

1 The Haunted Statue

“What’s this newest mystery about?” asked Tyrone Washington, owner of Tyrone’s Diner, as he placed a nail in the wall and prepared to hammer it in.

Steve held up and admired the newest addition to the diner’s sports-themed décor, a 2004 copy of *Sports United* with a picture of Pelé, his own grandfather’s all-time favorite soccer player, on the cover. He waited until his friend finished pounding in the nail before handing him the framed magazine. “A haunted statue.”

After placing the cover on the wall and nodding approval, Tyrone turned to the twelve-year-old boy. “Does Matt know yet?”

Steve chuckled and pointed to the front glass doors. “Nope, but here he comes now.”

“Let me know how it goes.” Tyrone grinned and disappeared into the kitchen.

Steve pushed a drop of sweat up into his slight afro. He watched Matt hobble into the diner, then very slowly walk over to the nearest booth and wince as he sat down.

After their last case finished, Steve, Matt, and Jenny decided to begin self-defense classes at the local community center. The most athletic of the trio, Matt had volunteered to practice with each of his two friends.

As Steve sat down across from him, Matt said, “Dude, next time Jenny wants a practice partner, I’m volunteering you.”

Steve pushed a menu toward his aching friend. “That bad, huh?”

The tall, brown-haired boy leaned back into the bench seat and closed his eyes. “No matter what people say, Northern California beach sand does NOT make a comfortable landing pad for judo lessons.”

“So, have my favorite detectives decided what to eat on this fine afternoon?” asked Tyrone. He sat down next to Steve and pointed toward Matt. “What’s with him?”

Steve tried to muffle a laugh. “Jenny’s been using him as a practice dummy again.”

“Dummy is right,” Matt mumbled.

Tyrone leaned in. “Would a triple-thick chocolate shake make you feel better?”

Matt’s brown eyes popped open and a giant smile spread across his face. “Would it ever.” He sat up straight, then a look of pain replaced the grin. He groaned and eased back slowly.

Tyrone laughed. “Okay, one triple-thick shake, extra pain-killing chocolate. How about you, Steve? Want something to drink?”

The small boy nodded. “Strawberry for me.”

After their friend left to get their drinks, Matt sat up again, a little slower. “So what’s this big project you found for us to do? And please tell me it’s not some stupid summer school class.”

Steve shook his head, his dark eyes gleaming. Even though he enjoyed school and had recently been elected president of both the National Junior Honor Society and the Black Student Union, he loved solving mysteries even more. He pulled a sheet of paper out of his backpack, unfolded it, and handed it to his friend. “We’re going after this.”

Matt took it and squinted at the print-out of an old newspaper article dated April 12, 1985. He cleared his throat and read the headline. "Lost Egyptian Treasure Still a Mystery." He looked up. "Egyptian treasure?"

Steve grinned widely. "Isn't that the greatest thing ever?"

"Isn't *what* the greatest thing ever?" asked Jenny Reed as she slid into the booth next to Matt. "Sorry I'm late. Dad needed an extra pair of hands." Her father owned a repair shop, and Jenny, who was amazing at fixing things herself, often helped him out.

Matt pushed the article toward her. "Here. It's Steve's latest project for us." He leaned back again and closed his eyes. "It's some crazy treasure hunt that's probably going to get us lost in underground tunnels, then tangled in a heap of danger with guns pointed at us...again."

Steve laughed. "Treasure hunt, yes; guns, no. Mr. Alexander's still in jail, remember?"

Clasping her hands together, Jenny waved them over her head in triumph. "Thanks to the Decoders, kid detectives extraordinaire."

On their first case, the trio had not only discovered a priceless treasure hidden in the nearby mountains for centuries, they had also helped the local police catch an international jewel thief named Frank Alexander.

Matt sighed and opened his eyes. "So what are we going after this time?"

As he lowered his voice, Steve leaned in. "A statue of Anubis."

Matt frowned. "Anu...who?"

"Anubis," Steve said. "He's an Egyptian god, the one who protects the dead. According to legend, when Cleopatra's dad died, she had a special statue of Anubis made to watch over him. The statue turned out so beautiful, she decided to keep it for herself and took it with her whenever she traveled."

Jenny twisted her long blonde hair into a bun. "What does Anubis look like?"

Once he pulled up an image of the Egyptian god on his cell, Steve turned the screen to face her. "He's got the body of a man and the head of a jackal."

Jenny's eyebrows knitted together into a frown. "Yeah, that is *so* not beautiful to me. Maybe Cleopatra was super near-sighted."

Steve put the phone in his pocket. "But this statue looked different. She had it carved out of black onyx and pure gold, and it had dark green emeralds for eyes."

She nodded. "Okay, now *that* sounds beautiful."

His face beamed with excitement. "But that's not the best part. Ready for this? The statue is supposed to be haunted."

Matt shook his head slowly. "A haunted statue? Seriously, dude, why can't we ever go after something normal, like a missing cat?"

"I think it sounds fabulous." Jenny pointed to the paper. "According to this, the lost treasure is supposed to be buried somewhere close by."

After tossing his hands up in dramatic fashion, Matt crossed his arms. "See? Underground tunnels, danger, men with guns. Just like I said." He paused. "Hold on a sec. This article is thirty years old. What makes you think nobody's found it yet?"

A soft voice cut into their conversation. "Because the Egyptian government has just offered a ten thousand dollar reward for its return."

The three kids looked up and greeted the newcomer.

"Hey, Alysha," Matt said, "don't tell me Steve's got you roped into this thing, too?"

Alysha Stonestreet rolled her wheelchair up to the booth, her green eyes twinkling. "Actually, I'm the one who sent Steve that article. The Egyptians made the announcement yesterday. In a couple of days, every newspaper in the country will be running the story, so dozens of people are gonna be flocking here searching for the treasure. But if anyone can solve the mystery and find that missing statue, it's the Decoders."

Tyrone came over and handed the boys their drinks. "How about you, ladies? A cool beverage on this hot day?"

Jenny strummed her fingers on her chin for a moment. "I think I'll take a cookies and cream shake."

Alysha nodded. "That sounds good. Make it two."

"Coming up in a moment." He left to wait on another table before putting in their order.

Matt jabbed his straw into his glass and attempted a sip. His cheeks caved in as he used all his breath to bring the super thick shake up the straw. "Mmm. So good. Almost makes me forget about my aching body. Almost." He took another drink and sighed. "Okay. What's the deal with this statue?"

As he stirred the whipped cream into his own shake, Steve took a deep breath. "Like I said earlier, Cleopatra owned the statue of Anubis and took it with her everywhere. After her death, it fell into the hands of a Roman general who gave it to one of his lieutenants as payment for a war debt. As the centuries went on, the statue changed hands many times until finally ending up in a museum in Spain."

When he paused to take a drink, Alysha picked up the story. "In the late fifteen hundreds, the King of Spain decided to send a number of treasures, including the statue of Anubis, across the ocean to start a museum in New Spain. Unfortunately, the ship came under attack by pirates who stole the treasure."

After swallowing a giant gulp of strawberry shake, Steve continued. "The attacking pirate, Francis Drake, sent most of the treasure back to England, but kept the statue for himself to take with him on his expedition around the world."

Matt held up his hand. "Francis Drake? Isn't he like a sci-fi writer or something?"

Steve shook his head. "Maxwell Alexander Drake is an award-winning author of science fiction and fantasy. *Sir Francis Drake* was an English admiral and privateer who raided Spanish merchant ships to steal their gold. He's been dead for over four hundred years."

Interrupting their conversation for a moment, Tyrone set down the cookies and cream shakes, then left to put in Matt's order for a double burger and fries.

Matt pushed his hair back, away from his face. "So, this Drake dude stole the Anubis statue and...what? He brought it here, to California? But I thought that pirate from our first case was the only one who ever moved here, and that all other pirates lived in like the Caribbean or something?"

Steve sighed. "Pirates roam the ocean. *All* the oceans. That's what they do. So back to Francis Drake. After stealing the statue, he planned to take it back to England so he could display it in the treasure room at his mansion."

Jenny licked the whipped cream off her straw. "Why didn't he?"

His eyes gleamed. "Because he discovered the statue was haunted, and decided to get rid of it."

Leaning his head back, Matt said, "And we're back to the statue being haunted."

Jenny lifted her straw out of the glass and sucked the shake through it from the bottom. "What made him think it was haunted?"

"It spoke to him."

Matt reached for his drink. "What exactly would a half-man/half-jackal statue say to a crazy pirate thief?"

Steve looked at Alysha who, once again, picked up the story. "The research on that is a little fuzzy. Journals kept from members of Drake's crew all confirm hearing the statue wail when the weather became a little rough. One crewman said it sounded like a cry from the depths of Hell. Sir Francis believed it to be the soul of Cleopatra herself begging to be returned to her homeland. By the time the crew reached the Northern California shore, they decided to dispose of the statue before the Queen of the Nile unleashed her wrath on them from the underworld."

Matt gulped. "And this is the statue you want us to track down? Seriously, why would we do that? I don't know about you guys, but I'm good without the wrath of a crazy dead pharaoh chick."

Jenny clamped her hand over Matt's mouth. "Ignore him. What happened to Anubis?"

Taking a deep breath, Alysha continued. "The pirates gave the statue to a group of monks at a nearby Spanish mission and then sailed away. According to legend, the monks also heard the wailing statue and decided to hide it away from the world until someone worthy came to find it. They buried it somewhere, leaving no map or clues to its whereabouts. And to make matters worse, the mission itself burned down about a hundred and fifty years ago."

Matt removed Jenny's hand from his mouth. "Hold on. If there's no mission, no map, and no clues, then how are we supposed to track this thing down?"

Steve grinned. "With these." He pulled a group of papers from his backpack and spread them around the table. "After the mission burned down, the land sat vacant for years and years. Finally, in the nineteen-fifties, somebody decided to buy the property and build on it." He picked up one of the papers and held it up to his friends. "These are blueprints of the two buildings built on top of the mission ruins."

Jenny took it out of his hands. "Where did you get these?"

Steve cleared his throat. "Let's just say Alysha and I have been busy doing some reconnaissance work."

Jenny's blue eyes twinkled. "Ooh. So the two of you have been doing recon together. Sounds exciting. What exactly did you guys do? And are you gonna do it again?"

Steve felt his face get hot. Everybody knew that Alysha had a crush on him, and Jenny used every chance she got to remind him of it. "We didn't do anything bad, really. We simply went

down to the building department at City Hall, and while Alysha did an interview with the clerk, I walked around and...found stuff.”

Matt’s eyes widened. “You took stuff from City Hall? That’s it. We’re all going to jail. They probably have a tracking device on you right now, and they’re listening in on our conversation.” He continued in a loud voice. “Just so everyone knows, I had no idea they were doing this. I am innocent.”

Steve laughed. “Calm down, Matt. I only took a couple pictures of files they keep in unlocked cabinets. Technically, all commercial buildings are public record. We could’ve gotten these blueprints officially.”

“It just would’ve taken weeks,” Alysha added. “By then, the whole world will be here looking for the treasure.”

Jenny placed the paper in the center of the table. “Okay, so what’s the plan?”

Tyrone interrupted, placing Matt’s food in front of him. “Anyone else want something to eat?”

They all shook their heads and the owner left, promising to bring them all refills of their shakes.

Pointing to the blueprints, Steve said, “According to this, the building on the left is now a used bookstore and has a basement.”

Matt reached for the ketchup and shrugged. “So?”

“It’s a known fact that Spanish monks always built catacombs underneath their missions,” Steve began. “So it’s a safe bet that the mission that burned down here in Beachdale also had them, and *that* will be the best place to look for our treasure.”

Jenny frowned. “What are catacombs?”

Anticipating Matt’s reaction, Steve leaned back to get a good look at his friend’s face. “Underground cemeteries.”

Matt choked on the French fry in his throat. After a few seconds of coughing, he held up his hand. “Are you kidding me? You expect us to go to an underground cemetery? Dude, you are completely insane. Count me out.”

Steve chuckled, wishing he had caught Matt’s reaction on video. “I had a feeling you’d say that. That’s why I brought you these.” He pointed to several copies of photographs among the papers on the table. “These are pictures of catacombs. See the wide tunnels? They were constructed in a way so the priests would have easy access to the dead. It’s not going to be as scary as you think.”

Matt groaned. “You want us to go creeping around an underground cemetery, filled with tons of old skeletons, looking for a haunted statue that is known for talking to people? How is this not the very definition of scary?”

“The bookstore opens at ten,” Steve said. “Let’s meet at my house at nine-thirty and don’t forget to bring your mystery backpacks. You never know what we might run into down there.” “Or who,” Matt grumbled and took a giant bite of his burger.

