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THE
STOLEN
QUEEN

A NOVEL



Fiona Davis



DUTTON





DUTTON

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For Mom

CHAPTER ONE

Charlotte

NEW YORK CITY, 1978

The staff meeting of the Metropolitan Museum's Department of Egyptian Art was supposed to start at ten, which meant associate curator Charlotte Cross arrived at nine to prepare her colleagues for battle.

The department had never been so busy. Two months ago, Charlotte had overseen the opening of the Temple of Dendur, which had been plucked from the banks of the Nile (with the blessing of the Egyptian government) and reconstructed at the Met in a special exhibit hall featuring a slanted wall of glass overlooking Central Park. Next month, the King Tutankhamun exhibition—which had been touring America to great acclaim for the past couple of years—was scheduled to have its final stop at the Met. The prospect of millions of visitors descending upon the museum had put pressure on everyone, including Charlotte's boss, Frederick, who much preferred wooing donors to dealing with departmental logistics.

The Met was closed on Mondays, but only to visitors. For the employees, much of the behind-the-scenes work was accomplished on the first day of the workweek: handlers moved paintings from one gallery to another, the curatorial team might oversee the installation of a new exhibition, technicians performed condition checks of antiquities, while lampers wandered from gallery to gallery, necks craned, searching for blown-out lightbulbs. Monday was Charlotte's favorite day, when the museum felt like a private playground, the staff free to roam about without being accosted for directions to the nearest bathroom.

She started in the gallery that housed the ten-foot-high, four-thousand-year-old Colossal Seated Statue of a Pharaoh. The figure depicted was all muscle and power, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist. Even though his face and one arm were damaged, he looked as if he were about to declare something important: an act of war, or maybe a death sentence.

A group of handlers were already gathered around the statue. Joseph, a budding sculptor who led the team, looked up expectantly as Charlotte approached. “Morning, boss.”

Charlotte nodded. “I wanted to give you the heads-up that Frederick is considering moving this piece to the Temple of Dendur gallery.”

They all moaned in unison. “This old guy’s been in the same spot since the 1930s,” said Joseph. “He’s way too fragile.”

“That was my first impression as well,” answered Charlotte. “But I was thinking about it last night, and there might be a way.” They talked through the procedure, which would involve a mechanical hoist and several carefully placed padded blankets and straps, until the team’s uneasiness abated. Luckily, the Met’s staff were the best in the business, as professional as they were serious, and Charlotte knew they’d leave nothing to chance.

In the Old Kingdom gallery, Charlotte pulled aside a technician. “Denise, I’m still concerned about the humidity in here. Can you talk to Steve in the conservation department today and see if silicone gel will help absorb the moisture?”

“That’s a great idea. Will do.”

Just before ten, Charlotte finished her circuit and headed to the spacious plaza in front of the Temple of Dendur, where Frederick stood among a group that included the more junior assistant curators, as well as handlers, technicians, and conservators.

“There’s so much to cover, I don’t even know where to begin.” Frederick ran one hand through his thick mane of hair and gave his head a tiny shake, a nervous habit that meant he was about to lose it. “The humidity in the vitrines *must* be better controlled. I don’t know how many times I’ve said it, but if any of these loaned antiquities get damaged on our

watch, one of you will be to blame. I will not allow the Met to become the laughingstock of the country. Denise? Do you hear me?"

"I do, sir," answered Denise in a strong alto. "I've already spoken with Steve in the conservation department. He thinks silicone gel will help, and we'll have it taken care of by tomorrow morning."

"Oh. Okay." Frederick sniffed. "What about the updated budget information for the exhibition? I need to see where we stand."

An administrative staffer threw Charlotte a grateful glance before speaking up. "It's on your desk."

"Huh." Frederick paused, the ends of his mouth turned down, as if he found his staff's industriousness slightly disappointing. He scanned the crowd before settling his gaze on Joseph, who immediately snapped to attention. "Joseph. I'm going to tell you something that you will not like. Not at all. Are you ready?"

Joseph nodded.

"The Colossal Seated Statue of a Pharaoh is to be moved into the Temple of Dendur for the duration of the King Tut exhibition."

Joseph replied without missing a beat. "Yes, sir. We can do that."

"Really?" Frederick's voice rose in pitch. "I mean, it hasn't been moved in ages. You really think you can handle it?"

"Sure thing."

"Okay, then. Glad to hear it." Frederick sounded like he was trying to convince himself of the fact.

The mood in the room relaxed noticeably. So far, so good.

"Charlotte, have you proofed the King Tut catalog yet?"

Frederick had insisted on writing the copy himself for the exhibition catalog, which meant Charlotte had spent most of last week editing it so that readers unfamiliar with terms like "cartouche" and "New Kingdom" wouldn't end up befuddled. "It's on your desk, and I've integrated Mr. Lavigne's notes as well."

"You got notes from the director already? Well, then, I suppose all is in order. Oh, wait, I almost forgot." He snapped his fingers. "One of our

donors suggested we should sell King Tut scarves as part of the merchandising. Nancy, look into that and get me samples by next week.”

Nancy was Frederick’s assistant, a tough divorcée from Queens who usually managed her boss with a firm hand. But merchandise was not part of her job description, as Frederick well knew.

“Scarves?” she repeated. “You must be confusing me with someone else. I don’t do the souvenirs.”

“Not my problem,” he snapped before breaking out in a wide smile. “That’s all, folks.” Frederick clapped his hands twice and trotted away, his mood obviously lighter now that he’d ruined at least one person’s day.

Charlotte approached Nancy, who was barely concealing an eye roll. “Reach out to Wendy Metcalf, she’s the merchandise planner in the Met Store who handles textiles and women’s apparel,” said Charlotte. “Tell her I sent you.”

“Will do. Frederick’s lucky to have you, Charlotte Cross. I was just about to tell him where he could stick his scarves.”

Charlotte had been working at the Met Museum her entire career, except for a brief stint in Egypt when she was a young woman. While her colleagues had climbed the ranks and been appointed head curators at other museums, she was still an associate, her career stalled out, and for the past fifteen years, her job had basically consisted of cleaning up after Frederick. He liked to consider himself a “concept guy,” which meant all the details fell to her. But it also gave her a chance to reconfigure his concepts so that they appealed to the museum’s visitors and could be smoothly executed by the staff. All the responsibility and none of the accolades. Sometimes she felt more like the protector of Frederick’s legacy than associate curator, but she adored the people she worked with and loved being surrounded by some of the most precious antiquities in the world.

Still, in recent months, Charlotte had been thinking more and more about her own legacy. A few years ago, without sharing her plans with anyone, she’d begun to investigate a bold theory about an ancient Egyptian ruler who modern historians had largely dismissed. And now, in the wake of hundreds of hours of painstaking research, Charlotte had something up her

sleeve that she hoped would change everything. After a decade and a half of living in Frederick's shadow, Charlotte might finally have a chance to shine.



The administrative offices of their department were located through an unmarked door down one of the gallery's long hallways. After the grandeur of the collection, the offices were something of a letdown—Charlotte considered herself lucky that her particular cubicle looked out onto an air shaft. Her duties included answering letters from people asking if the object they'd found in their grandmother's attic was an ancient Egyptian relic or not (she could usually tell from the enclosed snapshot that it was not), handling requests for loans from other museums, spending a couple of hours in the storerooms checking on items that weren't currently exhibited, and working on the infernal Egyptian Art collection catalog that eventually would list every artifact the department owned. It had been started in the 1950s, and Frederick hoped one day to have a third volume published that would include all the pieces from the Twentieth to Thirtieth Dynasties, a massive undertaking.

As soon as she sat down at her desk, Charlotte caught sight of a large envelope from Egypt that lay next to a well-worn accordion folder bursting with notes and research papers.

For the past three years, Charlotte had been studying the complicated life of an ancient Egyptian woman named Hathorkare, who married the pharaoh Saukemmet I but was unable to bear him a son, which meant that, upon his death, the infant son of one of the lesser queens was chosen to be the next leader of Egypt. Hathorkare, seething with resentment of this child king, quickly named herself regent and stepped in to rule, ostensibly until Saukemmet II came of age. Yet seven years into her regency, she named *herself* pharaoh, maintaining her hold over Egypt for the next twenty years. After her death, Saukemmet II finally seized the throne and immediately ordered many of his stepmother's images to be violently hacked out of the stone walls of temples and shrines.

Or at least that was the conventional wisdom among Egyptian scholars—including Frederick, who had published a seminal article on the early struggles and triumphant rise of Saukemet II.

But Charlotte had a different theory about Hathorkare.

After doing some meticulous research, she'd concluded that the vandalization of Hathorkare's likenesses couldn't have occurred right after her death, as historians believed. In fact, according to Charlotte's calculations, the proscription had to have been undertaken twenty years *after* her death—and not long before Saukemet II's own demise—which seemed an awfully long time to hold a grudge. It made no sense that Saukemet II's rage would suddenly erupt in his waning years. Perhaps there was another, less emotional reason for the erasures.

Charlotte also noticed that historians ignored all the good Hathorkare accomplished during her reign: building glorious temples, making savvy trades with neighboring countries, and providing a long stretch of economic and political stability for her countrymen. Instead, she was unilaterally disdained and dismissed. In fact, the Met's own depiction of Hathorkare—written by a male archaeologist in the 1950s for the museum's catalog—described the female pharaoh as a “vain, ambitious, and unscrupulous woman.”

If correct, Charlotte's findings would completely transform the way Egyptologists—and the world—viewed Hathorkare. Finally, after three years of hard work and multiple dead ends, this envelope containing photos taken at the Temple of Karnak in Luxor, Egypt, was crucial to proving her theory. She spent an hour studying the photos with a magnifier, making notes, checking her timeline. By the time she was done, she knew for certain that her initial instincts about Hathorkare and the timing of the erasures were right.

Charlotte was about to turn a long-held assumption upside down, revive the name and reputation of Hathorkare, and make a major contribution to the study of ancient Egyptian history.

The ringing of her phone brought her out of her daydream.

“Frederick wants to see you down in the basement storeroom,” said Nancy. “There’s a new piece that just came in.”

That was odd. They weren’t expecting anything other than the Tut artifacts. “I’m on my way. Hey, does Frederick have time in his schedule for me today? I have something important I want to show him.”

“He’s not free until six tonight.”

“I’ll take it.”

“And thanks again for your help earlier,” added Nancy. “The King Tut scarves have been ordered.”

“Let the merchandising begin.”

Out in the galleries, Charlotte paused in front of one of her favorite depictions of Hathorkare in the collection, a fragment of a statue known as the Cerulean Queen. While many of the other figures from Egypt were made of limestone or red granite with a rough finish, the Cerulean Queen was made of finely polished lapis lazuli. The only remnant of the statue was a tantalizing fragment of the lower portion of its head, consisting of the cheeks, the chin, and a large portion of the lips. And what lips they were: beautifully curved and utterly sensuous. The lips of Hathorkare. If the rest of the statue came anywhere close to being as beautiful as the lips, it must have been a sight to behold. Charlotte wondered how it came to be smashed. Was it accidentally dropped while being moved from one location to another? Or did someone take a hammer to it on orders from Saukemet II? The thought was too awful to contemplate.

The fragment was small, only around five inches across. It had been found at the turn of the twentieth century, by a British earl who fancied himself something of an Egyptologist, in a trash heap containing destroyed statues of Hathorkare, just outside her temple. Nearby had lain a broken slab of limestone with a warning that translated to “Anyone who removes an object dear to Hathorkare outside of the boundaries of the kingdom will face the wrath of the gods.”

The earl was killed in a hunting accident two weeks after bringing the Cerulean Queen to his estate in Hampshire. His widow quickly sold it off to the Met, and died less than a month later choking on a gumdrop.

As she stood before the artifact now, Charlotte reflexively looked around for a young woman in a red coat before remembering it was a Monday, the Met closed to visitors. “Little Red Riding Hood,” the staff called her, because in cold weather she always wore a bright red coat with a large, floppy hood. Judging from how often Charlotte spotted her in front of the statue, Little Red Riding Hood was a big fan of the Cerulean Queen. She was always alone, probably a graduate student or an artist, and had the saddest eyes Charlotte had ever seen.

A voice drifted in from the hallway.

“Charlotte’s been around how long?”

“Way longer than Frederick.” Charlotte recognized Joseph’s voice. He was speaking with one of the younger technicians, a new hire. “Since the 1930s.”

Charlotte slid behind the statue, hoping they wouldn’t peer into the gallery as they walked by.

“Then why isn’t she in charge? It would make our jobs a whole lot easier.”

“She’s never been back to Egypt, not since she was there in the ’30s. There was some kind of accident, a tragedy. No one ever shares the details, but she’s never been back.”

“An Egyptologist who won’t go to Egypt. Huh.”

They moved out of hearing range. Charlotte’s cheeks flamed with embarrassment as she sidled her way back around to the front of the statue, trying to find her equilibrium again.

The curse of Hathorkare hadn’t ended with the death of the earl’s widow. Charlotte had fallen under its spell as well.

It was dangerous to think about that time.

She took a couple of deep breaths, studying the curve of the statue’s chin, trying to imagine the shape of the nose and eyes. The Cerulean Queen gave her hope. Hope that one could be broken and crushed and still carry on, the gleaming remnant proof that something beautiful once existed in this terrible world.



Downstairs, Frederick and several others from their department stood around a large worktable in the storeroom, one of many bursting with artwork and sculptures in the Met's basement level.

"Ah, Charlotte. I know you'll want to see this," said Frederick, waving her over. Whatever lay on the table was hidden due to the crush of bodies surrounding it. "We've just received a very generous one-year loan from an anonymous donor."

Frederick usually consulted with Charlotte on any loans. Why now, when they had their hands full managing the loans for the King Tut exhibition, would they need one more? Typical Frederick, to have his attention pulled by the latest shiny new thing. She hoped it was worth it as she maneuvered her way closer.

But once she was at the edge of the table and the object came into focus, she gasped, one hand going to her heart. The conservators on either side of her looked at her curiously.

In the middle of the table lay a broad collar, a type of necklace popular in ancient Egypt. But this one was exquisite, made of gold and glass, and Charlotte knew even before she leaned in closer that she would find a gap on the right side of the bottom row where one of the nefer amulets was missing.

The piece was exceptional, distinctive.

She'd first seen it in Egypt, in 1936, when it was lifted from the bowels of a tomb, covered in dust.

And she'd last seen it a year later, right before it was lost at the bottom of the Nile.

"Does it have the cartouche of Hathorkare on the back of the clasp?" she asked, not bothering to hide the panic in her voice.

"It certainly does." Frederick nodded to the technician, who turned over the necklace with gloved hands to show off the hieroglyphics that represented the pharaoh's name, enclosed in an oval. "I'm impressed."

"Where did this come from?" she demanded.

“Charlotte, are you all right?” Frederick regarded her with concern. “You’re as white as a sheet.”

She had so many questions, the words got stuck in her throat. “Why are we getting it? Who was the donor?”

“The donor asked to remain anonymous. We have the broad collar for one year. I thought you’d be pleased.”

She could almost hear the screams from that fateful night echoing in her head. The night that changed everything. And the reason she could never return to Egypt.

Frederick ordered the technicians to take the necklace away and turned to leave. Charlotte followed him out the door.

“You have to tell me who the donor is,” she said. “It’s important.”

Frederick looked at his watch. “I have exactly four minutes until my next meeting at the other side of the building. Why exactly do you need to know this information?”

She couldn’t tell him. That would reveal too much, and she was barely hanging on as it was. “I was there when it was found.”

“Ah, back in Egypt, in the olden days.” He laughed at his joke. Charlotte did not. “What does it matter who owns it now?”

“It doesn’t make sense, how it suddenly reappeared like this. It was lost.”

“Then lucky for us it was found. I would think you would be pleased.”

Charlotte forced herself to back off. It would do her no good to anger Frederick right now, not if she wanted him on her side when she told him about her Hathorkare finding.

Besides, she had other ways to figure out who the donor was. Charlotte took the elevator up to the fifth floor of the building, where the director of the Met, Mr. Lavigne, had his office. The last time they’d interacted, he’d expressed his thanks to Charlotte for providing a reference for a friend’s daughter who was applying to a PhD program in art history. Charlotte had insisted on interviewing the woman before she wrote the reference and was relieved to find her smart and ambitious, so it hadn’t been a difficult request

to honor. But Mr. Lavigne didn't need to know that. As far as he was concerned, he owed her a favor.

Unfortunately, his secretary informed Charlotte that he was away in Europe, back on Thursday. She made an appointment for the afternoon of his return; she wasn't giving up so easily.

She had to know where the broad collar came from, how it got to the Met.

And why it was haunting her from the grave.