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Opening extract from

# The Eye Of The Serpent

Written by

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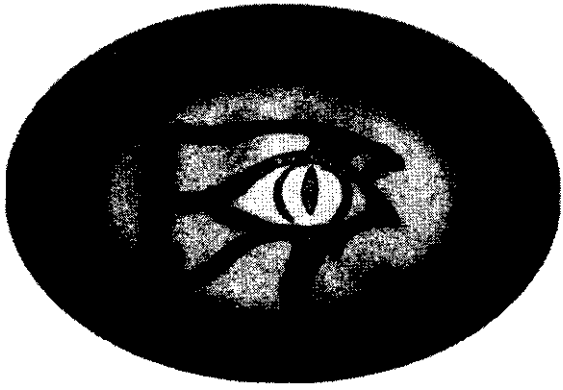
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PROLOGUE

# Egypt, the Valley of the Kings, 1923



With a growing sense of anticipation Sir William Devlin stood at the top of the long flight of stone steps and gazed down at the massive doors set deep into the sand below him. At his side, his young assistant, Tom Hinton, could hardly conceal his excitement. This was the moment they had devoted so many years of their lives to; the moment they had begun to believe would never come.

The workmen had finished unearthing the steps weeks earlier and, in removing the piles of rubble heaped at the base of the huge gates, had revealed the seals bearing the name of Akhenaten,

one of the mightiest pharaohs of the eighteenth dynasty and the father of Tutankhamun. After so much fruitless searching, this was like a miracle.

For four years the two men had worked side by side in the Valley of the Kings, both convinced that Akhenaten's final resting place was hidden not in his desecrated tomb in Amarna, but somewhere in these limestone hills. But in all that time they had discovered nothing more than ancient trinkets: a faience cup, a calcite jar, the occasional piece of discarded jewellery. They had been on the verge of giving up the search when workmen had, quite by accident, uncovered a step, just a few inches beneath the constantly shifting sands.

The resulting dig had unearthed fifteen more steps, perfectly cut from smooth white stone and angling steeply down into the bowels of the earth. But even then there had been a maddening wait while the seals were photographed and artists reproduced every element of them for the archives. Now, as the two archaeologists watched in silence, a couple of their most trusted workmen were finally breaking the seals and pulling open the doors, to reveal the darkness beyond.

Sir William and Tom descended the steps

together until they stood peering into the blackness. Sir William was aware of a thick sweat on his brow: this moment could be the greatest achievement of his life or the greatest disappointment. With a shaking hand he lifted his Eveready torch, flicked the switch and directed a beam of light into the antechamber.

What he saw there made him gasp in amazement.

The large room was piled high with treasures – gilt decorated boxes, gold statues, chairs, couches, even a beautifully ornate chariot. Apart from a fine film of dust, they looked as though they had been placed there only days ago, but Sir William knew that they had been waiting to be discovered for over three thousand years.

'My God!' whispered Tom – and excitement flashed in his blue eyes. He lifted his own torch and added a second beam of light. The two men stood in shocked silence as the twin beams picked out yet more details – intricate necklaces, the threads that bound them long since rotted away, stone jars stacked in orderly ranks, mummified cats, their shrivelled faces staring sightlessly back into the glare of electric light.

At last Sir William took a deep breath. 'It's

going to take us months to make an inventory of all this,' he said. It seemed a terribly lame thing to say after such an incredible discovery, but it was clear to him that their work had only just begun. Ahead of them lay a long stretch of photographing and filing; then the packing of the countless relics for the journey to the museum in Cairo.

'Wait!' said Tom, pointing into the darkness. 'Look – there! Another doorway.'

Sir William redirected the beam of his torch and saw that Tom was right. Beyond the jumble of treasure, half concealed by the sides of the chariot, there was a second sealed door. Before he could stop him, Tom, with all the impulsiveness of his twenty-two years, had run forward into the antechamber and was picking his way nimbly through the litter of treasure.

'Tom, just a minute, we must go easy!' cried Sir William.

'Don't worry,' Tom assured him. 'I'll be careful.'

A few moments later, as Sir William watched, Tom went down on his hands and knees to crawl beneath the chariot. 'The door's intact,' he shouted back over his shoulder. 'No grave robbers have been here. This *has* to be a burial chamber!'

Reluctantly Sir William followed his young

assistant, terrified that he might blunder into some priceless relic and damage it beyond repair; but after a few moments he too was crawling beneath the chariot and staring at what was affixed to the sealed door.

It was a Wadjet eye – an oval of smooth blue faience, onto which had been painted the symbol of an eye. Sir William knew that these eyes were usually representations of the eye of Horus, the hawk lord, son of Osiris – a powerful talisman used to protect precious items from harm. He also knew that in ancient Egyptian mythology, the eye represented the moon and, it was believed, had the power to bring the dead back to life. But there was something different about this one. The painted pupil was a vertical line, making it look more than anything like the eye of a serpent. Sir William noticed how the edges of the stone were rounded and how it stood out from the door in relief, as though it had been used to plug an opening of the same oval shape.

Tom lifted a hand to touch the stone. 'I believe I can pull it free,' he whispered. 'We'll be able to peep through the opening into the room beyond.'

'We shouldn't,' said Sir William nervously. 'Not

until it's been photographed and documented. We could cause damage.'

'It'll be all right,' Tom assured him. 'We could be on the verge of finding the sarcophagus of Akhenaten. You want to look in there, don't you?'

'Well . . .' began Sir William.

'If we do it by the book, it'll be months before we can even get back to this door. We'll have to clear all the artefacts from the antechamber, one by one, catalogue them, photograph them . . . Let's just take a quick peek.' Tom didn't wait for an answer but raised his hand again and took a firm grip of the eye. He pulled once, grunting with the effort, but the thing didn't budge. 'It's jammed in tight,' he said. 'Looks like wax has been set around the edges.'

'Tom, maybe we should wait,' said Sir William.

'No, it's all right, I think I can . . .' Tom gritted his teeth and applied all his strength to the task. There was a brief silence, during which Sir William was aware of his heart beating furiously. Then, quite suddenly, the eye came free with a dull thud that seemed to echo weirdly in the enclosed space, and there was the opening, an oval of the deepest, darkest midnight black.

Sir William experienced a sudden powerful sense of dread. It spilled through him like a wash of Atlantic water, and once again he opened his mouth to tell Tom to wait. But it was already too late. Tom had scrambled closer and was raising his head to peep through the opening.

There was a long, loud hiss, as though a blast of air had escaped from the next room; and beside him, Sir William felt Tom's body flinch.

'Tom?' he gasped. 'What's wrong?'

Tom edged slowly back from the door. His handsome young features were very pale in the torchlight and bore a vacant expression, a look of dull surprise.

'What did you see?' Sir William asked him.

'Nothing,' said Tom, his voice little more than a whisper.

Sir William went to put his own eye to the opening but Tom suddenly placed a hand on his shoulder with a strength that was surprising in one so slight.

'There's nothing,' he said again, and this time his voice was a deep, rumbling growl.

Sir William felt quite unnerved by the incident and decided that enough was enough. 'Come on,' he said. 'Let's get out of here.' He scrambled

back from beneath the chariot and helped Tom towards the entrance.

Stepping out into the open sunlight was a shock. The power of the sun hit Sir William like a clenched fist and he almost cried out with the force of it. It seemed as if the two of them had been in the antechamber for days. He turned to look at Tom and felt another shock go through him.

The young man seemed to have aged ten years. His naturally pale skin was now as white and dry as a roll of parchment and his eyes, usually keen and intense, had a flat, blank expression in them. He seemed to react slowly, as though drugged. As Sir William watched, thick beads of sweat on the young man's forehead popped and went rolling down his face.

'Tom, are you quite all right?' he asked.

Tom turned to look at him as though he barely remembered Sir William. When he spoke, his voice was thin and reedy.

'I . . . I feel strange,' he said. He shivered, and more sweat began to trickle down his face.

'I believe you have a fever,' said Sir William, mystified. Only a few moments earlier, Tom had seemed in perfect health. 'Here, let's get you to

your tent.' He slipped an arm beneath Tom's shoulder and helped him towards the steps, signalling to the two native diggers as he did so.

'Stand guard here,' he told them. 'Close up those doors and let nobody into the tomb except myself or Mr Hinton.'

They bowed their heads and hurried to obey his orders.

Sir William managed to get Tom to the top of the steps and half dragged him across the ground beyond to the campsite. Once in the safety of the big canvas tent, he laid Tom on his bed and covered him with a blanket. Tom was shivering violently now and the sweat had already soaked through his khaki shirt.

'I'm going to get Doc Hopper,' Sir William told him; then remembered that the expedition's resident doctor had gone into Luxor for provisions that morning. 'Perhaps I can send one of the boys for him,' he added.

'Don't worry,' Tom said. 'It's . . . just a fever. I'll see him when he gets back. I'll be fine once I've had some rest.'

'But . . . to come on so suddenly . . . I'd feel happier if he had a look at you.'

Tom shook his head and sweat rained from his

hair onto his pillow. 'Don't be ridiculous,' he said. 'That will take ages to sort out . . . and . . .' His voice trailed away for a moment and he seemed to grow stronger, his eyes staring up at Sir William with a powerful intent. 'This is your moment, William. It's what you've worked for all these years. Go back to the tomb and . . . get things organized.' The momentary strength seemed to fail him and he flopped back against his pillow. 'I . . . just need to sleep for a while.'

Sir William frowned. 'You're sure you're all right?'

'I'm fine . . . really . . . I only need to . . .'

Tom closed his eyes and seemed to sink immediately into a deep sleep. His chest rose and fell steadily. Sir William stood by his bed for a moment, unsure of what to do. Part of him wanted to get straight back to the tomb and revel in his moment of triumph. Another part felt that something was terribly wrong. Lord knew, they'd all had doses of the fever on this expedition, but this one had struck so suddenly, so completely . . . and Sir William remembered how Tom's body had jolted as he'd peered through that gap in the door, almost as though he'd been shot . . .

A tumult of shouts from outside made his

decision for him. Somehow, news of the discovery had got back to the others in the camp and workers were running around shouting about it. People were spilling out of their tents, eager to get to the excavation. There was no time to waste. The tomb site had to be secured before the news travelled any further.

Sir William stepped quickly out of the tent, letting down the canvas flap behind him and buttoning it closed to keep out the sunlight. Then he hurried back towards the tomb, shouting orders as he went.

It was night before he had a chance to return. By then, he had a whole team of people at work in the antechamber, photographing its contents in position, before separating them for illustration and cataloguing. An area had been set aside where the items could be packed, ready for despatch to the Cairo Museum. It was only as he trudged back through the night towards Tom's tent that it occurred to him that he hadn't seen the odd-looking Wadjet eye since Tom had removed it from its position. Presumably it had been dropped near the door of the adjoining chamber.

He came to the tent and stooped to unbutton the flap. As he straightened up, he was startled to hear a rustling sound coming from within. He threw back the flap and stared in. It was too dark to see very much, so he reached for his torch before remembering that the zinc carbide batteries were exhausted from their earlier use. Instead he located a hurricane lamp and knelt to light it.

The rustling sound went on – a continuous susurration that seemed to grate on Sir William's nerves. It sounded to his heightened senses like a million dry leaves being stirred by the wind – but not the kind of leaves you would ever find in a land like Egypt. He was thinking of the autumn leaves of his native Kent, and for the first time it dawned on him how he missed the place. Perhaps he had spent too many years in this dry, unforgiving heat. It was time he headed home to visit friends and family. He thrust the thought aside and managed to get the lamp alight. Lifting it, he stepped into the tent and looked towards Tom's bed.

He felt a momentary stab of surprise. He remembered throwing a blanket over Tom before he left, but not the dark-brown shiny one that now covered him from head to foot. Sir William

stepped closer and then gasped in involuntary horror as he saw that the blanket was moving, swaying back and forth like the tide of some unspeakable ocean. And then he realized that this was a tide made up, not of liquid, but of myriad large, shiny, fat insects that were swarming over what was left of Tom's corpse. Scarab beetles. Millions of them.

Sir William shouted something. He didn't know at the time nor could he ever recall exactly what he'd said; but as he shouted, he thrust his arm forward, directing the pool of light onto the bed, and the great tide of glistening creatures began to scatter before the glow as if it was poison to them. They spilled off the edges of the cot, raining down onto the ground in frantic, wriggling heaps, until Sir William was ankle-deep in them. He stared down in revulsion at the thing they were gradually revealing: a hideous, wasted manikin clad in tattered clothing, the flesh beneath the clothes almost completely consumed, leaving nothing more than bone and a few shrivelled tatters of dried skin.

The eyelids were still there though . . . and as Sir William watched, they slid open to reveal two piercing blue eyes that, most hideous of all, were

still very much alive. Tom's ravaged lips curved at the edges to reveal his white, even teeth, set in a hideous grin. He began to laugh, a deep, throaty sound that froze Sir William's blood within him; and then suddenly the scarabs were swarming back, as though Tom had somehow summoned them.

They skittered frantically up the legs of the camp bed and began to stream in beneath his clothing, the fabric rising as if the bones were growing new flesh. Scores of scarabs crawled up from beneath the collar of his shirt and began to flatten themselves against Tom's skull. Instantly their dark covering faded and they turned the colour of pale skin. It was as though Tom had new flesh – flesh that wriggled and squirmed with unspeakable evil.

Sir William began to scream, and as he screamed, loud and shrill like a child, the small part of his brain that remained methodical noticed one last puzzling detail.

The breast pocket of Tom's shirt had been torn open and there, lying against his ruined chest, was the serpent's eye, gazing steadfastly up at Sir William as he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER ONE

# Return to Luxor



Alec Devlin stood on the deck of the steamship *Sudan* and gazed thoughtfully across the calm waters of the Nile to the far shore. He and his valet, Coates, had embarked at Cairo three days ago, and though life aboard the *Sudan* was comfortable enough, progress was maddeningly slow. Every inch of Alec's fifteen-year-old frame longed to be at his destination – the archaeological dig in the Valley of the Kings, where he was due to spend his school holidays.

Alec's father, Hugh, was a diplomat, working at the British embassy in Cairo. His busy schedule

left little free time to spend with his son; and Alec's mother, Hannah, had been dead more than six months now. During term time Alec attended an English boarding school in Cairo, but holidays had always been a problem; at least until Uncle Will had started inviting him down to help out on his archaeological digs.

It had started when Alec was thirteen. A letter had arrived from Uncle Will (Alec could somehow never bring himself to call him 'Sir William') inviting Alec to go and make himself useful. Alec's father had thought it a capital idea, but his mother had been less impressed.

'He's too young,' she'd argued. 'That's a lawless part of the world. He could get into all kinds of trouble.'

'Nonsense!' his father had answered. 'It'll make a man of him . . . and it's better than having him mooching around the house, bored out of his mind. Look, if you're so worried, we'll send Coates with him – he'll make sure he doesn't get into any scrapes.'

Coates was the family valet. He had been around for as long as Alec could remember, a big, shambling fellow with brilliantined black hair and a face like a slab of granite. Though he

seemed tough, Alec knew from experience that he could bend Coates around his little finger if he needed to: taking him along shouldn't be a problem.

So for the past two years Alec had made this trip down to Luxor to work alongside his favourite uncle, and in the process had become totally absorbed in the study of Egyptology. Uncle Will was a brilliant teacher, and consequently Alec knew more about the subject than any other child his age. Everything about it fascinated him: the tombs, the relics, the incredible history of a race of people who had built fabulous temples and monuments when the rest of the human race was still scuttling around in rags. And nothing – absolutely nothing in the world – could ever rival the thrill of finding something that had lain hidden from human eyes for thousands of years.

The previous winter, two things had happened that had changed Alec's life for ever. The first was the death of his mother. He'd been back at school in Cairo, working through some history revision, when he'd been summoned to the headmaster's office. He was initially delighted to find his father waiting for him. But the look on

his face had told him very quickly that this wasn't to be good news.

Alec's mother was dead.

She had been bitten by a mosquito, his father said, as Alec listened incredulously. Mosquito bites were nothing – people suffered them on an almost daily basis in this part of the world – but something must have been different about this particular bite, because it had turned septic. She had fallen into a raging fever and within a few hours she was gone. Alec couldn't believe it. A mosquito bite! How could such a silly, innocuous thing be the death of the person he had thought would live for ever?

'It's all right if you want to cry,' Father had told him, but Alec couldn't. He felt like screaming; he felt like smashing the headmaster's office to bits, but try as he might, he could not shed a tear for the mother he had loved all his life.

He had travelled back to the house on Kasr al-Dubara with his father and had gone through the ritual of the burial – the prayers, the hymns, the readings – and he had just felt numb, as though this was happening to somebody else and he was watching it from a distance.

Back at school, he threw himself into his

lessons, thinking that at least he had the summer holidays to look forward to, a chance to immerse himself in the subject he enjoyed so much.

But then a letter had arrived from his father, telling him that something bad had happened over at the dig. Nobody was sure exactly what had transpired, but it appeared that Uncle Will had suffered a complete nervous breakdown and had been taken to a sanatorium. It looked as though archaeology was off the agenda.

And then Alec *did* find some tears. This was the last straw. It seemed to him that everything was lost and he resigned himself to waiting until his schooling was finished before he could devote his life to the subject that so fascinated him.

But then, only a few weeks before the end of term, a revelation! Another letter from his father had arrived, telling him that the dig seemed to be back on the cards. Uncle Will's most trusted American friend, a man called Ethan Wade, had stepped in to take over directorship of the site; and he had extended a personal invitation to Alec to come out and resume his former duties.

So now here he stood at the rail of the *Sudan*,

gazing out at a small herd of camels on the far bank, dipping their heads to drink from the blue waters of the Nile. Alec was asking himself how much longer it would be before he could step off this great floating tub and get his hands into some good Egyptian sand. Coates, a plain-speaking Yorkshireman, who had always seemed able to read Alec's mind, gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

'Fear not, Master Alec. We'll be at Luxor tomorrow afternoon and, all being well, Mr Wade should be at the quayside to meet us.'

Alec glanced at his valet. It always seemed odd to see the big man clad in the unfamiliar garb of a khaki safari suit and pith helmet, rather than his usual black tailcoat.

'I've asked you before, please don't call me that,' he murmured. 'A simple Alec will be fine.'

'Yes, Master Alec,' said Coates, without a trace of irony. 'I shall try to remember that.'

A short distance from the steamer, a large crocodile surfaced briefly, snorted a little water from its nostrils and then sank again, leaving barely a ripple in its wake.

'What do we know about this Ethan Wade?' asked Alec.

'Only that he is a friend of Sir William's and that your father met him some years ago and was, by all accounts, rather impressed with him. I believe Mr Wade was working on an earlier dig alongside your uncle at the time. But he'd moved on by the time you started helping your uncle out.'

'He's an archaeologist, then?'

'No. I understand he is what the Americans like to call "a soldier of fortune".'

Alec frowned. 'What's that exactly?'

'I believe it describes a man who is willing to go anywhere in the world where there is action and adventure. I've heard some reports of exploits in Mexico and Africa . . .' Coates sniffed. 'But of course, if your father thinks he's made of the right stuff, who am I to quibble?'

Alec was impressed. 'Sounds like an interesting fellow,' he said.

Coates allowed himself the faintest look of disdain. 'That's the Americans for you,' he said. 'Probably watched far too many motion pictures. I believe that's what they call them.'

Alec smiled. 'Movies, Coates. That's the American word. And if Father trusts him and Uncle Will trusts him, then he'll do for me.' He

paused. 'It's going to seem odd, Uncle Will not being at the dig. I wish we knew more about what happened to him.'

Coates sighed. 'Perhaps we'll learn more in due course,' he said. 'All I do know is that he's not in his right mind and—'

'Excuse me. I trust you will excuse my boldness . . .'

Alec and Coates turned in surprise. They had been approached by a complete stranger. He was a hugely obese man, dressed in a white safari suit and a wide-brimmed fedora. Beneath the brim of his hat, his face resembled a great pink blob of blancmange, beneath which a couple of chins wobbled alarmingly. He was sweating profusely and mopping at his neck with a red kerchief.

'I couldn't help but overhear your conversation,' said the man, who spoke with a distinct Welsh accent. 'Wilfred Llewellyn, from the *Cairo Herald*.' Llewellyn extended a meaty hand and Alec shook it politely. It felt unpleasantly sticky and he had to make an effort not to wipe his palm on his trousers. 'I'm on my way down to the Valley of the Kings to do a story and I heard you mention a dig and an "Uncle Will" . . . You

couldn't possibly have been referring to Sir William Devlin, could you?'

Alec and Coates exchanged glances.

'Umm . . . yes, I'm his nephew,' said Alec cautiously.

'Astonishing! And your name would be . . . ?'

'Alec. Alec Devlin.'

'Of course, Sir William has a brother, Hugh. Your father. That makes sense.' Llewellyn reached into his jacket and pulled out a small notebook and pen. 'I trust, dear boy, you won't object if I make a few notes. For the record.'

Coates frowned. 'What's this all about?' he demanded.

'Oh, just gathering details, my good friend – nothing to be concerned about. We . . . journalists tend to pull in every little thing, so that later we can . . . sift through for the nuggets.' Llewellyn had a soft, syrupy voice that Alec found distinctly irritating. 'So you are on your way to see your uncle?'

'No, we're going to the dig. I've worked up there twice before.'

'Oh, capital, absolutely capital! And if I may say so, how inspiring to meet a young man willing to work in such a dangerous environment.'

'Dangerous?' Coates raised his eyebrows. 'How so?'

'Oh, well, I'm no expert of course, but I would have thought out in the open like that, there must be all sorts of things that could happen. Dust storms . . . wild animals . . . bandits . . .'

Alec grinned. 'Judging from what's happened before, I'd say it's not much worse than camping out with the scouts,' he said. 'And besides, I've got Coates to look after me.'

'Coats?' Llewellyn scribbled a note in his little book. 'Some kind of protective clothing you wear?'

Alec tried not to laugh.

'I'm Coates,' said Coates, with an air of menace.

'Oh, I see! The family retainer, I suppose?'

'I prefer the word "valet".'

'Hmm, yes, of course. And you would have a first name, Mr Coates?'

'Oh, most certainly,' said Coates unhelpfully. 'Look, which paper did you say you work for?'

'Er . . . the *Herald*.'

'It's strange. I've lived in Cairo for many years now and I can't say I've ever heard of it.'

'Oh, well . . . we're quite new. But doing very nicely, thank you.' Llewellyn fixed Alec with a

look. 'So you're Sir William's nephew. A terrible thing that happened to him, is it not?'

Alec frowned. 'We don't really know much about it,' he said. 'Only that he had some kind of breakdown.'

'Oh, is that what they told you?' Llewellyn said slyly. 'And did anybody mention anything about a Mr Hinton?'

Alec raised his eyebrows. '*Tom* Hinton?' he asked. He knew Tom well enough; had met him on the two previous occasions when he'd helped out on digs and had found him to be a most agreeable fellow. 'Nobody said anything about Tom. Why?'

Llewellyn leaned closer and Alec wrinkled his nostrils as they caught a curious smell: the odour of cheap lavender water mingled with the sharp tang of sweat.

'I thought it was common knowledge. Mr Hinton disappeared the same night your uncle suffered his . . . *breakdown*. Nobody has seen hide nor hair of him since.'

'Disappeared?' Alec was shocked. 'How could such a thing happen?'

Llewellyn shrugged. 'People are talking about a curse,' he said.

There was a brief silence.

'I think Master Alec has answered enough questions for now,' said Coates.

'Oh, but if I might be permitted to . . .'

Coates put a big slab of a hand against Llewellyn's chest and pushed, gently but firmly, making the man lurch backward several steps.

'If you wouldn't mind,' said Coates, an edge of threat in his voice. 'We were enjoying the solitude.'

'Yes, well, of course, if that's what you wish. Far be it from me to outstay my welcome.' Llewellyn was quite clearly furious, but strove to disguise it with an unconvincing smile. 'I'll leave you to it. I'm sure we'll be seeing each other at the dig, anyway. Perhaps we will have the opportunity to speak again.' He touched the brim of his fedora. 'Master Devlin,' he said. He looked briefly at Coates. 'Mr Coates.' He turned and waddled away across the deck, mopping his sweating face as he went.

Alec looked at Coates. 'What was that about?' he murmured.

'I can't imagine,' his valet replied. 'But if that fellow is a journalist, I'll eat my pith helmet.'

'Then what *is* he, d'you suppose?'

'Somebody too fond of asking questions.' Coates frowned and hunched his massive shoulders. 'And something tells me we haven't seen the last of him.'