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opening extract from

# The Kane Chronicles: The Red Pyramid

written by

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# 1. A Death at the Needle

CARTER

WE ONLY HAVE A FEW HOURS, so listen carefully.

If you're hearing this story, you're already in danger. Sadie and I might be your only chance.

Go to the school. Find the locker. I won't tell you which school or which locker, because if you're the right person you'll find it. The combination is 13/32/33. By the time you finish listening, you'll know what those numbers mean. Just remember the story we're about to tell you isn't complete yet. How it ends will depend on you.

The most important thing: when you open the package and find what's inside, *don't* keep it longer than a week. Sure, it'll be tempting. I mean, it will grant you almost unlimited power. But if you possess it too long it will consume you. Learn its secrets quickly and pass it on. Hide it for the next person, the way Sadie and I did for you. Then be prepared for your life to get very interesting.

Okay, Sadie is telling me to stop stalling and get on with

the story. Fine. I guess it started in London, the night our dad blew up the British Museum.

My name is Carter Kane. I'm fourteen and my home is a suitcase.

You think I'm kidding? Since I was eight years old, my dad and I have travelled the world. I was born in LA but my dad's an archaeologist, so his work takes him all over. Mostly we go to Egypt, since that's his speciality. Go into a bookstore, find a book about Egypt; there's a pretty good chance it was written by Dr Julius Kane. You want to know how Egyptians pulled the brains out of mummies, or built the pyramids, or cursed King Tut's tomb? My dad is your man. Of course, there are other reasons my dad moved around so much, but I didn't know his secret back then.

I didn't go to school. My dad home-schooled me, if you can call it 'home'-schooling when you don't have a home. He sort of taught me whatever he thought was important, so I learned a lot about Egypt and basketball stats and my dad's favourite musicians. I read a lot, too – pretty much anything I could get my hands on, from Dad's history books to fantasy novels – because I spent a lot of time sitting around in hotels and airports and dig sites in foreign countries where I didn't know anybody. My dad was always telling me to put the book down and play some ball. You ever try to start a game of pick-up basketball in Aswan, Egypt? It's not easy.

Anyway, my dad trained me early to keep all my possessions in a single suitcase that fits in an aeroplane's overhead compartment. My dad packed the same way, except he was allowed

an extra workbag for his archaeology tools. Rule number one: I was not allowed to look in his workbag. That's a rule I never broke until the day of the explosion.

It happened on Christmas Eve. We were in London for visitation day with my sister, Sadie.

See, Dad's only allowed two days a year with her – one in the winter, one in the summer – because our grandparents hate him. After our mom died, her parents (our grandparents) had this big court battle with Dad. After six lawyers, two fistfights and a near-fatal attack with a spatula (don't ask), they won the right to keep Sadie with them in England. She was only six, two years younger than me, and they couldn't keep us both – at least that was their excuse for not taking me. So Sadie was raised as a British schoolkid, and I travelled around with my dad. We only saw Sadie twice a year, which was fine with me.

[Shut up, Sadie. Yes – I'm getting to that part.]

So anyway, my dad and I had just flown into Heathrow after a couple of delays. It was a drizzly, cold afternoon. The whole taxi ride into the city, my dad seemed kind of nervous.

Now, my dad is a big guy. You wouldn't think anything could make him nervous. He has dark brown skin like mine, piercing brown eyes, a bald head and a goatee, so he looks like a buff evil scientist. That afternoon he wore his cashmere winter coat and his best brown suit, the one he used for public lectures. Usually he exudes so much confidence that he dominates any room he walks into, but sometimes – like that afternoon – I saw another side to him that I didn't really

understand. He kept looking over his shoulder like we were being hunted.

'Dad?' I said as we were getting off the A40. 'What's wrong?'

'No sign of them,' he muttered. Then he must've realized he'd spoken aloud, because he looked at me kind of startled. 'Nothing, Carter. Everything's fine.'

Which bothered me because my dad's a terrible liar. I always knew when he was hiding something, but I also knew no amount of pestering would get the truth out of him. He was probably trying to protect me, though from what I didn't know. Sometimes I wondered if he had some dark secret in his past, some old enemy following him, maybe; but the idea seemed ridiculous. Dad was just an archaeologist.

The other thing that troubled me: Dad was clutching his workbag. Usually when he does that, it means we're in danger. Like the time gunmen stormed our hotel in Cairo. I heard shots coming from the lobby and ran downstairs to check on my dad. By the time I got there, he was just calmly zipping up his workbag while three unconscious gunmen hung by their feet from the chandelier, their robes falling over their heads so you could see their boxer shorts. Dad claimed not to have witnessed anything, and in the end the police blamed a freak chandelier malfunction.

Another time, we got caught in a riot in Paris. My dad found the nearest parked car, pushed me into the back seat and told me to stay down. I pressed myself against the floorboards and kept my eyes shut tight. I could hear Dad in the driver's seat, rummaging in his bag, mumbling something to himself while the mob yelled and destroyed things outside. A

few minutes later he told me it was safe to get up. Every other car on the block had been overturned and set on fire. Our car had been freshly washed and polished, and several twenty-euro notes had been tucked under the windshield wipers.

Anyway, I'd come to respect the bag. It was our good luck charm. But when my dad kept it close it meant we were going to need good luck.

We drove through the city centre, heading east towards my grandparents' flat. We passed the golden gates of Buckingham Palace, the big stone column in Trafalgar Square. London is a pretty cool place, but after you've travelled for so long, all cities start to blend together. Other kids I meet sometimes say, 'Wow, you're so lucky you get to travel so much.' But it's not like we spend our time sightseeing or have a lot of money to travel in style. We've stayed in some pretty rough places, and we hardly ever stay anywhere longer than a few days. Most of the time it feels like we're fugitives rather than tourists.

I mean, you wouldn't think my dad's work was dangerous. He does lectures on topics like 'Can Egyptian Magic Really Kill You?' and 'Favourite Punishments in the Egyptian Underworld' and other stuff most people wouldn't care about. But, like I said, there's that other side to him. He's always very cautious, checking every hotel room before he lets me walk into it. He'll dart into a museum to see some artefacts, take a few notes and rush out again like he's afraid to be caught on the security cameras.

One time when I was younger, we raced across the Charles de Gaulle Airport to catch a last-minute flight, and Dad didn't relax until the plane was off the ground. I asked him point

blank what he was running from, and he looked at me like I'd just pulled the pin out of a grenade. For a second I was scared he might actually tell me the truth. Then he said, 'Carter, it's nothing.' As if 'nothing' were the most terrible thing in the world.

After that, I decided maybe it was better not to ask questions.

My grandparents, the Fausts, live in a housing development near Canary Wharf, right on the banks of the River Thames. The taxi let us off at the kerb, and my dad asked the driver to wait.

We were halfway up the walk when Dad froze. He turned and looked behind us.

'What?' I asked.

Then I saw the man in the trench coat. He was across the street, leaning against a big dead tree. He was barrel shaped, with skin the colour of roasted coffee. His coat and black pinstriped suit looked expensive. He had long braided hair and wore a black fedora pulled down low over his dark round glasses. He reminded me of a jazz musician, the kind my dad would always drag me to see in concert. Even though I couldn't see his eyes, I got the impression he was watching us. He might've been an old friend or colleague of Dad's. No matter where we went, Dad was always running into people he knew. But it did seem strange that the guy was waiting here, outside my grandparents'. And he didn't look happy.

'Carter,' my dad said, 'go on ahead.'

'But –'

'Get your sister. I'll meet you back at the taxi.'

He crossed the street towards the man in the trench coat, which left me with two choices: follow my dad and see what was going on, or do what I was told.

I decided on the slightly less dangerous path. I went to retrieve my sister.

Before I could even knock, Sadie opened the door.

'Late as usual,' she said.

She was holding her cat, Muffin, who'd been a 'going away' gift from Dad six years before. Muffin never seemed to get older or bigger. She had fuzzy yellow-and-black fur like a miniature leopard, alert yellow eyes and pointy ears that were too tall for her head. A silver Egyptian pendant dangled from her collar. She didn't look anything like a muffin, but Sadie had been little when she named her, so I guess you have to cut her some slack.

Sadie hadn't changed much either since last summer.

[As I'm recording this, she's standing next to me, glaring, so I'd better be careful how I describe her.]

You would never guess she's my sister. First of all, she'd been living in England so long, she has a British accent. Second, she takes after our mom, who was white, so Sadie's skin is much lighter than mine. She has straight caramel-coloured hair, not exactly blonde but not brown, which she usually dyes with streaks of bright colours. That day it had red streaks down the left side. Her eyes are blue. I'm serious. *Blue* eyes, just like our mom's. She's only twelve, but she's exactly as tall as me, which is really annoying. She was chewing gum as usual, dressed for

her day out with Dad in battered jeans, a leather jacket and combat boots, like she was going to a concert and was hoping to stomp on some people. She had headphones dangling round her neck in case we bored her.

[Okay, she didn't hit me, so I guess I did an okay job of describing her.]

'Our plane was late,' I told her.

She popped a bubble, rubbed Muffin's head and tossed the cat inside. 'Gran, going out!'

From somewhere in the house, Grandma Faust said something I couldn't make out, probably, 'Don't let them in!'

Sadie closed the door and regarded me as if I were a dead mouse her cat had just dragged in. 'So, here you are again.'

'Yep.'

'Come on, then.' She sighed. 'Let's get on with it.'

That's the way she was. No 'Hi, how you been the last six months? So glad to see you!' or anything. But that was okay with me. When you only see each other twice a year, it's like you're distant cousins rather than siblings. We had absolutely nothing in common except our parents.

We trudged down the steps. I was thinking how she smelled like a combination of old people's house and bubble gum when she stopped so abruptly I ran into her.

'Who's that?' she asked.

I'd almost forgotten about the dude in the trench coat. He and my dad were standing across the street next to the big tree, having what looked like a serious argument. Dad's back was turned so I couldn't see his face, but he gestured with his

hands like he does when he's agitated. The other guy scowled and shook his head.

'Dunno,' I said. 'He was there when we pulled up.'

'He looks familiar.' Sadie frowned like she was trying to remember. 'Come on.'

'Dad wants us to wait in the cab,' I said, even though I knew it was no use. Sadie was already on the move.

Instead of going straight across the street, she dashed up the sidewalk for half a block, ducking behind cars, then crossed to the opposite side and crouched under a low stone wall. She started sneaking towards our dad. I didn't have much choice but to follow her example, even though it made me feel kind of stupid.

'Six years in England,' I muttered, 'and she thinks she's James Bond.'

Sadie swatted me without looking back and kept creeping forward.

A couple more steps and we were right behind the big dead tree. I could hear my dad on the other side, saying, '– have to, Amos. You know it's the right thing.'

'No,' said the other man, who must've been Amos. His voice was deep and even – very insistent. His accent was American. 'If *I* don't stop you, Julius, *they* will. The Per Ankh is shadowing you.'

Sadie turned to me and mouthed the words 'Per *what*?'

I shook my head, just as mystified. 'Let's get out of here,' I whispered, because I figured we'd be spotted any minute and get in serious trouble. Sadie, of course, ignored me.

'They don't know my plan,' my father was saying. 'By the time they figure it out –'

'And the children?' Amos asked. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck. 'What about them?'

'I've made arrangements to protect them,' my dad said. 'Besides, if I don't do this, we're all in danger. Now, back off.'

'I can't, Julius.'

'Then it's a duel you want?' Dad's tone turned deadly serious. 'You never could beat me, Amos.'

I hadn't seen my dad get violent since the Great Spatula Incident, and I wasn't anxious to see a repeat of *that*, but the two men seemed to be edging towards a fight.

Before I could react, Sadie popped up and shouted, 'Dad!'

He looked surprised when she tackle-hugged him, but not nearly as surprised as the other guy, Amos. He backed up so quickly, he tripped over his own trench coat.

He'd taken off his glasses. I couldn't help thinking that Sadie was right. He did look familiar – like a very distant memory.

'I – I must be going,' he said. He straightened his fedora and lumbered down the road.

Our dad watched him go. He kept one arm protectively around Sadie and one hand inside the workbag slung over his shoulder. Finally, when Amos disappeared round the corner, Dad relaxed. He took his hand out of the bag and smiled at Sadie. 'Hello, sweetheart.'

Sadie pushed away from him and crossed her arms. 'Oh, now it's *sweetheart*, is it? You're late. Visitation Day's nearly over! And what was that about? Who's Amos, and what's the Per Ankh?'

Dad stiffened. He glanced at me like he was wondering how much we'd overheard.

'It's nothing,' he said, trying to sound upbeat. 'I have a wonderful evening planned. Who'd like a private tour of the British Museum?'

Sadie slumped in the back of the taxi between Dad and me.

'I can't believe it,' she grumbled. 'One evening together, and you want to do research.'

Dad tried for a smile. 'Sweetheart, it'll be fun. The curator of the Egyptian collection personally invited –'

'Right, big surprise.' Sadie blew a strand of red-streaked hair out of her face. 'Christmas Eve, and we're going to see some mouldy old relics from Egypt. Do you ever think about *anything* else?'

Dad didn't get mad. He never gets mad at Sadie. He just stared out of the window at the darkening sky and the rain.

'Yes,' he said quietly. 'I do.'

Whenever Dad got quiet like that and stared off into nowhere, I knew he was thinking about our mom. The last few months, it had been happening a lot. I'd walk into our hotel room and find him with his cell phone in his hands, Mom's picture smiling up at him from the screen – her hair tucked under a headscarf, her blue eyes startlingly bright against the desert backdrop.

Or we'd be at some dig site. I'd see Dad staring at the horizon, and I'd know he was remembering how he'd met her – two young scientists in the Valley of the Kings, on a dig to

discover a lost tomb. Dad was an Egyptologist. Mom was an anthropologist looking for ancient DNA. He'd told me the story a thousand times.

Our taxi snaked its way along the banks of the Thames. Just past Waterloo Bridge, my dad tensed.

'Driver,' he said. 'Stop here a moment.'

The cabbie pulled over on the Victoria Embankment.

'What is it, Dad?' I asked.

He got out of the cab like he hadn't heard me. When Sadie and I joined him on the sidewalk, he was staring up at Cleopatra's Needle.

In case you've never seen it: the Needle is an obelisk, not a needle, and it doesn't have anything to do with Cleopatra. I guess the British just thought the name sounded cool when they brought it to London. It's about seventy feet tall, which would've been really impressive back in Ancient Egypt, but on the Thames, with all the tall buildings around, it looks small and sad. You could drive right by it and not even realize you'd just passed something that was a thousand years older than the city of London.

'God.' Sadie walked round in a frustrated circle. 'Do we have to stop for *every* monument?'

My dad stared at the top of the obelisk. 'I had to see it again,' he murmured. 'Where it happened . . .'

A freezing wind blew off the river. I wanted to get back in the cab, but my dad was really starting to worry me. I'd never seen him so distracted.

'What, Dad?' I asked. 'What happened here?'

'The last place I saw her.'

Sadie stopped pacing. She scowled at me uncertainly, then back at Dad. 'Hang on. Do you mean Mum?'

Dad brushed Sadie's hair behind her ear, and she was so surprised, she didn't even push him away.

I felt like the rain had frozen me solid. Mom's death had always been a forbidden subject. I knew she'd died in an accident in London. I knew my grandparents blamed my dad. But no one would ever tell us the details. I'd given up asking my dad, partly because it made him so sad, partly because he absolutely refused to tell me anything. 'When you're older,' was all he would say, which was the most frustrating response ever.

'You're telling us she died here,' I said. 'At Cleopatra's Needle? What happened?'

He lowered his head.

'Dad!' Sadie protested. 'I go past this *every* day, and you mean to say – all this time – and I didn't even *know*?'

'Do you still have your cat?' Dad asked her, which seemed like a really stupid question.

'Of course I've still got the cat!' she said. 'What does that have to do with anything?'

'And your amulet?'

Sadie's hand went to her neck. When we were little, right before Sadie went to live with our grandparents, Dad had given us both Egyptian amulets. Mine was an Eye of Horus, which was a popular protection symbol in Ancient Egypt.



In fact, my dad says the modern pharmacist's symbol, ℞, is a simplified version of the Eye of Horus, because medicine is supposed to protect you.

Anyway, I always wore my amulet under my shirt, but I figured Sadie would've lost hers or thrown it away.

To my surprise, she nodded. 'Course I have it, Dad, but don't change the subject. Gran's always going on about how you caused Mum's death. That's not true, is it?'

We waited. For once, Sadie and I wanted exactly the same thing – the truth.

'The night your mother died,' my father started, 'here at the Needle –'

A sudden flash illuminated the Embankment. I turned, half blind, and just for a moment I glimpsed two figures: a tall pale man with a forked beard, wearing cream-coloured robes, and a coppery-skinned girl in dark blue robes and a headscarf – the kind of clothes I'd seen hundreds of times in Egypt. They were just standing there side by side, not twenty feet away, watching us. Then the light faded. The figures melted into a fuzzy after-image. When my eyes readjusted to the darkness, they were gone.

'*Um . . .*' Sadie said nervously. 'Did you just see that?'

'Get in the cab,' my dad said, pushing us towards the kerb. 'We're out of time.'

From that point on, Dad clammed up.

'This isn't the place to talk,' he said, glancing behind us. He'd promised the cabbie an extra ten pounds if he got us to the museum in under five minutes, and the cabbie was doing his best.

'Dad,' I tried, 'those people at the river –'

'And the other bloke, Amos,' Sadie said. 'Are they Egyptian police or something?'

'Look, both of you,' Dad said, 'I'm going to need your help tonight. I know it's hard, but you have to be patient. I'll explain everything, I promise, after we get to the museum. I'm going to make everything right again.'

'What do you mean?' Sadie insisted. 'Make *what* right?'

Dad's expression was more than sad. It was almost guilty. With a chill, I thought about what Sadie had said: about our grandparents blaming him for Mom's death. That *couldn't* be what he was talking about, could it?

The cabbie swerved onto Great Russell Street and screeched to a halt in front of the museum's main gates.

'Just follow my lead,' Dad told us. 'When we meet the curator, act normal.'

I was thinking that Sadie never acted *normal*, but I decided not to say anything.

We climbed out of the cab. I got our luggage while Dad paid the driver with a big wad of cash. Then he did something strange. He threw a handful of small objects into the back seat – they looked like stones, but it was too dark for me to be sure. 'Keep driving,' he told the cabbie. 'Take us to Chelsea.'

That made no sense since we were already out of the cab, but the driver sped off. I glanced at Dad, then back at the cab, and before it turned the corner and disappeared in the dark I caught a weird glimpse of three passengers in the back seat: a man and two kids.

I blinked. There was no way the cab could've picked up another fare so fast. 'Dad –'

'London cabs don't stay empty very long,' he said matter-of-factly. 'Come along, kids.'

He marched off through the wrought-iron gates. For a second, Sadie and I hesitated.

'Carter, *what* is going on?'

I shook my head. 'I'm not sure I want to know.'

'Well, stay out here in the cold if you want, but *I'm* not leaving without an explanation.' She turned and marched after our dad.

Looking back on it, I should've run. I should've dragged Sadie out of there and got as far away as possible. Instead I followed her through the gates.