

Chapter One

The dark-skinned concierge at the Hotel Genaina rubbed his moustache with the crook of his finger, contemplating the young man with shrewd, dark eyes. With his other hand, brown gnarled fingers poking out of the sleeves of his faded blue djellaba like chicken legs, he circled the approximate location of the necropolis, the City of the Dead.

To the older man, who had, at first, frowned to the rim of his gray woolen skullcap, it was obviously an unprecedented request.

“There is nothing to see there,” he had assured the young man, who, in jeans, T-shirt, and sandals, still had the air of an American tourist.

“Nevertheless, that’s where I want to go,” Si Kelly said in Arabic, underscoring the original request and displaying his mastery of the language. The accent, he knew, was distinctly foreign. But Cairenes were used to all accents. The man showed him a row of rotted teeth and busily sketched the route.

“Muhammad Ali’s mosque in the Citadel is a good landmark.” Then he paused. “No more than fifteen minutes by taxi.”

Si Kelly thanked him with a ten-piastre coin—“baksheesh”—and the older man’s hand opened and closed quickly, a snapping maw. But he could not resist his curiosity.

“A relative?”

Si Kelly nodded, closing his eyes, deliberately illustrating the solemnity.

“May Allah grant eternal life,” the older man said respectfully.

“Thank you,” Si said, turning and heading through the dank lobby into the people-clotted street.

What greeted him was an unprecedented assault on his senses. Engulfed in a soup-like smog overheated by the mid-July sun was a hodgepodge of vehicular traffic moving like a river of molasses around Ezbekieh Gardens, a dust-coated green spot in a vast sea of crumbling brown and gray buildings. Scrawny donkeys pulling flatbed carts competed for space with ramshackle buses choked with people, trucks belching

dark exhaust, cars of every vintage, motor scooters, bicycles, barefoot men on little gray donkeys, and human-propelled transport as well, the young dark boys in filthy pajamas pushing huge nondescript burdens, cigarettes dangling from their lips. In all, a giant swarm of refugees escaping, it seemed, from some monstrous persecution.

The images drained his energy, and he stood in the shadow of the hotel entrance, unable to find his bearings. On the edges of the vehicular swarm, people moved like a pencil scribble out of control; women in clothes that described five thousand years of women's fashions, chic girls in high heels side by side with bulky women in long somber black abayas, burdened with children and packages; barefoot boys in ragged pajamas, men in sleek French-cut fashions as well as every style of djellaba, turbans, and woolen skullcaps. Animals were everywhere; dogs, cats, donkeys, goats, and sheep.

The initial assault on the eye masked the attack on the ear, rising like a symphony orchestra tuning up. No car seemed to be able to function without perpetual horn blasts; vendors hawked, children shouted, babies howled, radios blasted Arabic and Western music. The nose, too, did not escape. Gas fumes permeated everything, and a saffron-coated chickpea stink laced with vague odors of human waste larded the air. A single inhalation, and it could be tasted like some noxious medicinal brew. He was now digesting Cairo, and it lay like lead in his gut.

Gathering his courage, he moved into the current, retreating again to a slatted chair of what passed for an outdoor café, a dingy hole in the wall where men sat around smoking water pipes, playing backgammon, or arguing. Others sat staring into space. Kayf, his mother had called it. Looking into the eye of emptiness. He had seen her doing it many times. It was a talent he would have liked to call upon at that moment.

He ordered a Turkish coffee, brought by a man in a tattered djellaba who patted his arm as he laid the cup on the table. Si noted that everybody seemed to touch each other in this human warren, as if the connection of the flesh was not merely accidental, but necessary.

Could this be the Egypt of his mother's memories? he wondered. In her green eyes, which he had inherited, he had assumed that he could actually visualize what she persistently refused to reveal of her early life. Because she wouldn't discuss it with him, he had to invent images of this strange land for himself. Feluccas, like graceful swans slipping soundlessly along a green Nile, depthless and flowing, a mirror of

those eyes; sun spangles on the minarets, the soft colors of an orange sun against an azure sky, timeless and beautiful.

And more. The blue Mediterranean kissing the golden sands of Alexandria. Morning dew on the wadis. The perpetual rhythm of the Archimedes' screw worked by the blindfolded water buffalo, lifting the life-giving water of the river to the verdant soil, the soft plaintive rhythm of the tarabooka floating in the perfumed mysteries behind the Mashrabiyyas, the latticed screens that hid the curious veiled women. And dominating all, the glories of the ancient monoliths, the old kings and queens of the timeless kingdoms, sitting solidly on their stone thrones, living proof that they had conquered time forever.

Seeing what he saw now, Si learned what really had been in the crucible of his mother's dying brain. Certainly not his romantic speculations. She hadn't given him a clue. And he had gotten it all wrong.

"What was it like?" he had asked her, a perpetual refrain.

"What?"

"Egypt. Your childhood. Growing up."

What she had given him, he knew finally, were evasions, stuff that he extracted from books. The temples of Karnak and the Valley of the Kings wasn't her Egypt. Abu Simbel wasn't her Egypt. Ramses II, his domains and megalomania, wasn't her Egypt.

"Tell me what it was like, for crying out loud!" he had remonstrated. He knew she had grown up in Cairo. She had admitted that. She'd had to, because he'd needed to provide his family's background information for school. Mother's birthplace: Cairo, Egypt.

"What do you know about it?" he had asked his father many times.

"Nothing, kid. She doesn't talk about it."

"Why not?"

His father had wrinkled his Irish thin-skinned freckled face into a broad sunny smile. "Who gives a damn?"

His father had met his mother in Tripoli in 1953, while he was stationed there before Qaddafi had kicked the Americans out of Wheelus. She had been a belly dancer in a nightclub.

"You should have seen her," his father told him often, usually after he had drained

two six-packs or a fifth of whiskey.

“You should have seen her up there on that dance floor with those veils floating around her and the music pumping out the Arabian beat, and her long black hair flowing. Poetry. The first time I saw her, I said to myself, ‘Tom, you black Irish bastard, there’s your mate.’” He stared inward and shook his head, as if in disbelief that he had won her. “She was something.”

Si could never imagine her that way. By the time he’d arrived, she had grown plump. Occasionally, she had performed for them, briefly and privately, just to please his father.

“You should have seen her.” His eyes would grow moist, wistful. “Up there in front of all those gaping guys. God, I love that woman.” His mother had giggled when he said this, thumping him playfully.

She had taught Si Arabic. It had annoyed his father.

“He’s an American,” he would tell her gloomily when mother and son chirped together in that alien language. It had been a needless concern, and when Si finally started school and did well, his father let them talk together without commenting.

They had named him Osiris Sean Kelly. His father had always called him Si, but his mother never used the diminutive. It wasn’t an embarrassment to him until the other kids taunted him.

“What kind of stupid name is that?” some kid invariably said when a teacher called it out in class.

“Egyptian,” he would say aggressively in self-defense. Later, he would learn it was the name of an Egyptian god, but he would never tell them that.

“They call me Si,” he would say. “Only my mother calls me Osiris,” he would explain.

“He was the most important Egyptian god of all,” his mother told him. It was only later that he found out about Isis.

Because he was an only child, she smothered him with maternal excess, invoking a thousand don’ts, can’ts, and be carefals, as if he were perpetually walking a tightrope across some dark abyss. Danger was everywhere, except near her watchful eye. As he grew older, he became guilt-stricken because he was vaguely ashamed of her. The Arab woman, they called her behind her back. She hadn’t made much attempt to assimilate. Even his father had abandoned any attempt to help her achieve that,

although he'd tried to make Si a Roman Catholic. But his mother's invocation of Allah confused him and finally became the despair of the priests.

"When he gets old enough, he'll choose for himself," his father said. By the time he was old enough, he forgot to make a choice, preferring to be nothing.

"Praise be to Allah," his mother would say often. "For giving me the gift of Osiris." She could never get enough of touching him, watching him, fussing over him. That, too, embarrassed him, especially if others were around, particularly his friends.

"Allah, shmallah," his father would say, mimicking the stereotype.

They were an odd triumvirate. To most people, he was a Mick, and he liked it that way. The Israeli victories had made the Arabs seem like bumblers. For most of his life, the Egyptians were pariahs. Only when King Tut's treasures made their rounds and Sadat went to Jerusalem did it become acceptable to be an Egyptian. He made a point of telling people that he was, as he called it, a half-breed, an absurd combination at that.

Farrah, his mother, had olive skin. Her green eyes were almond shaped. She had bequeathed that to him, along with her jet-black curly hair and wide mouth. He'd gotten his height from his father as well as the wide shoulders and thin hips. His nose was a hybrid, straight like his father's, with flared nostrils like his mother's.

But most people took him for an Irishman. He was, after all, a Kelly. And he had long since stopped asking her what it was like in Egypt.

Then, suddenly, it became the most important thing in his life.

Her Allah had picked a terrible time for her to die. Worse, he had made the going painful and consuming. Si was certain she was thinking that, sitting propped up in the bed they had moved to the sunniest spot in the living room of their little apartment in Brooklyn Heights. He had come down from Cornell in the spring, just two months from graduation, hoping that the deathwatch would not inhibit his preparation for finals.

"I can't sit up there, knowing what is happening," he told his father, who had lamely protested. The distraught man was glad that Si came, although his getting his degree meant a great deal to his parents. Tom Kelly had never gone to college, and Farrah could barely read Arabic, no less English. He had promised them both that he would study and take his finals.

"It's only a B.A. in liberal arts," he told them, not daring to reveal that it didn't

matter much to him. He was swimming in indecision.

There were other things he could not tell them as well. He felt, as he put it to himself, estranged. For some unknown reason, he could not run with the crowd, could not find peers. He felt foreign in what should have been his own milieu. It wasn't thrilling to douse his mind with pot or booze, or his body with indiscriminate sex.

He tried to put up a brave facade of evaluation. But that grew difficult and boring. He blamed it on the times, then on himself. Perhaps, he decided, he needed something to prove himself, to display his courage, his martyrdom for a brave cause, his superior goodness. Something!

How could he tell them that?

By the time he had arrived home, his mother's skin seemed to have turned to thin gray paper. Her eyes had sunk into their almond-shaped hollows, although, when the sun filled the room, the green shone like emeralds. They had placed two chairs beside the bed and took turns embracing her, sitting on the bed, while she remained lost in a perpetual *kayf*, a blank mental haze. Now it was drug induced.

"She was something, Si," his father repeated as they sat in the quiet room, as if she weren't present at all. "Standing up there on that stage, a soft lovely beauty, like a flower. I was so proud of her. So damned proud." Then he turned to her and caressed her hands, squeezing them. "You were something, baby." It had been his "moment," the high point of his life.

Grief consumed him now and, already, there was a hint of his future as he sipped whiskey endlessly, giving in to the curse that somehow she had helped him avoid until now. In many ways, Si had thought her passive in her relations with his father, and only now could he glimpse her silent power over him. They belonged to each other. His father had actually said that many times, but, up to then, he hadn't absorbed its meaning. *So that is love*, he thought.

When her mind was lucid, she spoke very little. He knew she was resigned to death. Yet something he saw in her nagged at him, some shadow, even stronger than the specter of impending death. Occasionally, in her pain-racked sleep, she would mumble a single Arabic word, "*Battal*."

"What did she say?" his father asked.

"I don't know," he lied. *Battal* meant bad. She was too young to die, forty-three. To Si, she had been a good, blameless, and loving woman. Watching her now, he realized

how little he knew about her. Except that she loved him and he loved her. Yet even as he observed her agony, he felt that she had cheated him, had left him too much in the dark about herself.

When she emerged from her drugged kayf, he tried to ease the anguish with talk of the future.

“When you get better, we’ll go to the Tut exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum. The whole town has Tut fever,” he had told her that day. He had been surprised at the interest, but had postponed going himself for fear it would leave him unmoved.

She smiled and nodded.

“Egypt is in. Between Sadat and Tut, the eyes of the world are on Egypt,” he said.

She looked at him for a long time, until tears spilled over the lower lids onto her cheeks. Coming close, he kissed her and gently wiped away the tears.

“Isis,” she whispered, her lips quivering.

“Isis?” The word was certainly clear. He had, by then, stopped explaining his name to others. Most people thought it had Greek origins. But Isis?

Isis, he had learned, was the goddess of heaven and earth in Pharaonic times, wife of Osiris, god of the underworld and judge of the dead. It was Osiris who decided who would or would not have eternal life. He had always snickered at that. Osiris was the son of the sun god Ra, supreme arbiter among the bickering gods. Set was Osiris’s brother. Set murdered Osiris, cut him into fourteen parts, and dispensed the parts throughout Egypt.

The fourteen parts signified the fourteen provinces of Egypt. But his beloved mate, Isis, was determined to put him back together again. She searched everywhere for his missing parts. But all she could find were thirteen. The missing piece was Osiris’s sex organs.

They never found those. The myth always embarrassed him.

“What a ridiculous name,” he had protested.

“It is a necessary name,” his mother had said, which always puzzled him. Osiris and Isis were like two halves of a riddle.

“I’m Osiris,” he reminded her gently that day, misunderstanding. He thought her mind was slipping and she had gotten confused.

“My baby,” she said.

His father was not in the room then. She started to speak, in Arabic. His father

would not have understood in any event.

“My baby, Isis,” she repeated.

“I don’t understand, Mother.” He thought she was hallucinating. She had gripped his arm. Her fingers were like claws, digging into his flesh.

The spring sun was setting, and the shadows were lengthening across the bed. The fading light made her gaunt face skeletal, eerie. She tried to rise from the bed, frightening him, since she was too frail and weak. The cancer had almost consumed her. Embracing her, he tried to force her down against the pillows. Oddly, her strength persisted.

“What is it, Mother?” he cried, feeling the panic begin. He could feel death in the room. Looking into her eyes, he could see that they were surprisingly clear. Her gaze turned on him like a blinding floodlight.

“You have a sister, Osiris.”

“A sister?” Then it came to him.

“Isis?”

She nodded.

The power of the revelation seemed to erupt inside of her. She was forcing it out of herself. Her chest was heaving with the effort, and her breath came in short gasps. She struggled to expel it.

“In Egypt?”

She nodded again. He knew she was dying now, but could not bring herself to go with this thing embedded in her.

“I left her in Cairo, the City of the Dead. In the tomb of the family Al-Hakim. Come to my sanctuary.”

“I don’t understand,” he cried, embracing her. She was gathering all of her strength as she tried to control her speech.

“There was no other choice. He would have killed my Isis, my baby. So I left her with the woman in the tomb of the Al-Hakim family in the City of the Dead. ‘Come to my sanctuary.’ Above the entrance. It is written.”

His mind was clogged with questions. But he dared not broach them. There didn’t seem time. She had begun to perspire, struggling for every moment of life.

“She was born the first of December 1951 in Alexandria,” she panted. “Isis.” He felt her sinking. The sudden burst of strength was all she had left. Watching her face,

he saw her lips open, her eyes narrow; an attitude he had never seen before, as if she were poised to spit out some horrible curse.

“Zakki,” she cried, clearly, in a voice he had never heard, a curse crawling out of the smoldering pit of her anguished soul.

Then she sank deeper into the pillows, slowly closing her soft lips again, forming a sweet, contented smile, while her eyes looked upward, sightless, into the void.

“Mama,” he cried, embracing his dead mother’s body.

Sometime later, he felt his father’s hands touch his shoulder and gently move him away.

They buried his mother in a Roman Catholic cemetery in Brooklyn. It seemed an incongruous setting for her burial: dour pink Irish faces watching tearlessly as the priest offered the blessings of Jesus. Dust to dust. Ashes to ashes. The exit seemed contrived, fraudulent. For his father’s sake, he protested only in his heart.

The Kellys had had little to do with her. Not that they hadn’t tried. But she was always that strange Arab woman that Tom had married. There was no enmity, only indifference. She had, after all, made Tom Kelly happy.

They went, father and son, back to the apartment, feeling lost in the emptiness. She had not said much, but the presence of her love for them had filled the place. Si’s father brought out a bottle of whiskey and filled two tumblers. He picked his up, lifting it upward in acknowledgment of his son, then put it down again, unable to hold back the quaver in his voice.

“She had no right to go first. You had no right,” he said to the walls. Si felt his heart break for him.

“She was something,” his father said, when he had controlled himself, repeating his mantra. “We belonged to each other.” He lifted the glass to his lips and swallowed the liquid in a long greedy draught, his pale gray face flushing quickly.

“She said nothing? She mentioned nothing?” Si asked. It was his litany now. He had told him about Isis.

“Not one damned word.”

“Why?”

“Guilt, maybe,” his father said after a long pause, refilling his glass. “Hell, it wouldn’t have mattered. I’d love her any way, any time.”

“All those years. Living with that.” They sat for a long time in silence.

“She loved you, Si,” Tom Kelly said, his tongue thickening. “She wanted more kids. But it was just not in the cards.”

“And she never talked about it? Hinted? Never spoke of her past life?”

“It wasn’t important.”

“But it was,” Si protested.

“She just never mentioned it.”

“All that brooding. All that kayf. It wasn’t emptiness at all. She was thinking about Isis. My sister.” He tried to drown the word with a gulp of whiskey, but it burned going down and he coughed, nearly spitting it up.

After a while the alcohol turned his father maudlin. Si suffered it as long as he could, then went out.

He never went back to Cornell. Instead, he roamed the streets and tried to cajole his father into not being dependent entirely on the crutch of alcohol. He didn’t help much.

“How else can an Irishman drown his grief?” Tom Kelly had cried, pouring another deep drink, wallowing in the cliché.

“She wouldn’t have wanted that.”

“I know. You don’t know about love yet, son. It’s like belonging. Like your place.” Tears brimmed in his eyes. “I’ve lost my place. I’m nowhere.”

Si reached out and touched his father’s shoulders. “You’ve got me, Dad,” he said, feeling foolish.

His father nodded. Si knew it could never be same.

He stood in line for hours at the King Tut exhibit. Moving slowly in the line, he listened to the effusiveness of those who viewed the objects. What right had they to comment, he told them silently, maliciously? *They have no connection with it.*

He studied the golden death mask of Tutankhamun, imagining the youth’s face stripped of its false beard of majesty. The slopes of the eyes, downward toward the flared nose, were outlined with thick black lines of eye liner. In their centers the upper segments of the pupils were lost in the upper fold of their almond shape. He knew those eyes. They were his mother’s. His own. He shivered and coughed to hide his confusion. The lips were wide, sensual. Like his? He was sure he was fantasizing, and he ridiculed himself and moved on.

His namesake, of course, was there, in color photographs, a mummified figure, complete with striped headdress, greeting the boy Pharaoh in the glorious afterlife. He carefully read the text, explaining how the boy king was “given life forever and ever.” The idea moved him, and his knees shook. What was he feeling, he wondered. Kinship? The boy had died more than three thousand years ago.

He bought a poster of Tutankhamun’s golden face, excited with a strange idea that had surfaced in his mind. He went into a drugstore not far from the museum and bought eye liner, pancake makeup, and lipstick. He could think of nothing else on the subway ride back to Brooklyn. He rushed into the apartment, unfurled the poster near the hanging mirror in the living room, and mounted it with clear tape on the wall beside it. The apartment was empty, although his mother’s presence, her scent and spirit, still seemed to permeate the place.

Working carefully, through trial and error, rubbing off the makeup with a moist towel when he made a miscalculation, he applied the pancake and the eye liner until he had it right. Then he painted his lips lightly with the pink lipstick. Taking a dish towel, he fashioned a headdress as best he could. A reddish beam of the setting sun reflected itself in the mirror and bathed the room in a faint orange glow. The face in the poster was gold, which he could not match, but as the sun faded and his eyes probed the face in the mirror, he was sure that he could see the resemblance.

“I am your seed,” he whispered.

He studied this new face in the mirror for a long time, trying to create within himself that sense of kayf that was his mother’s refuge. But he could not find it. His mind raced with thoughts. Perhaps he had overintellectualized it. He felt embarrassed. Finally, he washed off the makeup, unfastening the poster and rolling it up again.

When Si’s father came home, his eyes were rheumy with weariness, grief, and alcohol. They sat in the living room for a long time, not speaking, letting the darkness hide them, hoping that the woman, Farrah, wife and mother, would come back and turn on the lights.

“I miss her, Si,” his father’s voice croaked out of the silence.

“Me, too.”

“She wasn’t talkative. I never really knew what she was thinking. But she was

there.” He was silent again. “You know what I mean.”

“And she never told you any of it?” Si asked, again. It was still incredible to him that she could live with him for a quarter of a century and tell him nothing about it, the old life. Isis.

“It didn’t matter,” he said again.

“Maybe because she bottled it up, it killed her.” He knew it was stupid when he said it, and it set off a long silent pause of brooding.

“I’ve got to go there, Dad,” Si said. The pronouncement neglected all practical considerations. They hadn’t much money. Whatever his father had, had gone into his education.

“Where?”

“Egypt. To find...” His tongue seemed to choke him. “Isis.” The idea rose out of the depths of himself, surprising him as he had not been conscious of its percolation.

“I knew you would,” his father said. “Maybe that’s why she told you and not me.” Did Si detect the faint jealousy? His father stood up shakily, and went to his bedroom, coming back with something wrapped in tissue paper. He unwrapped it and held up a gold coin on a thin gold chain. It was the thing she wore around her neck. It had become so much a part of her, he had forgotten to notice it.

“She wanted you to have this.” He dangled it in front of him. “It’s supposed to be worth something. An old coin. She never told me where she got it, but she was wearing it the day I met her. She never took it off.”

Si took the coin and rubbed it between his fingers, searching, perhaps, for some vestige of his mother’s old warmth.

“Take it to a coin dealer,” his father said, sitting down again.

“She wanted me to go, Dad,” Si said after a while. He was sure of that now.

To his surprise, a Manhattan coin dealer gave him three thousand dollars, explaining that the coin might be worth more in the future, but was still fairly common, minted in the last years of the Ottoman empire, about 1912. Immediately, he rushed to the airline office, bought a ticket to Cairo, round-trip, with the return open, and applied for his passport.

For the first time in a long while, he felt he had shed his ennui. He had never really come to grips with it, although he could sense the same affliction in many of his fellow students. Sometimes, he felt as if his whole generation was in a swamp of

indecision, isolated, alone, like himself. A number of his classmates had taken refuge in some of the various cults that had sprouted up on the campus. He had resisted that as well, and all the other “-ologies” and causes that were then fashionable.

Now, suddenly, his mother had given him a cause, a mission. To find Isis. But why? He decided not to answer that question. *She wanted me to do it*, he convinced himself, excited by the potential adventure, a search for something.

“Don’t worry about me, Dad,” he told his father as they embraced at the airport. He could smell the whiskey breath. “And you take care of yourself.”

“Be careful, Osiris,” his father said, turning away tear-filled eyes. He had never before called him that.

SAMPLE

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