

Egyptian Heart

By Kathryn Meyer Griffith

Dedication

For my mother, Delores Meyer, with love...who always told me to never give up and never stop writing. I miss you so, mother! I hope they have books in heaven for you to read.

Prologue

Some women wait all their lives to find their one great love, if they're lucky enough to find it at all. I traveled to Egypt and three thousand years into the past to find mine. It was my destiny...as was everything that happened to me that summer the University sent me to Egypt on a grant, to search for the lost necropolis I was sure existed beneath the desert sands not far from the three Pyramids of Gizah. Here is my story....

Chapter One

My mother had warned me before I'd bought the plane tickets, "Maggie Owen...these days with all the strife going on, Egypt isn't a safe place for anyone, much less a woman. Why can't you put this trip off for a while and go some other time? Next summer maybe?"

"Because the grant is for *this* year, *now* Mom. Maybe next year it won't be offered. And next year I won't have a published book out. That's why the College Board chose me. This is my chance. All I know, is that if I don't go now, I might never get to go. This is the time."

My book on deciphering ancient hieroglyphs wasn't a best seller but it had made the college look at me differently. It had helped that I'd filled the book with full color reproductions I'd drawn and painted myself from photographs of Egyptian artwork and hieroglyphs from the ancient tombs. My series of Egyptian themed original paintings from the book were on display at local art galleries all over town and my reputation as an artist and published writer was growing.

I'd beaten out ten other professors who'd wanted overseas grants for research this summer. Fate wanted me to go and I wasn't going to argue with fate.

"Okay. But I'll worry about you every day." My mom's face had shown her concern and I understood her fears as I put my arms around her that last night before I left.

"I'll be careful," I'd promised her. "Just take good care of Snowball." Snowball was my cat. A puffball of white with such an ugly little pug face, she was cute. I'd had her fourteen years and hated leaving her. But I knew Mom would take good care of her and give her the love she needed. And Snowball wouldn't be lonely because Mom had three other cats.

"I will. She's going to miss you, though. Like us."

"I know. I wish I could take her. But she's too old and the desert is too hot for her. It gets up to a hundred and twenty in the sun this time of year."

"Glad you're going to Egypt and not me. I don't believe I'd like living on the sun."

"Very funny." It was different for me. Heat didn't usually bother me. And if you wanted something bad enough, I figured, you put up with a lot more than a little heat.

I'd dreamed of being an Egyptologist and college professor digging in the sands of Egypt—been beckoned to Egypt—for as long as I could remember; as if it'd waited and held a great secret for me. As if I'd lived there before. Ever since I was a child, I'd been lugging home library books full of colorful pictures and stories of the ancient land. I wanted to walk the same ground and gaze upon the same antiquities that those earliest Egyptians once had. Descend into the tombs, decipher the hieroglyphs and unearth the scrolls that would reveal the ancient peoples' loves, fears and lives. Their secrets. I was looking for something.

Then I was there. In Egypt. The ancient people used to call it *To-mery* and it was as sultry and mysterious as my colleagues at Boston University warned me it would be. The sun was a ball of fire pulsating above and baking every living and inanimate object on the archeological dig. The desert around me was endless and dusty, the tents were airless and cramped and I couldn't understand what the natives were saying, though I was trying to learn the language.

The desert sand crept into my suitcases, into my bags and like a mischievous thief, invaded the clothes I wore. The grains were fiery hot and everywhere a rainbow of earth toned colors sparkled beneath the sun's rays. The sun burnt my flesh and brought tears to my eyes; sand mixed with the trickling sweat on my body and built up in the creases and crevices, making me sticky and uncomfortable minutes after rising in the morning. During the day the sand swirled around my head in a cloud like a living thing, tugging at my hat and my loose clothes and often making it difficult to walk. And those were the good times.

The bad times were when the vicious sandstorms would roar in from the horizon unexpectedly and roar away as swiftly, leaving destruction and gritty sand behind everywhere. Our tents had to be securely tied to the ground or they'd blow away. All my books, clothes and personal items had to be placed in huge plastic bags and roped together to keep out the sand. So I lived out of trash bags, picked granules out of my food and kept myself bundled up in lightweight clothes to protect my skin from sunburn. It was like living in an oven.

But I didn't care about any of that as I strode across the rocky plateau in long steps, away from the pyramids beneath the blazing noonday sun. The heat, the primitive conditions and the complaining natives the University had hired for the summer dig, didn't bother me. Being there was heaven. Magical.

My family had given me a lavish Bon Voyage party with cake, gifts and everything before I'd left the States. My two brothers and three sisters had been happy but uncertain for me. Unlike me, they were all married with children and had solid, normal lives. They would have preferred I'd found a boyfriend, gotten married and had a couple of kids, kept teaching and painted my pretty pictures from home, too, instead of gallivanting across the world looking for dead bones.

But, hey, the goodbyes had been said. I'd packed and the plane left the next morning. Nothing would have stopped me. Not even the pathetic look on my mom's face. And I didn't have a boyfriend or anyone else to miss or miss me. I was alone. I was always alone.

You chase them off, Mom said. It's that old soul behind those emerald eyes of yours, honey. A soul that has experienced many lifetimes and suffered and knows too much. It glares back out at people and frightens them off.

My mom was a whimsical, perceptive woman and an exceptional watercolorist, who in some ways, I took after. But she believed in reincarnation, eternal love and all sorts of weird things I could never accept. Me, I didn't believe in anything but hard work and myself.

We make our own destiny, I told her.

And she'd just laugh at me. *That's what you think. Just wait. Life has a way of surprising a person. Give it time. It'll knock you on your butt someday all right.*

"I'll be back in three months. That's not that long."

"So much can happen in three months, Maggie," she'd whispered and the words would later return to haunt me.

I had no idea how true they were going to be.

But standing in the desert weeks later, I wasn't thinking about my mother, my cat, my family or my lack of love affairs. I was thinking of Egypt and the *lost necropolis*. A forgotten and undiscovered Egyptian graveyard, a city of the dead and those who'd served them, buried under the sand near the Great Pyramids. The burial ground where perhaps Nefertiti, wife to the heretical and ill-fated pharaoh Akhenaton, and her children, who'd lived three thousand years before, might be buried. His remains, they believed, had been found, but his wife's and family's hadn't.

I'd first begun to suspect the lost city might exist three years ago when I'd come across a very old book, supposedly copied from some ancient scrolls found in an unknown tomb. I hadn't thought anything of it until my translating of the text began to veer away from what the book was reflecting. I'd always had a gift for deciphering tomb paintings and hieroglyphs.

My translation was different and I believed the original manuscript had been misread. A disparity here and there with key pictograms changed the meanings. In the last three years I'd searched and found more references in other books and ancient texts about this mysterious necropolis and I began my quest to find it. It was the reason I was here. If what I suspected

were true, it could be the discovery of the century. And I would be the one to make it. It would make me famous.

I found a large square stone in the shade of a few straggly trees, and settled down on it, sighing softly. My hat provided shade and the limestone felt cool on my legs through my white cotton slacks.

I'd been working at the dig all morning, it'd been hotter every day as Egypt's summer moved in, and I was exhausted. I was where I'd always wanted to be, doing

what I'd always dreamed of, but with no one to share it with, I found myself suddenly lonely.

My family, colleagues and friends were thousands of miles away.

Staring out over the sand and the waves of heat, my loneliness brought me strange thoughts and a startling hallucination. I saw myself dancing, floating over the sand, with a man. And somehow I knew that he wasn't just any man, but the man I would spend my life with. He was tall and strong but I couldn't see his face; couldn't tell who he was. The figures were too misty and the illusion faded too quickly. Shaking my head, I tried to clear my mind. Must be heat stroke. Now I was seeing things.

But I wondered what it meant. I didn't usually daydream about suitors.

Sure, when I'd been younger I'd had dates and my share of boyfriends. I'd come close to falling in love a couple of times, but never had. I always pulled back at the last moment, something deep in my heart and soul kept me from loving anyone completely.

As if I was waiting for something or someone who was yet to come.

I wanted someone who would love me the rest of my life, protect and cherish me. Be the center of my world. Love the things I loved. He'd come someday, Mom said. I was beginning to have my doubts. But my someday lover still lived strongly in my heart.

He'd be smart, strong willed, sure of himself and wouldn't need to challenge and control me. But he'd also be tender. His touch would set my flesh and blood on fire, yet we'd be able to talk of many things. And, most importantly, he would love me more than life itself. If need be, he would fight to the death for me.

And sitting there in the hot sun of Egypt, he'd never seemed so real. I could almost feel his warm hands on my skin, could almost see his loving smile and thoughtful eyes. As if he were near. Nearer than when I'd been at home. How odd that here I was in Egypt searching for something that would make me rich and respected in my college circles back home but I was spending my time daydreaming about love. I should be thinking of my job and the lost tomb.

My eyes scanned the pyramids and the desert in the distance. Outside the big cities, the people were nomads and truly followed the old ways. It was a land that in many ways lived in the past.

There were rules to follow, especially for a woman. Egypt was a country of Islam, usually a peaceful loving religion, yet foreign women needed to dress modestly and keep their bodies properly covered. If a woman dressed skimpily, I was told, she was putting herself in danger.

So I wore gauzy but opaque shirts with long sleeves and baggy cotton pants in sun friendly colors and I pulled my long silver-blond hair into a bun and kept it covered with a wide-brimmed straw hat. Dark sunglasses hid my eyes from strangers. I kept my fair skin covered and watched the tone of my voice. I was humble. I was cautious. I tried to be invisible. I'd learned my lesson the first few days I was here.

I'd caught one of the workmen staring at my face one morning and there was fear in his.

"Your eyes, mistress," he'd muttered in an anxious tone. "Such a pale strange shade of green. Jinn eyes." He'd averted his gaze quickly then, and had hurried away, but not before

I'd seen he'd been frightened of me. Of my eyes.

The peasants were superstitious. They hadn't changed in thousands of years and were afraid of anything different and of what they alleged was bad magic. In their history a Jinn was like a genie and most of them were evil. They caused mischief and grief in a person's life if they attached themselves to you. The peasant thought I had a jinn's eyes...maybe that I had a jinn inside me. Afterwards, I recalled that the workman had been wearing a blue amulet around his neck and had tattoos on his arms—two things that were supposed to protect a mortal from the malevolence of jinns.

Since that morning I kept my eyes hidden if possible. I didn't want trouble.

I wiped the sweat from my face with a rag kept tucked at my waistband and peered up at the three pyramids in the far distance. The largest was the final resting place of the mighty King Rhufu, the middle pyramid was Khafre's, Khufu's son, and the smallest was Menkaure's, a later and lesser successor. Khufu's pyramid towered above me at four hundred and fifty-one feet.

Contrary to what people think, most of the pyramid builders hadn't been slaves but had been free Egyptian citizens who'd toiled for love of their pharaohs and their gods. They ate bread and garlic, drank beer, wore mustaches and had generally died in their thirties from cancer, accidents and parasitic diseases. It didn't sound like that great of a job to me.

Looking at the massive stones that formed the pyramids, it was hard to imagine that the people of those ancient times had been small compared to today's humans. Between four and a half to five and a half feet being the average, even for men. I would have been considered a very tall woman at five foot eight. The people's sun-weathered skin had been different hues, from a dark ivory to cinnamon brown and their eyes a soft amber to deep ebony. Very fair skin and green or certain shades of blue eyes would have been rare and looked upon with mistrust.

Most of the common people wouldn't have been able to read or write.

The pyramids aged beneath the sun, waves of heat churned around them under the cyan skies. It didn't rain much in this part of Egypt and I sure could have used a gentle rain to cool me down. The heat was the worst I've ever experienced and I knew it could get worse.

A lone, dark bird flew above me and circled. To the Egyptians it would be considered a bad omen. A string of balking camels, led by a turbaned old man, trudged their way past a group of chattering tourists and ventured out into the desert. I watched the shaggy beasts until they plodded past our colony of tents, my home these last few weeks, and became a line of dots on the horizon.

Catching sight of the tents reminded me of the joys of tent living.

But, truth was, I was beginning to feel comfortable behind the flaps of my canvas house. It was cozy, even if it didn't have running water or a bathroom. Water came in plastic containers and the bathroom was a bucket. Odd thing was, living in a tent made me feel closer to the ghosts of the ancient people who'd once lived out on the sand in tents as well.

My eyes flicked back to the far away pyramids. There were always tourists around them. Oohing and aahing. Climbing. Taking pictures. Like ants everywhere. Oh, if only those stones could talk. The things they'd seen over the millennia: the lovers who'd met besides the huge structures or walked, kissed and wept tears in their shadows and the history that happened all around them.

I was woolgathering again. I couldn't seem to help myself. Since I'd arrived I kept hearing ghosts whispering on the breezes around me of long ago passions and secrets. I couldn't make out what they were saying but they haunted me. My fingers dropped to sift through the glittering grains at my feet. Something about this place, the humid heat, the exotic

smells in the air and the warmth of the sand brought out the long dormant erotic side of me. I hadn't felt so alive, so sensual, since I'd been a teenager. My skin tingled it was so strong at times.

Egypt had cast a spell over me. That was it. It was bringing the woman I could have been, but never had been, out in me. I found myself staring at the men in the excavating crew and having the oddest thoughts. What did their tanned bodies really look like underneath those desert robes and headdresses and, at the end of the day, I mused, which ones were going home to please wives or lovers under the Egyptian moon.

The past. Love. Yearning. Passion. I saw them everywhere.

Sunstroke. That's what Jehan Es-senusi, head of the digging crew and Egyptian guide, would say if I told him about it. Sunstroke was his answer to all temporary lapses of sanity or unexplained illnesses. He was forever warning me not to stay out in the midday sun too long.

Makes a person crazy, he'd say, making air circles by his ear with dirty fingers.

Not that I'd confess to Jehan the peculiar ideas and emotions I'd been having. I didn't like him, though educated and knowledgeable, he'd been recommended and hired by the University to lead the workers. Otherwise, he was an enigma and made me uneasy with his emaciated tallness, sooty beard and mustache and shifty black as obsidian eyes. He had this way of scrutinizing me, as if he was a vulture and I was a mouse.

He never looked me in the eyes and never said much, or got too close, but there was something unsettling about the man. I couldn't stand his hungry eyes on me.

I would have gotten rid of him, but Jehan was the best guide around. He knew everyone and everything. When we needed something, information or permits, he could get them when no one else could. The men never questioned him.

They seemed afraid of him.

I sat there, remembering late last night. I'd been dressed for bed in a long nightgown and robe, making notes on the day's discoveries, as I usually did, and heard someone outside my tent. I went out to check and it wasn't hard to mistake Jehan's tall, bony figure limping away.

I called his name into the darkness but he didn't answer. The experience left me with an uncomfortable suspicion that Jehan had been spying on me. It hadn't been the first time, either. Someone had been shadowing me for weeks, yet I could never catch anyone at it. So it'd been Jehan all along.

In the corner of my vision, he was glaring at me. In his robe-like *galabia*, decorated with arcane amulets, flapping in the wind around his tall form, and in his *tarha*, the standard desert headdress, he reminded me of a sinister desert sheik out of some romance novel, or out of another time. His face's expression, except for the cunning lift to his mouth, cold and his blue eyes gleamed in the sun. Why is he looking at me like that?

Sayed, the other workmen's supervisor, happened to be standing next to me. Glancing at Jehan and then over at me he whispered, "*Es-senusi...evil man. I caution you, missy, to stay away from him. He uses bad magic. See the blue amulet around his neck?*"

I nodded at the clean-shaven Egyptian besides me. Sayed and I had become friends the last few weeks. He was fair to the workers he supervised and respectful of me.

Educated in America, Sayed's English was almost as good as mine and he'd been invaluable to me, with the local people and their customs; knowing the workmen as well as he did. From the beginning, Sayed treated me as if I were his daughter. He'd always had a smile, a genuine twinkle in his brown eyes, and advice for me, whether I wanted it or not. He was a good man and I trusted him. So when he talked, I listened.

I never got the sense he was holding anything back from me or lying like Jehan.

"Why don't you and the men like him?" I'd wanted to ask that for weeks.

Sayed stared at me, amusement in his gaze. "You, with all your learning and knowledge of our country and the ancient times, really don't know?"

I had a hunch, but for a twenty-first century woman, it was too crazy to speak out loud.

"Jehan Es-senusi is a sorcerer," Sayed finally gave in and spoke the words I couldn't.

"There's no such thing." Though the bizarre notion had occurred to me many times over the last few weeks. The way the man acted, the amulets and tattoos; the fear in the other workmen's eyes when Jehan was around. "I don't believe in sorcerers or magic." I laughed uneasily. "You're a smart man, Sayed, don't tell me you believe in all that mumbo jumbo?"

"Believe?" Sayed's eyebrows rose and there wasn't humor in his gaze anymore. "I know for a fact that he practices dark magic. He's a follower of the secret ancient priests of Amon. It was said that they had the power to reach out and snatch a person's soul from their breast or take their magic from them. They were very powerful.

"And everyone knows Jehan has the evil eye, so no one dares cross him."

I knew the legends about the infamous priests of Amon. In their time, they'd defied the very pharaoh, Akhenaton, whose family we were searching for beneath the sands. The story was that the priests had used their magic to bring Akhenaton down because he worshipped one god and forced Egypt and his people to worship the same—and the land of many gods and the priests of Amon had fought him bitterly over it.

Sayed claimed that Jehan was a disciple of those same priests, which would explain a lot of things. But I, a modern woman who didn't believe in the supernatural, dark or otherwise, still couldn't accept the magic part.

"If it's true, Jehan is some powerful magical priest and everyone knows it," I said, "why is he here working on a University dig and taking orders from me? Shouldn't he be off leading a chant in a temple somewhere?"

Sayed smiled at me with his slightly crooked front teeth and replied thoughtfully, "No one knows why he's here. He's a wealthy man and doesn't need money. There must be some other reason. I'm looking for it. In time I'll find out and then I'll tell you.

"Yet for now, heed my warning and stay away from him, Miss Owen. I see him watching you. Perhaps he sees something in you...some magic...he desires for himself. He's waiting for something. Something to happen."

Shaking my head at the absurdity of the conversation, but knowing enough not to mock an Egyptian's religious beliefs, I replied, "Thank you for the warning, Sayed. I'll stay away from him if I can."

I didn't mention Jehan's spying on me. I was a big girl and could take care of myself, there was no use dragging Sayed into it. I'd just stay clear of Jehan. Which wouldn't be difficult since I had pretty much avoided him from the beginning.

My eyes wandered to the spot where Jehan had been skulking. He was no longer there.

"Please wear this." Sayed handed me a silver chain with a tiny blue amulet of an Egyptian beetle, a sacred scarab, carved into its face. A delicate thing that got lost in the palm of my hand.

"It's a gift from me to you. It's very old," he explained. "I've been saving it for years and now I know it was meant for you. It'll protect you from evil magic and harm, from Jehan, and lead you to the one you are fated to love. Wear it always. Never take it off."

As if it had been dug up from an ancient tomb, the necklace appeared authentically old. If it were real, it would be priceless. I wanted to ask where he'd gotten it. I wanted to give it back. The problem was: to not accept a gift from an Egyptian was considered rude, so I smiled at the man who was becoming my friend and slipped the chain around my neck. He'd given it from his heart and I wasn't about to hurt his feelings. I needed his goodwill and

guidance too much.

The necklace had a cold feel against my skin and when I put my hand up to caress it, an eerie vibration tingled through my fingers. I had a strange premonition at that moment that this necklace was more than it seemed to be. Then I chided myself for becoming as superstitious as the Egyptian peasants I worked with every day.

“Never take it off,” Sayed repeated, as if he really wanted me to remember that.

“I won’t.” It was the least I could do when he’d given me such a lovely gift.

With another smile, Sayed strolled away. “I need to get back to the digging site now. I think we’re close to discovering what we’re looking for. I will come for you if it is so.”

“I’ll be waiting,” my voice trailed behind him as he vanished around the tents in the direction of where we’d been digging the last three and a half weeks.

I knew I should be following him. I needed to be digging, too. Instead, I lingered there in the sunlight and stroked the scarab hanging from my neck. For some reason, touching it brought me comfort. I studied it and wondered where it had come from and who had worn it before me. A peasant or some ancient Egyptian princess? If only I knew.

Nothing happened that day or for a few days after that. I worked at the site and heeded Sayed’s warning to stay away from Jehan; though he continued to follow me around and stare at me from a distance, he never bothered me.

Then we unearthed the first of the burial chambers, a series of rich tombs surrounded by a huge common graveyard where slaves and laborers were buried. As the days went by and we kept digging, we eventually discovered the sprawling dead city beneath the sands just about where the scrolls had said it would be.

And everything changed.
