

Monday

CHAPTER THREE



“Get up, you lazy creature!” I hissed. I tugged the donkey’s mane again. It looked at me grumpily. It wasn’t going anywhere in a hurry!

By the time I’d got the beast up, everyone else was waking up, too. Hassan stumbled half asleep out of

our chamber. Mother gave me some food and helped me strap the water jars on to the donkey’s back. I was in a tearing hurry now. If I was late, the foreman would give my job to someone else.

I climbed up on the donkey’s back and headed up the mountain. Noise and chatter came from the tomb houses around me. The village was waking up. Two women walked past me on their way to the well, water jars on their heads. One of the village dogs uncurled itself from a heap of rubbish to sniff at us. Behind me I heard a cockerel crow. I wondered if Ahmed would come down to the Valley today. He was lucky – he didn’t have to work as hard as me. He had four older brothers to help with it.

I turned on to the path that led to the Valley. At least I didn’t have to scramble over the mountain today. The guards jumped up when they saw me and pointed their guns at me. They asked me what I was doing there. I held my head high. I am Effendi Carter’s water carrier, I told them. They laughed, waving me on with their guns.

Before I reached the Valley, I was joined by diggers

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and basket boys. They told me they were pleased to see me. "We will have plenty of water again today."

"We will need it!" one of the men said. "It is hot work, digging up all that rubble!" He told me that Mr Carter thought there might be a stairway hidden underneath it. A stairway that led to the tomb!

I left them while I went to fill the jars at the well. While I drew up the water, I thought about what they'd told me. There was a lot of rubbish to clear away; it could be ages before they found the stairway. I just had to hope they'd find it soon. I only had the donkey for a few days. After that, I'd have to go back to working in the fields and helping Hassan sell his pots.

I poured out water for the men, then sat down nearby to watch, wrapping a corner of my turban over my nose and mouth. Dust from the dig got into everything. No one took any notice of me. I was Ali the water carrier now, and they didn't seem to mind me. Besides, their eyes were fixed on the ground as they shifted great piles of debris into baskets. Everyone wanted to be the one who found the hidden

staircase!

I was sifting sand idly through my fingers when my hand hit something hard. I scrabbled down a bit deeper. Maybe I'd found a bit of old pot, though it felt more like a stone. Probably one the diggers had missed when they were carting them away. I bent down to pick it up, but it was stuck fast. I dug deeper, until I could feel its edges. I began to feel excited. Maybe I'd found what everyone was looking for!

My heart began to beat hard.

I jumped up. "Hey!" I cried, waving my arms. "Come here. Quick!"

The men nearest me swung round to me. "Hey, Ali, what are you doing over there – get off with you now."

They wouldn't mind, not when they saw what I'd found!

"I've found a step! Look!" I bent down and jabbed a finger at the stone.

"What's he saying?" One of the men put down his pickaxe and came over to me.

I pointed at the stone I'd uncovered. "It's a step. I've found the hidden staircase!"

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I crouched down and ran my hand over the stone. “At first I thought it was just an ordinary stone, or a bit of rock, but see...”

The man’s eyes followed my finger as I drew it round its edges.

“Don’t get too excited. It’s just a stone, lad.”

“No,” I said. “You’re wrong. It’s the entrance to the tomb. I’m sure it is.”

I was practically shouting now. The commotion brought other men to my side.

“He’s right!” a voice exclaimed next to me. I stepped back as the foreman crouched down and ran his fingers over the stone, too. A rare smile broke on his face. He stood up again and waved us away. All work was to stop, he ordered, until Mr Carter arrived.

It was almost ten o’clock before I saw Carter ride up to us. By then I was about to burst with excitement. “Is something wrong?” he said, climbing down off his donkey. “Why have the men stopped work?” The foreman scuttled up to him. I scowled at his back. I felt sure he was telling Mr Carter it was him not me

who’d found the step.

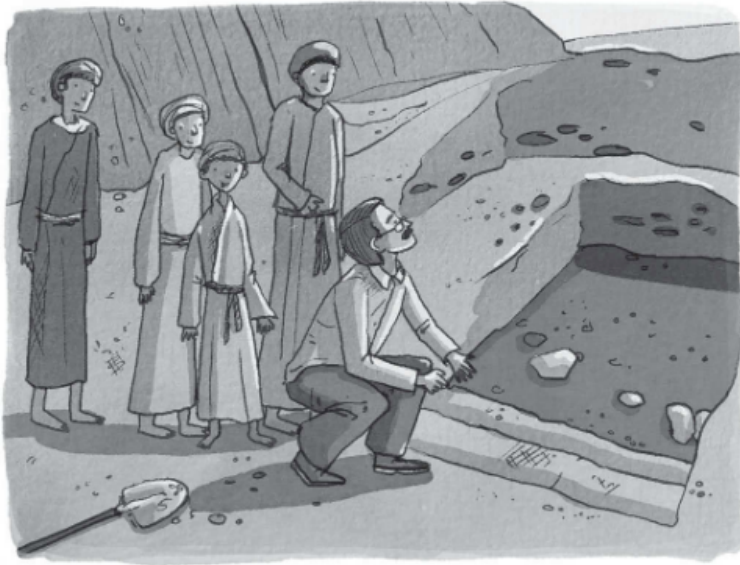
He took him over to where I’d found it. Carter looked doubtful as he bent down. But he’d been digging in the Valley for years. Often he must have thought he’d discovered something only to find he was wrong.

He ran his hand over the stone. No one moved. No one spoke. Everyone’s eyes were fixed on him, waiting to see what he thought. I held my breath. Was it a step? Or wasn’t it?

He sat back on his heels, and I saw him look up at the sky, a big smile on his face, the kind of smile you make when you’ve been given the most wonderful present.

Then he stepped back, pulled out a notebook, and wrote something in it. “Back to work now,” the foreman said to the men. They picked up their tools to start digging again – right where I’d found that stone!

Thursday



I heard a shout. Two boys ran up to me. “We’ve been at the dump,” Ahmed said breathlessly, flinging himself down next to me.

“Hallo, Ali,” the other boy said slyly, sitting down on my other side. It was Ahmed’s brother Salim. I wished Ahmed hadn’t brought him. I didn’t trust Salim. He had shifty eyes and hands that were never still.

“Someone told us they’ve found a step. Is it true?” I nodded. “I found it,” I said proudly.

Ahmed whistled. “Perhaps it will lead down to the tomb.”

“And treasure.” Salim’s eyes gleamed. So that was why he was here. To find treasure. I might have guessed. It was the only thing he cared about.

“Where is it?” Ahmed asked. “Show us, Ali.”

“It’s where they’re working,” I said.

Only now I saw they weren’t. They’d stopped again and were leaning on their tools.

I jumped up. “They might have found another step,” I said excitedly. “Let’s go and see.”

“It’s probably just a bit of rock,” Salim yawned. “Come on. Let’s go back to the dump.”

“No wait,” said Ahmed. “Ali’s right – it might be important.”

We squeezed up to the men to see what they were looking at.

I could see a steep cut in the bedrock, about four metres below the entrance to Ramesses’ tomb.

“Just a bit of rock. Told you so,” Salim said. “Come

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looking at.

I could see a steep cut in the bedrock, about four metres below the entrance to Ramesses' tomb.

"Just a bit of rock. Told you so," Salim said. "Come on, Ahmed!"

"Let us know when you find the tomb, Ali!" Ahmed said as they ran off. I went back to my seat. I knew it was important, even if they didn't. Mr Carter was pacing up and down, arms behind his back. I could see that he was as excited as me. After years of finding nothing it was wonderful to think we might be on the brink of an amazing discovery.

The men began to dig again, even faster than before. Everyone was excited.

Load after load of rubble was carted away to the dump. The foreman's whip cracked at the heels of the basket boys. "Faster! Faster!"

When they stopped to eat, one of the men explained what they'd found.

"That cut in the rock," he said. "It means it really might be the top of that stairway we've been looking for."

My heart beat faster. And at the bottom of it might be Tutankhamun's tomb!

"Of course we can't be sure," he said. "Not till all this lot has been cleared away."

I was kept busy that afternoon fetching water. The men were working very hard and were hot and thirsty. Each time I got back I asked them if they'd found another step. I always got the same answer. "No. Just rubbish, lad. There's a lot of it to clear away. But we'll find another step soon. Now how about some of that water!"

At the end of the day they were still clearing the rubbish away. I wished they'd hurry up. In a day or two Father would want his donkey back. "It's a good sign," one of them said, wiping sweat off his forehead. "All this rubble will have kept robbers out!"

I climbed on to my donkey's back. Salim and Ahmed were still investigating the dump. I didn't wait for them to come back.

I wanted to be the first to get back to the village. I wanted to be the first to tell everyone about the step. It was me who'd found it, after all!