it most of the morning.' He picked up his sketchbook from the sarcophagus and held it out to show Cleo.

She flipped over the pages. 'Did *you* do these?' she asked. 'They're brilliant!'

Ryan was so surprised at the compliment he almost blushed. Cleo didn't strike him as the kind of girl who gave them out free with boxes of cereal. She was smiling at him