



Mummy Mania

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MUMMY MANIA

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MUMMY MANIA

Chapter One

Nothing but dust and echoes: and a long, glass case.

That was all that was left of our little museum. It made me miserable to see the room so desolate. It looked much smaller now that everything had been cleared out. There were just the five of us left: our hollow voices ringing through the empty spaces as we argued.

Or rather, as four of us argued. One of us didn't say a word – because one of us was dead.

Very dead. Four thousand year-old dead. A mummy.

I don't mean my mum, of course, or Jake's mum, although they were both there, glowering at each other. I mean a *mummy* – Ancient Egyptian style – wrapped from head to toe in shabby, brownish bandages. It lay serenely in its glass case with its arms crossed on its chest, while Mum and Mrs Foxe quarrelled over its coffin.

Mrs Foxe was winning. My mum was being far too polite.

“I want it out, *now!*” snapped Mrs Foxe. Her tanned face was screwed up in annoyance like an old tea-bag. “It shouldn't still be here! I bought this building on the understanding it would be empty by today! This is going to be a fitness centre – a gym full of lithe young bodies pumping iron. I can't have ancient corpses cluttering up the place!”

“It's not that easy–” began Mum, but Mrs Foxe just stormed straight through her words.

“I'm warning you. That *thing* has got to go. Right now!”

“Or even sooner,” added her son Jake, smirking at me.

Jake was in my class at school, unfortunately. I knew he didn't like me; partly because I was a girl, but mostly because he was a snob. He wore brand-new designer gear – just like his mum – and eyed my filthy, torn old jeans with a contemptuous sneer.

I glared back defiantly. So what if my jeans were held together with safety-pins? I'd been working. I'd spent all day on my knees, helping Mum clear out the museum.

Together, we'd carefully packed up all the broken pots, clay beads and rusty knives. We'd loaded them lovingly into boxes and carried them out. The room had slowly emptied. Now everything had gone... except the mummy.

“I'd have thrown the whole lot on the rubbish heap,” sniffed Mrs Foxe.

“Not much of a museum, is it?” jeered Jake. “A few bits of cracked pot and a crummy old mummy. The mummy’s not even anyone important. You’d think it was Tutankhamun the way you go on about it. But it’s nobody!”

I couldn’t deny it. The mummy *was* nobody.

If you peered closely through the glass case, you could see a name written in hieroglyphs on the side of its coffin – at least, Mum *said* it was a name, but it was too faded for her to read. Apart from those hieroglyphs, the coffin was plain and undecorated. So it wasn’t a king’s, or even a priest’s. It was a nobody’s coffin.

All the same, the mummy had lain there for as long as I could remember, and I’d played games round its glass case every Saturday while Mum was working in the museum. It was like part of the furniture.

I was going to miss those Saturdays, playing marbles and hopscotch on the museum floor... No-one had ever complained. There had been nobody to complain. Hardly anyone visited our little museum. That was why it was closing down.

Mrs Foxe began hectoring Mum in a voice like a dentist’s drill.

“This building’s got to be transformed by November! I’m bringing in state-of-the-art equipment. Treadmills, power rowers, electronic bench presses!” She jabbed a taloned finger around the room as if pinning them into place. “People can’t exercise on their turbo-ski muscle-chargers with that gruesome old relic rotting away in the corner!”

“I’ve already told you,” said Mum between gritted teeth. “I can’t move the mummy. It’s been donated to the university. They’ll come and pick it up next week.”

“I expect they’ll unwrap it,” said Jake with relish. “They’ll peel off all those bandages, and find out what’s underneath. I’d like to do that.”

“No, you wouldn’t, dear!” said his mother sharply. “*Germ*s!”

She turned back to Mum, her eyes narrowing. “I’m not waiting till next week. If that mummy’s not gone by tomorrow, I’ll throw the horrible thing out!”

“You can’t do that!” I said indignantly.

But Mum evidently thought she could. Looking fraught and worried, she ran her hands through her hair until it stuck out like a toothbrush.

“I’ll have to go and make some phone calls,” she sighed. “We might persuade the new museum to take it. Mrs Foxe – you’d better come with me and speak to them yourself. Amber, you stay here. We won’t be long.”

Mum left with Mrs Foxe. I was alone with Jake. He stared at me loftily, and I gazed coolly back.

When Jake started at our school, our headmistress got me to show him round. She seemed to think we should be friends, just because neither of us had a Dad who lived at home.

But Jake soon made it very clear he didn't want me for a friend. He got in with the trendy set – the ones with their own laptops and the latest mobile phones and parents swooshing round in big flash cars.

His mum was rich. She owned half a dozen gyms, all called *Eternal Youth* – the sort of places where people pay buckets of cash to go and puff and pant on weird machines that look like instruments of torture.

Jake was always bragging about the wonderful things his mum had bought him: a new camera one week, an MP3 player the next. Now that she'd bought our museum as well, he was going to be unbearable.

He started being unbearable straight away.

“Your mum's soft in the head,” he announced.

“No, she's not!”

“She is! She'd have to be stupid to work in this dump. Couldn't she get a proper job?”

“It is a proper job,” I said. “She's the curator.”

His lip curled. “I bet my Mum earns ten times as much money as yours.”

“So?”

Jake glanced around in contempt. “It's a rotten little museum. Boring. Who cares about stupid old pots and a mouldy old mummy?”

He kicked at the glass case, and then picked up Mum's bunch of keys, lying on top of it. He rattled them carelessly.

“Put those down!” I said. I was starting to lose my cool.

Jake's eyes glinted. “I bet you daren't open the mummy's case.”

I caught my breath. “It's not allowed.”

“Why not? It'll get opened anyway, once the university get hold of it. Why not have a look now? You'll never get another chance.”

This was true. I felt a pang as I realised I would probably never see the mummy again. And from time to time, I *had* wondered what would happen if I raised that lid...

But then I thought of what Mum would say, and shook my head.

Jake glanced at me sidelong and laughed. “Coward. You're scared of that old bundle of rags!”

“No, I'm not!”

I was so annoyed that I instantly changed my mind.

I grabbed the keys off him, found the only one small enough to fit the case, and turned it in the lock. I put my hands on the lid.

Then I paused, looking down at the mummy in its stained and tattered bandages, lying so peacefully in its open coffin. I felt I shouldn't disturb it.

"Scaredy-cat!" mocked Jake.

"Don't be stupid! I've known this mummy all my life," I said. And I lifted the lid.

A faint scent rose though the air, dry and sweet as an open spice jar. It made the back of my throat prickle. For a panicky moment I wondered if Mrs Foxe could be right. Suppose there were Ancient Egyptian germs in there? I told myself firmly that no germ could live for thousands of years.

"Bet you daren't touch it," whispered Jake.

"You bet wrong," I said. I wasn't going to back down now. Anyway, I wasn't scared of this mummy... was I?

So I put my hand into the coffin, and touched the mummy's arm.

And it *moved*.

"*Waa!*" I jerked back with a cry. Then I heard Jake laughing.

"Don't be so soft! It slipped, that's all!"

He was right. I could have kicked myself. The mummy's arm had simply fallen to one side as I touched it.

Where it had lain, the bandages on its chest were paler than elsewhere – except for something small and dark, half-hidden, tucked in amongst the layers of cloth...

My heart was beating violently. I told myself that of course I wasn't scared; but somehow I didn't want to touch it again.

Jake reached into the coffin.

"You can't leave it like that!" he said. Carelessly he picked up the mummy's bandaged arm, shifting it to and fro until he found a position where it would stay put. As he settled it in place, I thought I saw his fingers close round something.

"What's that?" I asked.

"What's what?" said Jake. "Ssh! They're back." Quickly he slammed down the glass lid, just before our mothers came back into the room.

Mum eyed us suspiciously. "Amber? Jake? You haven't touched that coffin, have you?"

Mrs Foxe looked horrified. "Oh, Jake! *Germs!*"

"We haven't touched a thing," said Jake, looking about as innocent as a crocodile. His hand crept stealthily into his pocket.

But Mrs Foxe chose to believe him.

"Come along, then, darling! Time to go," she said. "The new museum has agreed to pick that horrible object up tomorrow, and store it for the University. Though they seemed to think it was hardly worth the trouble; not a good

specimen at all.” She glanced at Mum triumphantly. “We’ll be back in the morning, to make sure that it’s gone!”

Jake gave me a piranha grin, and ran out after his mother.

I was fuming.

“I hate them!” I told Mum fiercely. “They’re stealing our museum! They’re stealing your job!” And I was sure Jake had stolen something out of the coffin – although I couldn’t imagine what. Probably a scrap of wood that he’d taken to show off and laugh at with his snooty friends.

Mum gave me a hug and ruffled my hair.

“Come on, Amber! You mustn’t feel like that. The museum had to close down anyway. It’s not Mrs Foxe’s fault. And I *have* got a new job, after all. I’m sure I’ll enjoy working at the Museum of the Future.” But she sounded glum.

“Huh!” I said. “I’ve been *there* with school.” The Museum of the Future was on the other side of town. It was brand-new, and looked like a giant vacuum cleaner made of chrome and glass and rubber, just waiting to suck people in.

No mummies there. It was full of videos and holograms, with buttons to press and things going *beep* and WHOOSH and *PING*. On our school visit, I’d had to queue ages for every single button.

“I won’t want to go *there* on Saturdays!” I said. “I like it here.”

I gazed round sadly. A blue dusk crept through the windows. Shadows began to fill the empty corners. I dropped my eyes to the mummy... and I shivered.

Although the mummy looked the same as ever, it felt different. Since I’d touched it, it didn’t feel like part of the furniture any more. It seemed alien and sinister – and scary. I wished I’d never opened that glass case.

I felt as though my world was changing all around me. Nothing was safe any more. Nothing would ever be the same.

Chapter Two

I think Mum knew I felt bad, because next morning she cooked my favourite breakfast: bacon and beans and big black mushrooms. I'd just taken my first huge mouthful when the phone rang, with a peculiar, muffled ring.

"Oh, no!" said Mum, looking around frantically. "Where is it?"

This happens all the time. Our house is a tip. It looks as if all our cupboards have exploded, and burst everything out onto the floor.

It's not my fault – it's hers. I'm quite tidy, but Mum isn't. She's hopeless. She never puts anything away, including the phone.

"Honestly, Mum! Where did you last use it?"

"I don't know!" She was scrabbling under the newspaper and behind the toaster.

"It's not ringing in here!" I told her. "It's in the living-room."

Running through, I began to search the shelves, where she often leaves the phone amongst her precious lumps of rock. Mum says they're stone axes and arrowheads, but you could have fooled me.

Jake was right, I thought, as I hunted. Mum was soft in the head about old things.

The phone wasn't on the shelves, and it was still ringing. I scooped up Magpie, our cat, but she wasn't sitting on it.

So I rummaged in the mountain of books and paint pots on the floor, and spotted the phone at last under a roll of wallpaper. Mum's always meaning to decorate, but she never gets it finished. Our walls were blotchy plaster where she'd peeled off the old paper and got no further.

"Here!" I handed her the phone.

"Hallo? Why, Mrs Foxe!" Mum pulled a face. "How nice! What can I do for– What? What do you mean? But that's impossible!"

"What is it, Mum?" I hissed.

Mum's face bore a look of horror. Her voice rose as she spoke into the phone. "It simply can't have... That's terrible news! Yes, I'll come round straight away."

"Mum? Mum? What is it?"

Mum turned a dazed face towards me, and let the phone fall into the cat basket.

"The museum," she said. "Our museum. There's been a break-in. A burglary. Get that breakfast down, Amber: we've got to hurry."

“A burglary? Are you sure?” I frowned, puzzled. “But I remember you locking up! And anyway, there was nothing there to take. We cleared everything out!”

“Everything except the mummy,” she said grimly. “And it’s the mummy that’s been stolen.”

*

When we arrived at the Museum, a gleaming lime-green Jaguar was already parked outside it.

“Puke,” I muttered. Nice car, horrible colour. It had *Eternal Youth* written on its sides in whirly silver letters, and made Mum’s car look like a rusty biscuit-tin. We pulled up behind it, and hurried through the open fire door.

When we got inside, Mrs Foxe was tapping her feet impatiently on the empty floorboards, with Jake looking bored and haughty beside her. They both wore identical green tracksuits with the silver *Eternal Youth* logo swirling across them.

“Double puke,” I thought. Mrs Foxe’s long fingernails were painted green to match – but her fingers were bent into rigid claws.

She was *furious*. Straight away, she began to rave at Mum about security and insurance and stuff, so that Mum couldn’t get a word in.

Jake mouthed something at me. I didn’t know what he wanted to tell me, and I didn’t care. I stared at the mummy’s case.

It was true: some-one had stolen the mummy. The lid of the glass case stood open.

With a tingle of guilt, I remembered that I’d never locked the case after opening it yesterday. Now the coffin was empty.

At least, it was almost empty. As I moved closer, I saw a few shreds of dirty brownish cloth inside. More shreds and scraps were scattered on the floor nearby.

Kneeling to pick one up, I rubbed it between my fingers. It felt so dry it seemed to suck the moisture from my skin. I shivered.

Jake squatted beside me.

“Bits of bandage,” he muttered. “There are more outside, on the pavement. Didn’t you see them? They must have fallen off the mummy when your mum dragged it out.”

“My mum?” I gawped at him. “Are you crazy?”

“She stole it,” hissed Jake. “She must have. Who else would want it?”

“She couldn’t have! She’s been at home since yesterday!”

“How do you know? Maybe she crept out while you were asleep. She’d do anything to keep that mummy, and stop it being sliced up by the University!”

I felt faintly sick. Could Jake be right? Then, seeing the smirk on his face, I squared my shoulders, and retorted,

“I bet you stole it yourself – just like you nicked something out of its coffin!”

“I never did! I don’t know what you’re talking about. What would I want with that rotten old mummy, anyway?”

“Well, I bet your mother’s taken it, then!” I muttered. “She’s the one who wanted to chuck it out with the rubbish. I bet that’s exactly what she’s done!”

That shook him, I could tell. He glanced over at Mrs Foxe just as she bawled at Mum:

“I want that empty coffin out of here within an hour. It’s junk. If you don’t shift it, I’ll take it to the tip myself!”

“See?” I hissed at Jake.

“I’ll try and get the coffin moved,” said Mum. She shook her head, looking totally dazed. “I just don’t understand it. I locked up carefully.”

“The burglars broke in through the fire door!” snapped Mrs Foxe.

“But there’s no sign of damage,” protested Mum. “It’s almost as if it was opened from the inside... as if the mummy just got up and walked away.”

Jake groaned and rolled his eyes. Mrs Foxe laughed, as harsh as a parakeet.

“Ha! If it had, I’d be the first to hunt it down! A walking mummy? That really would have the secret of eternal youth! It’d be worth a fortune,” she declared. “But this is real life, not a horror movie.”

I whispered to Jake, “You can tell my mum didn’t steal it. Look how shocked she is!”

“She’s pretending,” muttered Jake. “All that stuff about the mummy getting up and walking away... what a load of rubbish! I’m telling you, she stole it. She’s batty about old things.”

I bit my lip, because it was true. Mum’s most precious possession is a scrap of manky old leather that looks like something the cat’s chewed. She says it’s a thousand year-old shoe. So I knew she’d jump at the chance of owning a mummy.

Jake stooped and picked up a shred of crumbling cloth.

“We can soon find out,” he said. “All we need to do is follow the trail. We’ll see where these lead!”

I jumped up. “All right! We’ll find out where *your* mum’s dumped the mummy!”

“Or where yours has hidden it,” muttered Jake, glaring at me.

“Fine! Let’s go.”

Mum called over to me, sounding distracted. “Amber – I’ll have to stay on here to sort things out. Do you want to go to Auntie Pam’s?”

I thought quickly. “Can I go down the shops with Jake instead?”

“Oh, yes!” put in Jake. He caught on fast, I’ll give him that. Suddenly he was all smiles. “I’d like my pocket money, Mum. And then Amber can come round to play at our house, can’t she?”

Mrs Foxe didn’t look too pleased. But I guessed she was used to giving Jake anything he wanted. She pulled a wodge of notes from her purse, peeled a couple off and handed them to Jake.

“Here you are. Don’t be long. Take care crossing the roads, and don’t get dirty.” I saw a flash of annoyance sweep over Jake’s face, and felt smug. My mum never told me not to get dirty.

“Pocket money, please Mum?” I said.

Mum was looking perplexed. Not surprising, when only yesterday, I’d told her I hated Jake! Then she shrugged, fished in her pocket and gave me everything she had – 65p and a button.

Jake snorted. But I said brightly, “Thanks, Mum!” and headed for the door.

Once we were outside, Jake pointed to the pavement. “See?”

I saw. Shreds of frayed, brown bandage lay thinly scattered along the street, like sad, dirty snowflakes. We began to follow them.

The trail was hard to pick out. Some of the scraps were no more than a few threads, and we had to go down on our knees to hunt for them. Luckily it was still early in the morning; there weren’t many people about to see us crawling on the pavement.

At this hour most of the shops weren’t even open yet, apart from the newsagent. As we crept beneath its window, following the trail, the shopkeeper looked down at us, startled. He was busy arranging Halloween masks in a display.

I gave him a little wave and he waved back, bemused. Then he carefully placed a plastic mummy mask between a warty witch and a blood-stained Frankenstein. If he only knew!

Jake nudged me. “Come on! We can’t hang around here. The trail keeps going down the road. Your mother took the mummy a long way!”

“*Your* mother,” I retorted.

But I was puzzled. Why would anyone lug the mummy all this distance? It wouldn’t have been easy to carry, or even drag along the pavement. If someone had stolen it, why hadn’t they just used a car?

Jake was already loping down the road in search of scraps of bandage. As I caught him up, he suddenly halted, swearing.

“I’ve lost it! It’s gone – vanished into thin air.”

He was right. The trail had ended.

I scanned our surroundings. Across the road the cobbled market-place was busy with traders setting up stalls. Nowhere there to hide a mummy, I thought...

But to our right, a narrow, gloomy alley twined between the closed shops and disappeared in shadow.

I pointed. “That way!”

Cautiously we crept down the alley. It led us round a corner and opened out in a gloomy yard at the back of the shops.

“Yuck,” I said. The yard was in a disgusting state. It was piled high with rubbish – cardboard boxes, milk crates, black bin-bags with their contents spilling out, overturned wheelie-bins... and I even recognised a broken chair from the museum.

I pounced on it with triumph. “I knew it! Your mum’s been here! She must have thrown this out!”

Jake was about to reply when a noise at the far end of the yard halted him. There was a rustle, and then a crash as a wheelie-bin overturned. A cloud of dust and plastic bags filled the air.

Through it, we glimpsed someone digging in the rubbish. They were making an awful mess.

“Oy!” shouted Jake. “Can you tell us if you’ve seen a–”

His voice trailed away as the dust cleared. The plastic bags drifted aside, and the figure straightened up, clutching something in its hand.

But its hand was as yellowed and shabby as the faded newspapers billowing around it. So was its body. The face that turned towards us was not a face at all. It was blank and bandaged, with a dark gap where the eyes should be.

My heart seemed to stop. For a moment, I felt as frozen as a snowman. I heard Jake cry out wordlessly.

Then we both turned, and ran.

Chapter Three

Out in the street we paused, panting, and looked at each other wide-eyed. I leant against the wall to peer carefully back round the corner into the alley.

Nothing. No following monster. Perhaps we'd just imagined it.

"Incredible!" breathed Jake. His eyes were shining.

"I know," I whispered. "I can't believe it."

"A walking mummy! Remember what my mother said? It's worth a fortune! We've got to catch it!"

"Catch it?"

"Well, of course! What's up? Are you scared?"

"Not at all!" I retorted.

But I was lying. Although I'd never been afraid of the mummy when it lay peacefully in its coffin in the museum, now it was different... horribly different.

I remembered once watching an old movie called *Revenge of the Tomb*, about a murderous mummy that staggered out of a pyramid, lumbered through the town and strangled people. I laughed my socks off because I knew it was ridiculous. Mummies didn't walk around. It couldn't possibly happen.

But now it *had* happened. My stomach was busy tying itself in knots; yet Jake didn't seem bothered at all.

"Come on! Let's go back and grab it!" Snatching up a large black bin-bag that was fluttering by his feet, he began to stalk back down the narrow alley. I had to force myself to follow.

It was there. It was real. It stood amidst the heaps of rubbish, quite motionless, not looking our way. Its head was bent over its outstretched hand as if it were staring down intently at something in its palm. So I knew that it could see.

Its hearing wasn't so good, though. As Jake crept up stealthily behind it, the mummy didn't stir. Jake edged closer and closer, until he was only a metre away from it – and then he charged.

"**RAAARRH!**" he bellowed, as the black bag went over the mummy's head.

The mummy dropped the object it was holding. Its arms flailed out wildly, hitting Jake in the stomach.

"*Ooof!*" As Jake sat down heavily on a pile of rubbish, the mummy stumbled blindly past him, trying to tear the bag from its head.

I reached out to seize its arm. Immediately, I wished I hadn't. The bandages had a dusty, crackly feel that made me shudder in revulsion: I let go as if they'd given me an electric shock, and pressed myself back against the wall. Ripping off the bin bag, the mummy staggered past me down the alley.

My heart was leaping around like a frog trapped in my chest. I couldn't get my legs to move. I just stood there like a dithering dumbo, knowing I ought to chase the mummy, and not wanting to. I was relieved when it lurched out of sight.

Squatting down, I picked up the tiny object it had dropped.

"A matchbox?" I said. "It was digging in the dirt for a *matchbox*?"

I looked at Jake, but he couldn't answer for wheezing. Pulling an inhaler from the pocket of his jeans, he held it to his mouth.

"Why didn't you stop it?" he gasped between puffs of the inhaler.

"Well, I just – just didn't want to leave you. I thought I'd better make sure that you're all right."

"Huh! I'm fine." Despite his wheezes, Jake pocketed the inhaler and scrambled impatiently to his feet. "Come on! We've got to catch it before someone else does – or before it catches some-one. Did you see how it attacked me? Let's get it! Hurry up!"

I almost hoped the mummy would have disappeared. However, when we emerged from the alley, there it was right in front of us.

It was standing slap bang in the middle of the road, while cars hooted and swerved to avoid it. A bus screeched to a halt inches away from it, and the driver stuck his head out of the window to bellow.

The mummy didn't seem to hear. It had no more road sense than a baby. It turned its head from side to side as if staring around, while a honking traffic jam built up in both directions.

At last it decided to move. It lumbered across the road towards the market, where the traders had stopped arranging their stalls to goggle like a tank full of goldfish.

I couldn't help thinking of that film I'd seen. The mummy walked as stiffly as a badly-programmed robot; but I didn't feel like laughing at all. When the mummy lurched towards the market traders, they backed away in alarm.

"Is this some sort of joke?" cried a large woman with a face as flat and red as a brick. "Watch what you're doing!"

As it shuffled clumsily past her stall, the mummy had just swept a whole pile of towels off it onto the ground.

"You there! Hoy! I'm talking to you!" shouted Brick-face. "You touch my things again, and I'm calling the police!"

"If she does that, we're stumped," muttered Jake. He was about to dash across the road after the mummy, when I hung on to his sleeve.

"Wait! If we try and get the mummy now, everyone'll be asking us questions. We've got to think of a good excuse for it."

"Such as?"

“Give us some money!” I demanded.

“What?” Jake looked bewildered.

“Quickly!” As he pulled out a note, I snatched it from his hand and raced back down the road to the newsagent’s shop we’d passed just minutes earlier.

I hurtled in, panting.

“Two Halloween masks, please – one witch, one Frankenstein,” I said breathlessly. Then I jiggled impatiently as the shopkeeper slowly produced them from behind the counter. As soon as the change clinked into my hand, I shot outside, pulling on the witch’s mask while I ran back to Jake.

“Here!” I handed Jake the green monster mask. “It matches that awful track-suit.”

“Hey! Do you know how much this track-suit cost?”

“Oh, just put the mask on! It’s our disguise, don’t you see? And give me that bin-liner.” Draping a black bag round my shoulders like a witch’s cloak, I hurried across the road.

The mummy was shambling slowly between the market stalls. Wherever it went, an empty space appeared magically in the huddle of traders. When the mummy paused like a browsing shopper to inspect one of the stalls, it was surrounded by a circle of faces gaping at it from a safe distance.

Reaching out, the mummy picked up a small box in its bandaged fingers. It held it up to study it with care.

“You want those paper-clips? That – that’s 50p,” said a lady from far behind the stall, her voice high and wobbly. “You – you must be advertising something, right?”

“It looks like a mummy,” said a doubtful voice.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” snapped Brick-face. “It’s some joker dressed up, trying to scare us!”

“Escaped from the hospital, I reckon, with all those bandages,” muttered a man nearby.

“Loony-bin, more likely!” said Brick-face rudely, and the crowd murmured in agreement.

“Is he on the telly, Nana?” cried a little boy to Brick-face. “Are they making a film? Can I be in it?”

“No, Jonny. Stay there!” called Brick-face, alarmed.

But Jonny had already darted away from her, giggling, to tiptoe up behind the mummy. The mummy stepped backwards straight into him and sent him tumbling over the cobbles. He began to squeal.

The mummy dropped the box of paper clips and turned to look at the wailing child. Then, lumbering over, it stooped down and reached for him with its long, stiff, tattered arms.

Brick-face shrieked like a referee's whistle. "Get away from him, you!" The crowd began to mutter and surge forward.

I pushed through them and ran up to grab the mummy firmly by one arm. This time I held on tight, even though the powdery feel of the bandages made my blood run cold. My heart was still doing its leaping frog impression as I spoke out loudly through my witch's mask.

"There you are, Tom!" I said as confidently as I could. "I've been looking for you everywhere! Come on, hurry up – we'll be late for the Halloween party."

It worked. As Jake, wearing his monster mask, seized the mummy's other arm, the worried faces around us relaxed. A few people laughed.

Brick-face scooped up the little boy and cuddled him fiercely.

"A party, at this time of day?" she snapped.

"Breakfast party," said Jake smoothly. "Everybody has them these days." I'd never heard of a breakfast party, but I nodded agreement. The stall-holders shrugged and began to drift away.

"You scared my Jonny out of his wits!" said Brick-face furiously. Jonny, who had forgotten to keep crying, suddenly remembered and set up a fresh wail.

"Need a sweetie!" he howled.

The mummy tried to lunge at him again. I needed all my strength to tug it back. Hanging on grimly to its arm, I gabbled, "It's my big brother Tom in here, and it took us ages to get him bandaged up, only now he can't see where he's going, so he keeps walking into things. Sorry!"

"He can't talk either, can he?" chuckled an old man. "I think you might have overdone those bandages!"

"We'll loosen them off when we get to the party," I promised. "Come on, Tom! Time to go!"

I yanked at the mummy's arm, praying it would move.

At first it resisted and made another dive at little Jonny. Maybe it wanted to strangle him, I thought, like in *Revenge of the Tomb*. While I didn't altogether blame it, I was relieved when it finally stood still and watched Jonny's indignant Nana carting him away.

"Come on, you!" said Jake roughly, giving its shoulder a sharp jerk.

The mummy obeyed. It began to shuffle slowly along between us, as we steered it away from the market. We must have made a weird-looking trio, I thought: the mummy shambling down the road between a witch and Frankenstein's monster. Slowly we began to make our way back to the museum.

Chapter Four

It was like leading a giant toddler.

The mummy staggered alongside me as if it wasn't used to walking, and couldn't quite control its legs. And, just like a toddler, it stopped to look at *everything*.

It stopped to stare at cars and buses going past. It paused to gaze up at an aeroplane. It was transfixed by a woman on a bike, who wobbled so much at the sight of it that she nearly toppled over.

It gawped at a girl on a skateboard. And when a gang of boys on roller-blades swept past, shouting and waving, the mummy's head turned so far round that I was afraid it might come off.

"Get a move on!" I urged. I was anxious to get it safely back inside the museum before anyone stopped us – and before it fell to bits.

For I didn't think walking around was doing it any good. Its feet were in a terrible state. The bandages were grey with dirt, and more bits were shredding off with every lurching step.

But the mummy wouldn't be hurried. It was driving me crazy. As we tried to drag it past the shops, it kept pulling back to stare at our reflection in the windows.

"Stupid thing. We'll never get it home at this rate!" grumbled Jake, giving it a shove.

"Home?" I said, pushing up my mask to frown at him. "Hang on a minute! What do you mean, home? We're taking it back to our museum, where it belongs!"

"It doesn't belong there any more," snapped Jake. "It's not your museum now, remember? It belongs to my mother. I'm going home to give her this mummy. It could be worth millions! I can't wait to see her face!"

"But it's not hers!" I protested. "If it's anybody's, it's *my* mother's. She's looked after this mummy for years."

"Finders keepers," snarled Jake, as he marched the reluctant mummy along. It was still turning its head from side to side like someone at a tennis match. "Anyway, here's the museum now. And there's nobody here. So that decides it."

The museum was locked; both cars were gone. Only a big green poster on the door announced:

***ETERNAL YOUTH CAN BE YOURS!
COMING HERE NEXT MONTH.***

I could feel myself going all sniffly, and scowled at Jake so that he wouldn't notice.

"*Home*," said Jake. He tugged the mummy one way.

"No!" I tugged it the other way. The mummy stumbled as if it was drunk.

"Stop it!" said Jake.

"*You* stop it!" I yelled. We halted outside the museum entrance to play a furious game of tug of war with the mummy.

All of a sudden there was a thunderous rattle behind us, and a long, roaring *WHOOSH*.

The gang of boys on roller-blades, whom we'd passed a few minutes ago, had swooped round in a huge arc like a flock of birds to follow us. They glided to a halt, surrounding us in a wheeled ring.

They were high school boys. I didn't know any of them, and I didn't want to. The leader stood right in front of us, looking very tall on his skates, and grinning in a way I didn't like.

"Going to a Halloween party, are you?"

"We might be," I said cautiously.

"Cool! We love parties, don't we, lads? We'll come along too."

"You're not scary enough," growled Jake. "Go away."

The leader didn't go away. He took two gliding steps closer and gave Jake a hard stare.

"We can be really scary when we want," he said ominously. "Scarier than *him*." He flicked the mummy with a contemptuous finger. "Tatty, isn't he?"

"Yes," I said meekly. "Can we get past, please? We don't want to be late."

"I don't rate that costume," said the boy. "Reckon he'll unravel in no time." He took a loose piece of the mummy's bandage between finger and thumb.

"Try it, Dazzer! Unwind him!" cried another boy.

Grinning, Dazzer started to pull at the bandages. Almost immediately, a long strand of yellowed cloth came loose and flapped in the breeze.

"What did I tell you!" cried Dazzer. "You haven't wrapped him properly, have you? I reckon if I pull hard enough, he'll just spin like a top!"

He tugged at a bandage on the mummy's chest, and it peeled off. The mummy staggered. Two of Dazzer's friends joined him, jeering as they pulled at the mummy's bindings.

"Stop it!" yelled Jake. "Leave it alone!"

He threw himself onto Dazzer's back. At once I began to kick the other two and tried to yank them off the mummy.

It was useless. The rest of the gang piled in with glee. There were too many of them, and they were stronger than us.

They seized me and Jake, tore off our masks, and threw them on the ground. Then, like a flock of vultures, the whole lot of them fell upon the mummy. It struggled helplessly in their clutches.

"Leave it alone!" roared Jake furiously. "It's *mine*!"

I managed to wrench myself free. For a few seconds, I thought of running away – but how could I abandon the mummy? I couldn't leave it to be mauled to pieces.

So instead I darted behind it, grabbed it round the waist with both arms and hung on like a crab. Old and musty it might be, but I was determined not to let the gang have it.

"Let go of it! You don't understand. It's real!" I cried desperately.

"It'll put a curse on you!" shouted Jake.

"Oh, I'm so scared!" sneered Dazzer. "Oh, I'm shaking with terror!" He seized the mummy's shoulders and began to rock it roughly to and fro. More bits of bandage flew away on the breeze.

"You'll pull it apart!" I wailed.

"That's the idea, innit?"

Jake launched himself at Dazzer again with such fury that the two of them fell over in a scrabbling heap. As the other boys stood back for a moment to watch, the mummy managed to get one arm free.

But it did not use it to hit out. Instead, raising its hand, it unravelled the remaining bandages wrapped around its face.

I was still behind it. All I could see was the back of its head.

That was bad enough. Its skin was yellow-brown and shiny, covered with tiny cracks like an old, stained egg.

As it unwound the last bandage I winced. I was glad I couldn't see its face.

But the gang could. There was a sudden silence. A dozen speechless mouths fell open.

"It's – it's just another mask," said one boy at last, in a tremulous voice. "It's got to be..."

Dazzer scrambled to his feet. He wasn't laughing any longer: his face had gone white.

"We didn't mean it! It was just a joke! Leave us alone!" he croaked. "Don't touch us!"

“Come on – let’s get out of here!” The whole lot of them began backing away in a hurry, as if the mummy really had put a curse on them. They tripped over their roller-blades and barged into each other in their haste to get away.

Then they sped off with a rumble of wheels.

“Well!” I said shakily. My legs had gone all wobbly. I felt a bit sick when I glanced at that shiny head.

It didn’t seem to bother Jake. Standing up, he shook himself and grinned wickedly at me.

“That mummy is totally gross! You know, it could be really useful,” he said.

“*Useful?* What on earth for?”

“Terrifying your enemies, of course. Think of the fun you could have!”

I didn’t answer. I was watching the mummy fumbling with its loose bandages, trying to fasten them back around its head. To my surprise, I saw that its hands were trembling, as if it felt as shaky as I did.

Had it felt scared, I wondered? What *could* it feel? How much did it understand about what was happening? I felt a sudden pang of pity for it.

“Here! I’ll do that,” I told it.

Taking the bandage from its clumsy hand, I managed to wrap its head up again without looking at it properly. The bandages were in a mess – the whole mummy was in a mess, come to that – but I tucked the loose ends in as firmly as I could.

“That’s better,” I said, turning the mummy to inspect it. With its drooping head and slumped shoulders, it looked like a little kid in the playground whose friends have been calling it names.

And then I *knew*. I knew that it knew. It knew it was a mummy, and it wasn’t happy about it.

I remembered the way it had stopped to stare at its reflection in the windows. What a shock it must have got! Imagine looking in the mirror and discovering you’re four thousand years old and wrapped in ancient bandages!

“It knows it looks horrible,” I said. “Poor thing!”

“Poor thing, my foot!” Jake snorted. “Don’t be so stupid! It’s a freak. A very valuable freak.” He seized the mummy’s arm. “And I’m taking it home!” he added, glaring at me.

This time, I didn’t argue. I didn’t want to tussle over the mummy any more – it was ragged enough already. Another tug-of-war might just pull it to pieces.

On the other hand, if I went along with Jake, at least I could try to make sure he didn’t hurt it. So I shrugged, and gave in.

“All right, Jake. You’re the boss. We’ll go to your house. Lead the way!”

Chapter Five

House? That was the understatement of the week. It was a flipping mansion.

“Is that all *yours*?” I gasped.

“It certainly is,” said Jake smugly.

I stared at his house. Behind high gold-painted railings, a vast bungalow squatted on a lawn that was the size of the school playing field – only greener, and entirely free from crisp packets. And unlike the school playing field, it looked as smooth as a pool table. Not a single daisy spoiled its perfect surface.

Jake pushed open the heavy iron gate. As we went through, I thought I heard a whirr of roller-blades, and caught a glimpse of somebody whizzing round the corner and then back out of sight.

But I didn’t care if we’d been followed. We were safe now. With a reassuring CLANG, the gate swung shut behind us.

The mummy seemed quite happy to be here too. At any rate, it trudged meekly alongside me as we crunched up the long gravel drive. We passed the green Jaguar and reached the front door.

“Take your shoes off,” warned Jake as we opened it. “Mum doesn’t like dirty floors.”

I could see that. Spotless miles of ice-blue carpet stretched away on either side.

“If she doesn’t like dirt, she won’t be too keen on the mummy!” I whispered. “Look at the state of it! And she thinks it’s a disgusting bit of junk – remember?”

“She said that before it started walking round,” said Jake, but he sounded uncertain. “Maybe we’d better tidy it up before I show it to her. Let’s put it in my bedroom for the time being, while we make it look a bit more respectable.”

I tugged gently at the mummy’s arm. It didn’t move. It seemed to be transfixed by the wall-paper – an elaborate pattern of grapes and leaves in green and purple.

“That’s truly hideous,” I said. The mummy put out a bandaged hand to trace round a leaf.

“Don’t touch that! It cost a bomb. You’ll leave marks!” hissed Jake. He pushed us down the hallway, past a closed door with music thumping behind it.

“That’s Mum’s gym. She’ll be exercising,” he whispered. He put a finger to his lips, opened the door a crack and called in,

“Mum! I’m home! I’ve brought Amber round to play. Can we have something to eat?”

“All right! Don’t make a mess!” snapped his mother’s voice from inside the gym. I caught a glimpse of her, pedalling furiously on a machine. She didn’t pause to wave or smile at Jake. Didn’t even look at him.

She was like a machine herself, I thought: cold and efficient. I didn’t care how rich she was – I was glad she wasn’t *my* mum.

“Don’t make a mess?” I hissed at Jake as he closed the door on her. “Have you seen the carpet?”

He looked back. Hundreds of grubby shreds of cloth were strewn along the corridor behind us, like a giant’s dandruff. Jake groaned and pushed us further along to another door.

“My bedroom,” he told me. “Stay here, and look after the mummy. Don’t go anywhere! I’d better try and sweep up, and then I’ll get some clean bandages.” With that, he disappeared.

I was shut in a strange room, alone with a four thousand year old mummy. I gave it a wide, nervous smile.

“Well,” I said. “This is nice.”

The mummy paid me no attention. It turned its head as if staring round in wonder. And, an instant later, so did I.

I couldn’t help feeling jealous. This was a *bedroom*? It looked bigger than my whole house!

A flat-screen TV, a DJ mixer and the latest games console were lined up on a long, polished desk along one wall. Next to Jake’s perfectly made bed were an electric guitar and a huge pair of speakers. On the opposite wall stretched miles of gleaming, cold, steel shelving, covered with model aircraft.

I felt a twinge of jealousy, and told myself not to be daft. Why be jealous? I could never live in a bedroom like that!

For a start, it was way too clean. Even the skateboard propped against the wall looked as if it had been scrubbed.

There were no posters on the spotless white walls; not a single comic on the floor or sweet wrapper under the bed. I bet any germ that showed its face in there would be drowned in disinfectant and booted out the door.

I walked over to inspect the models on the shelves. They were quite something: not aircraft after all, but spaceships, perfectly made down to every tiny detail.

I was taken aback. Had Jake made these? *Somebody* had; there were neat boxes of tools and tacks and glue and little pots of enamel arranged in tidy rows.

There was a clatter behind me, and I turned round to see the mummy clambering unsteadily on to the skateboard.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing? Get off that!” I gestured at the mummy, but it ignored me. It pushed off from the bed, wobbling wildly on the skateboard, and careered across the room, its arms stuck stiffly out on either side.

“Watch out!” I cried, as it whizzed across the carpet and thudded into the desk. The TV rocked back and forth alarmingly.

“Mind that!” I yelled. As I ran over to steady the screen, the mummy knocked over the DJ mixer and sat down on the games console. While I stared in consternation, it heaved itself back up on to the skateboard for another go.

This time it did better. It swerved around the desk, missing the TV by a hairsbreadth, and smashed straight into the speakers.

“Look out!” I leapt sideways to catch the guitar before it toppled to the floor.

But the mummy was already off again. Swaying on the skateboard, it hurtled right across the bedroom, gathering speed, and did a most impressive heel flip.

The skateboard flew into the air. So did the mummy. Both of them hit the steel shelves with a mighty crash. Models and boxes rained down around the mummy in a torrent as it collapsed onto the floor.

“*Aargh!*” I howled, horrified. I didn’t know which to be more worried about – Jake’s models or the mummy.

Then the mummy sat up, looking a bit dazed, brushing space-ships off its legs. So *it* was all right.

The models weren’t. Whatever would Jake say? Frantically I began to shove them back on to the shelves, but there were all sorts of wings and fins and bits missing.

“Don’t help me, will you!” I said, scrabbling on the floor for them. Of course the mummy couldn’t understand me. It just sat there for a moment, as if stunned.

Then it took a small box from the pile on the floor. Instead of putting it back on the shelf, it examined it carefully, emptied the box onto the carpet and peered inside it.

“Those are drawing pins!” I told it, grabbing the box. “You don’t want those!”

As I hurriedly tried to scoop up a hundred drawing pins, pricking my fingers and cursing, the mummy was clumsily picking up box after box from the floor. It tipped out the contents of each in turn – staples, rubber bands, coloured pens – and then inspected the empty boxes, before dropping them with an air of disappointment.

“Stop it! You’re making things worse!” I said despairingly. As fast as I cleared up the mess, the mummy created more.

I looked round frantically for something to distract it. Felt tip pens! Perfect. I snatched them up, along with a sketchbook.

Then I said, “Wow,” as the pages of the book fell open. They were covered with drawings of space-ships... and they were *good*. I felt a sneaking admiration for Jake, which I firmly pushed away.

Turning to a blank page, I drew a horse. Well, a thing with four legs and a mane, anyway. I’m not very good at drawing.

“Look at the nice horsie!” I showed it to the mummy. It studied the book with its head on one side.

“Colour in the nice horsie!” I did a bit of the mane, then gave the mummy the pen. Holding it awkwardly in its bandaged fingers, it began to draw.

It ignored my sort-of-horse. Instead it drew half a dozen scratchy, wavy lines, as if it was getting used to the pen.

“That’s a good mummy!” I said, handing it a couple more pens so it could try the different colours.

It took the red one and drew a square. Not bad for a beginner, I thought. It was a bit lumpy and wobbly, but definitely a square.

“Clever mummy!” I said encouragingly. While I began to tidy up, the mummy kept drawing. It drew a few more squares until it had one that it seemed happy with. Above that square, it drew a semi-circle.

“That’s great!” I said.

And then, to my amazement, it drew an owl.

I stopped tidying up to stare. Although it was only a few lines, it couldn’t be anything but an owl.

This mummy was no beginner after all. With increasing confidence, it drew a snake, a leg, a twisted shape – like a folded rope – and finally, another semi-circle.

It pointed to the sheet of paper. Then it pointed to itself. I looked at it blankly.

Again, it pointed to the paper. Then it pointed to itself.

My hair stood on end.

“What do you mean?” I whispered. “Is that – is that your *name*?”

Chapter Six

The door opened, and Jake came striding in.

“Well, I’ve found some bandages…”

His mouth fell open as he saw the chaos on the carpet.

“What have you been doing?” he howled. “My mum’ll go mad! What’s happened to my models?” He glared accusingly at me and then at the mummy, still sitting amidst pens and glue and bits of shattered spaceship.

“It was trying to skateboard,” I explained.

“Skateboard? At *its* age?” said Jake scathingly, as he began to pick over the broken models. “These took me months to build!”

“Never mind them now, Jake. Just look at this! It’s written its name!” I thrust the sketchbook under Jake’s nose.

He frowned. “*Owl Worm Boot String?* That’s not a name. That’s rubbish.”

“Don’t you know anything about the Ancient Egyptians? Those are hieroglyphs! Picture-writing. That’s its name – it told me so!”

“Oh, don’t be stupid,” said Jake. “It can’t even talk. And it’s messing up my things again! Stop it, you!”

The mummy had found a small cardboard box, and tipped out half a dozen pencil sharpeners. Now it began to draw inside the box in felt tip pen.

Jake made as if to snatch the box away, but I held onto his arm.

“No, wait!” I said. “See what it does.”

We peered over the mummy’s shoulder. Inside the box, with tiny strokes, it drew a palm tree by a wavy blue line that might be a river. Then, in orange pen, it drew a sun. I heard Jake mutter in surprise.

“That’s weird,” he said, “it’s like–” He stopped.

“Like what?”

“Nothing,” said Jake. “*Now* what’s it doing?”

The mummy had stopped drawing and was lying down stiffly on the floor, flat on its back, with the box clasped to its chest.

For a moment, it lay perfectly still. Then it slowly sat up again with a dejected air, and crumpled the cardboard box in its hand.

“That box means something,” I said thoughtfully. “Something important. I wonder what it is?”

“How should I know?” snapped Jake. “Forget about boxes. Come on, we’ve got to get this mummy in a fit state for my Mum to see! I brought these to bandage it up properly.”

He handed me a packet. I read the label:

SPORTEEZE BANDAGES STYLISH SUPPORT FOR SPORTING SPRAINS

I looked inside, and shrieked quietly. Sporteeze Bandages came in day-glo orange, green, and pink. They were blinding.

“It can’t wear those!” I protested. “Haven’t you got any white ones?”

“These are all I could find,” said Jake sulkily. “They’re the latest thing. Mum’s got a whole load to sell at her new gym.”

“Does she know you’ve borrowed them?”

“She won’t mind. She doesn’t mind anything I do.” Ripping the cellophane off a green Sporteeze bandage, Jake began to wrap it around the mummy’s tattered right arm.

So I started on the legs. The mummy didn’t try to fight us off – it just looked a bit bemused.

We needed loads of Sporteeze Bandages to cover all the torn and tatty bits. By the time we’d finished, the mummy looked like an enormous stripy stick of candy. It held up its day-glo arms, and then its legs, as if to inspect them. I hoped it liked what it saw.

“That’s better!” said Jake.

“Is it?” I was doubtful.

“At least it’s not shedding bits of dirty bandage everywhere. Now let’s leave it here, and get something to eat. I’m starving. And then I want to look up mummies on the internet.”

“Will it be all right here on its own?”

“It can’t make this mess any worse,” grunted Jake. “It’s broken just about every model in the room already – no thanks to you!”

“Sorry,” I said, and I actually meant it. “Those models were pretty good.”

“Yeah, well... The mummy can stay here, and play with its little box.”

“Maybe it could do some more drawing,” I suggested. I tore the page of hieroglyphs out of the sketch book, stuffed it in my pocket, and gave the book back to the mummy with a clean page on top.

“Good idea,” said Jake, tipping the whole packet of pens on to its lap. “Help yourself, mummy. Do us some nice pictures, okay?” He waved his arms in the air in vague drawing motions. “That should keep it out of trouble, anyway,” he muttered. “Come on – let’s get some sandwiches.”

We left the mummy propped up against the wall with the sketchbook on its knee. I tiptoed after Jack past the thumping music of the gym and into a dazzling white kitchen.

“What do you like in your sandwiches?” he asked.

“Peanut butter and crisps, please. Have you got any Coke?”

“You must be joking,” said Jake gloomily. He threw open the massive fridge, and groaned. It held six bottles of mineral water, four types of lettuce and a jar of low-fat mayonnaise.

Armed with mayonnaise sandwiches, we went into the lounge. I sat on a huge black leather armchair that nearly swallowed me, watching Jake at the computer. Its screen was even bigger than his TV.

He took a bite of sandwich and began to surf the internet.

“I want to know how mummies were made,” he muttered. “Why is ours different?”

“Try the British Museum website,” I said.

Jake snorted. “Museums!” But he did as I suggested, and soon a whole shed-load of information was unfolding on the enormous screen.

We learnt that mummies had nothing to do with mothers. I already knew that, but I didn’t know that the word “mummy” was Ancient Arabic for the tar they once used to try and preserve dead bodies.

Tar hadn’t worked very well, so the Egyptians experimented with different methods, until they hit on one that seemed to do the job. If you ask me, whoever first thought of it must have had a really sick mind...

“Uurgh!” I said, and put down my sandwich. I’d just lost my appetite. “They pulled their brains out through their *noses*? *How*?”

“Little hooks,” said Jake. “Cool.”

“And they put their livers and lungs in jars? No-one could walk around again after that!” I said decisively. “They can’t have done all that to *our* mummy.”

“You’re right.” Jake looked thoughtful. “They must have used a different method. I bet he was one of the experiments. A one-off.”

“The one that worked.”

“Yeah... I wonder why?”

“Must have been something they used,” I said.

“Do you think it’s ever happened before?”

“Keep reading. It might tell us.”

We read on. We read all about how the mummies were buried in huge tombs, crammed with everything they’d need for the afterlife – food, furniture, clay models of slaves to look after them – and, of course, cute little jars to keep their organs in.

The tomb walls were covered with carvings or paintings of stories from the Book of the Dead.

There were photos of them: beautiful, but creepy, with their rows of painted people all standing sideways on, as if frozen forever in the middle of a dance. I shivered, imagining those cold, silent chambers, full of staring eyes.

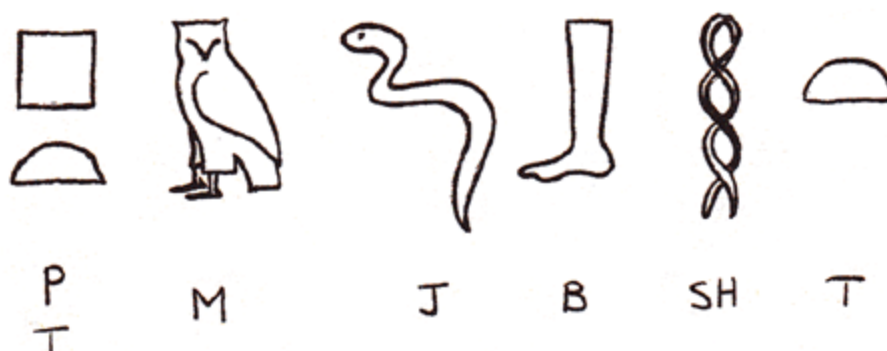
We kept searching. Although we tried lots of links to different websites, nowhere was there any mention of mummies coming to life, except in horror movies.

As Jake scrolled slowly through the pages, I became lost in another world. A world of pharaohs... pyramids... strange gods with the heads of jackals and crocodiles...

“Stop!” I said suddenly. “Go back! Look – there.” I pointed at the screen. “Those are hieroglyphs. It tells you the meaning of all the different pictures. There’s the owl our mummy drew! There’s the twisted rope!”

Jake frowned. “So what do they mean?”

Pulling the mummy’s drawing from my pocket, I carefully decoded it.



“P-T-M-J-B-SH-T,” I said slowly. “PTMJBSHT.” Saying it was like spitting out grape pips. It needed vowels, but apparently Ancient Egyptians didn’t write those down, so I tried out a few until I hit on a pronunciation that seemed to work. “Ptamejeb.. Ptomejib... Ptomajebshut! That’s his name.”

“Ptomajebshut? What a mouthful.”

“I expect he was Ptom for short,” I said. “Just think – in the market, when I called him Tom, I nearly got it right. Can we print out these hieroglyphs?”

“Sure.”

With the noisy buzz of the printer in our ears, neither of us noticed that the distant, thudding music had stopped.

We didn’t hear a door opening. We didn’t hear the footsteps padding faintly down the thick blue carpet of the corridor. We heard nothing – until, all at once, the peace was shattered by a dreadful scream.

Chapter Seven

“*The mummy!*”

“*My mum!*” cried Jake and I together. We leapt to our feet in unison and raced through the house.

Outside Jake’s bedroom stood the two mummies, face to face. Mrs Foxe was walloping the other mummy with a training shoe.

Wham! Blat! Whop! went the shoe. The mummy shrank back against the wall, trying to shield its body with its arms. Despite the Sporteeze bandages, bits of thread and dust were flying everywhere.

“Vandal! Hooligan!” shouted Mrs Foxe. *Whack!* went the trainer. “I don’t know which of Jake’s friends you are – but I’ll find out! You won’t get away with this!”

“Mum! Stop it!” Jake sprang between them, and Mrs Foxe paused in mid-wallop, trainer raised.

“Jake!” she thundered. “You’ve got some explaining to do. Who on earth is this idiot in fancy dress?”

Jake’s mouth opened, but no answer came out. Luckily she didn’t wait for one.

“What were you thinking of, to invite a hooligan like that back here?” she stormed. “Have you *seen* what he’s done to your room?”

“I know it’s in a bit of a mess, Mum, but we’ll tidy–”

“*A bit of a mess? You call this a bit of a mess?*”

Mrs Foxe flung open Jake’s bedroom door. Jake uttered a strangled croak. His room was newly decorated – in twenty shades of felt tip pen.

Every single plain white wall was now covered with pictures. And I mean *covered*. Big, spidery, multi-coloured drawings, like huge cartoons, sprawled from the floor almost to the ceiling.

Jake stepped slowly inside, and I followed him, staring wide-eyed at the pictures.

The first things I noticed were the animals. Long, lean dogs nosed along the skirting board; thin, proud cats slunk past the shelves, looking so alive that I half-expected them to sit up and start washing themselves.

A crocodile grinned behind the skateboard; baboons and jackals fought over the TV, and straining oxen pulled on ploughs above Jake’s bed.

And people, too... Women washed in a wavy river that flowed past the desk, where men were fishing with spears and nets. All had feet and faces turned sideways, broad, square shoulders, white skirts, and long black hair.

This mummy could really *draw*.

But it hadn't stopped there. The oxen shared the space over the bed with a bright red bus. A jackal-headed god rode a motor-bike. A jewelled princess pushed a buggy and clutched a mobile phone to her ear, next to two boys roller-blading in white skirts.

And dotted in amongst each scene were hieroglyphs, like captions in a comic book.

"Wow!" I breathed. "It's absolutely brilliant!"

"Brilliant?" Mrs Foxe glared at me as if I'd been the one at work with the felt tip pens. "*Brilliant?* It's sheer vandalism, that's what it is! And I want to know who the culprit is! I want that disguise off now!"

With that, she lunged at the startled mummy. A Sporteeze Bandage came away in her hand. She lunged again.

And this time the mummy fought back, pushing her away, trying to beat her off. It caught Mrs Foxe on the nose and she staggered against the wall.

"Gedoff be!" she screamed, holding her nose. "Don't cub near be! Jake – helb be! He's brogen by doze! He's gone grazy!"

I didn't think the mummy was crazy. It just panicked. When Jake tried to grab it, it thrust him away too. He lost his balance, went crashing into the shelves and knocked his models off all over again. Mrs Foxe began to shriek like a steam train.

The mummy raised its arms over its head – and suddenly I became afraid it might really go berserk.

Without giving myself time to think, I stepped in front of it, hands on hips.

"PTOMAJEBSHUT!" I thundered.

Everyone froze. I felt like my headmistress. Then, gradually, just like a large, sheepish pupil caught writing on the toilet wall, the mummy let its arms drop to its sides, and hung its tattered head.

"Mum!" said Jake urgently, staggering to his feet. "Just listen to me! This isn't fancy dress. It's not a friend from school – it's real! It's the real thing! It's the mummy from the museum, come to life!"

"Don't talk such nonsense," blazed his Mum. "What sort of fool do you take me for? It's a horrible trick you and your nasty little friends have cooked up between you! They're a bad influence! I knew that school wasn't good for you. But you would insist on going there!"

"It's not somebody from school, Mum," persisted Jake. "It's not a trick, it's real—"

"Real? In those bandages? Don't make me laugh! Those are *my* bandages! They cost a lot of money! How dare you use them for your stupid games?"

“I only borrowed them to hold the mummy together—” Jake began. When Mrs Foxe’s face grew even stormier, he tried again. “Mum! This could make us rich! It has the secret of eternal youth, don’t you see?”

“I most certainly do not!” she snapped. “I want all my bandages taken off, rolled up neatly, and put back in the box! *Now!*”

“But Mum, they’ve got to stay on—”

Jake was only making her angrier. She’d be tearing the bandages off the mummy herself in a minute. Quickly I interrupted to say in my politest voice,

“I’m so sorry, Mrs Foxe! We didn’t mean to upset you. You weren’t meant to see this mummy. You’re quite right – he’s one of our friends dressed up—”

“I knew it!”

“—but he’s a surprise for *my* mum,” I went on, “not for you. I’m afraid he must have panicked when you found him. We were just hiding him here until my mum gets home.”

Mrs Foxe let out a snort like a deflating balloon.

“Funny sort of surprise!” she huffed. “Maybe your mother likes that kind of thing. Well, I don’t. Whoever it is inside there, he’s a wicked, naughty boy! What did you call him again?”

“Er – Tommy,” I said. “Tommy Jebshut.”

She jabbed a sharp finger at the cowering mummy. “Well, Tommy Jebshut, let me tell you that I’ll be having a word with your parents! I’ve never seen such a mess! You’ll pay for those walls to be cleaned – and the floor to be shampooed. There are bits all over my new carpet! Oh, Jake, how could you? The dirt – the dust – remember your asthma!”

“I do,” said Jake grimly.

“Then get this filthy so-called friend of yours out of my house!”

“Right away, Mrs Foxe!” I cried. I seized the mummy’s arm and steered it off down the corridor, leaving Jake and his Mum arguing behind me.

I shook my head. “She’ll never believe him! But it wasn’t your fault, Ptom. You only drew nice pictures, just like Jake told you,” I said reassuringly. And I patted the shabby arm.

It was funny how I felt more comfortable with the mummy now that I knew his name. It was easier to think of him as a real person; a lost, bewildered, battered person. As I led Ptom to the front door, I kept chatting soothingly, the way you’d try to calm a frightened dog.

“I know you didn’t mean to hurt Mrs Foxe. Don’t worry, Ptom, I’ll look after you, I promise. Just keep moving now. Out we go – that’s right! With any luck we’ll be half-way home before Jake even realises we’ve gone.”

I closed the front door gently behind us. “I’ll take you home to meet my Mum. She’ll think you’re wonderful. *She* won’t treat you like a – uh, oh!”

As I turned round, I saw something that made my heart dive into my boots.

At the bottom of the drive, just outside the gate, half a dozen boys were hanging around and peering through the railings. In their midst was Dazzer, his roller-boots slung round his neck by the laces.

He spotted us and bellowed. “Oy! Good make-up job, but it didn’t fool us! We don’t scare that easily!”

He didn’t sound friendly. Not one bit. In fact, he sounded like he was out for revenge.

Swiftly I pulled Ptom out of sight round the back of the garage. I prayed that the gang wouldn’t dare to pass through Mrs Foxe’s awe-inspiring spiky gates.

Just then Jake came hurtling out of the house with a face as dark as a storm-cloud. I beckoned him over.

“She wouldn’t listen to a word I said!” fumed Jake, kicking up the gravel. “She just ignored me!”

“Forget it, Jake. We’re in trouble. Did you see that gang outside the gate? They’re still after us; they’re just waiting for us to leave. Is there another way out?”

“How dare she treat me like that!”

I glanced round the side of the garage. Dazzer was fumbling with the latch on the gate, trying to get it open.

“I’ll show her,” said Jake furiously. “I’ll prove the mummy’s real!”

“Jake!” I grabbed his shoulder and forced him to look down the drive. “Wake up! The gang! They’ll be here in a minute. We need to get away!”

“Gang?” Jake blinked. Then his voice changed. “Right,” he said decisively. “They’re not getting their hands on the mummy *this* time.”

Unbolting a small door at the back of the garage, he dived in and began to clatter around. It was so dark in there that I couldn’t see what he was doing until he hauled out a mountain bike and thrust it at me. “Getaway vehicles. Here’s yours.”

“I can ride a bike, but what about Ptom?” I objected.

“Ptom can ride with me, on *this*,” said Jake.

And out of the dark garage he pushed something much wider than my bike, with fat, black wheels and a chunky motor. My heart missed a beat.

“A quad bike!” I breathed. “I’ve always wanted to ride a quad bike! Is it yours?”

“Yeah,” said Jake grumpily, “but I haven’t used it since we moved here. Mum won’t let me ride it on the lawn, and I can’t take it on the road ’cos I’m not old enough. But this is an emergency.”

He started the motor. It sounded wonderful – a deep, throaty roar. Jake said,

“Don’t just stand there admiring it! Help the mummy get on!”

Together we manoeuvred Ptom’s legs over the saddle, and fitted his hands on to the handlebars. He didn’t seem to mind. He gripped the handlebars firmly, and while Jake was still balanced on one leg, about to squeeze on behind him, he suddenly turned the throttle so that the engine howled.

And before Jake could do anything about it, the quad bike shot away with the mummy perched on top.

It hurtled across the lawn, ploughing big black tyre-tracks through the spotless turf. Jake set off running after it, but there was no way he was going to catch it up. The bike zigged and zagged away from him across the grass, throwing up showers of earth on either side, its engine roaring like an angry lion.

Mrs Foxe appeared in the doorway and began yelling. I was yelling too, but I don’t think any of us could hear each other for the noise as the bike thundered in great, black loops around the garden. It did a figure of eight and then headed for the drive.

I jumped on the mountain bike and pedalled after Jake.

“Get on!” I shouted as I caught up with him. As soon as he had scrambled up behind me, I set off after the quad bike. By now it was rattling down the drive, spraying fountains of gravel that fell on us like stinging rain.

Dazzer had opened the gate. He and his gang stood in the drive. As I watched, they deliberately arranged themselves right across the mummy’s path.

“Oh, no! They’ll get him!” I wailed.

But the quad bike didn’t even slow down. It charged straight at the boys, gathering speed as it plunged towards them. At the last minute they all had to leap aside in a shouting, sprawling heap, while the quad bike shot past them through the gate and out into the street.

I pedalled furiously after it. It wasn’t easy, standing on the pedals with Jake behind me clutching at my jumper and yelling in my ear. But before Dazzer and his lot had even picked themselves up off the ground, I swerved through the gate and was speeding down the road in hot pursuit of the mummy.

Chapter Eight

“Don’t let it get away!” Jake bellowed, clinging on behind me.

“Your Mum’s blazing mad!” I yelled over my shoulder. “Did you see the state of the lawn?”

“Yeah, I know. Too bad! Serves her right. Just keep your eyes on the road, and follow that mummy!”

“At least *he*’s old enough to drive, even if you aren’t.”

“Funny!” said Jake sarcastically.

But the mummy was having trouble steering. The quad bike wavered this way and that as it growled along.

Luckily Jake’s road was pretty quiet; there were no cars around except parked ones, and Ptom managed to avoid hitting any of those. When he reached the cross-roads, however, with all the traffic buzzing past, things got a bit trickier.

I winced as Ptom wobbled out across the junction. He narrowly missed getting hit by a van, and took fright. The quad bike did a quick turn – too quick; it almost tipped over, teetering on two wheels for a few heart-stopping seconds.

When it thudded back down on to all four wheels, I breathed again; but not for long. Next the quad bike tried to take a short cut across the pavement, swerved at the last minute to avoid two old people waiting to cross, and nearly wrapped itself around a lamp-post.

As the old couple stumbled back out of its way, clutching at each other, the quad bike spun to a halt just inches from a wall. The engine choked into silence.

Behind me, Jake jumped off and ran towards it, waving his arms frantically. “Mummy!” he yelled. “Mummy! Stop!”

“Great heavens!” exclaimed the old man, his eyebrows shooting upwards. “Jake? Jake Foxe, from number 24? Is that your mother in there?”

“Whatever has she done to herself?” squealed his wife, staring at the mummy half-sliding out of the saddle.

Jake stopped dead and gawped at them, his mouth open. For once, he had no idea what to say.

The old lady addressed the mummy in a concerned voice.

“Mrs Foxe?” she quavered. “How are you, dear? Have you had an accident? Let me help you back on. Oh my, you are in a bad way!”

Jake was still struck dumb. I hurried to his rescue.

“It’s all right! She hasn’t had an accident,” I explained. “It’s a rare tropical skin disease. She has to put on special ointment and then be covered in bandages, isn’t that right, Jake?”

Jake gave a faint moan.

“Please don’t touch her!” I said hastily to the old lady. She was patting the shoulder of the mummy, who was trying unsuccessfully to start up the quad bike’s engine.

“Shouldn’t she be at home, in bed?”

“Oh, no,” I assured her. “Exercise. Very important. The doctor said so. In fact, he advised her to get out on her bike and – oh, help, there she goes!”

Somehow Ptom had worked out how to start the engine. It growled into life. Ptom’s head jerked back as the quad bike reared up, and then cannoned down the road.

“Get back on, Jake!” I said briskly. “We’d better just, er, keep an eye on your mummy, to make sure she doesn’t overdo it. Bye!” I waved at the bewildered neighbours as we pedalled away.

“*Tropical skin disease?*” said Jake bitterly behind me.

“Well, you weren’t exactly full of ideas, were you?” I retorted.

“My mum’s going to hate this.”

“Just shut up, and hold on!”

The quad bike roared ahead of us. Bits of bandage streamed behind it like ribbons in the breeze. Ptom seemed to have got the hang of handling the quad bike now, and showed no signs of slowing down.

In fact, I could have sworn he was enjoying himself. Why else would he go twice round the roundabout, and once straight across it, before heading off down my street? Why else would he zig and zag across the white line as if he was playing dodgem with the cars coming the other way?

As I pedalled desperately after him, my legs were aching, my lungs were bursting, and my heart was in my mouth. Ptom’s luck surely couldn’t hold. He was bound to hit something sooner or later.

We sped past my house – I glimpsed Mum’s old car sitting in the drive – but I couldn’t stop. I had to keep chasing the mummy.

I winced as the quad bike swerved round a truck and drove perilously fast towards the traffic lights. Please don’t go through a red light, Ptom, I thought...

They turned green just in time, thank goodness. The mummy started to shoot across. Next minute it veered wildly to and fro, as the car in front of it stopped to turn.

Ptom didn’t know which way to go. The quad bike skidded sideways, leapt onto the pavement and crashed through a fence into somebody’s front garden.

Rocketing after it on the mountain bike, I tried to mount the pavement and totally lost control. My bike slid through the fence at high speed and dumped me and Jake in a flowerbed full of thistles.

There was silence. Then Jake groaned, and sat up, beginning to wheeze. Ptom was trying to disentangle himself from a rose bush. The quad bike lay in the garden pond, which was luckily empty apart from a thick layer of green slime. The mountain bike had a bent wheel.

"Sorry," I said to Jake.

Jake buried his head in his hands. "That's my mum's new mountain bike! She'll kill me!"

"Well, at least we lost the gang," I said. It didn't seem to cheer him up.

Ptom managed to free himself from the roses – leaving quite a lot of bandage behind – and staggered over to Jake to offer him a tattered hand.

"Don't touch me!" snapped Jake hoarsely, pushing Ptom away.

"He only wants to help you up," I said.

Ptom turned aside in a dejected way, and began to stumble into the pond after the quad bike. Jake jumped up, leapt into the pond after him and wrenched the bike out of his hands.

"Oh, no, you don't!" he wheezed. "You've caused enough trouble!"

"We've ruined the fence too," I said guiltily. A *For Sale* sign lay amidst the fence's wreckage. The house looked empty and the garden unkempt. At least we wouldn't have to apologise to its angry owner.

But three ladies with shopping bags were staring at us over the broken fence with suspicious frowns.

I waved at them. "Er, just er, dropping in," I said. "But there's no-one at home, so we'll be on our way now." I picked up the crooked bike and tried, unsuccessfully, to straighten the wheel.

"What on earth is *that*?" One of the ladies pointed a horrified finger at the mummy.

I followed her gaze. Ptom did look a dreadful sight, what with the day-glo bandages, feet covered in green slime, and half a rose-bush still attached to his chest.

Now more passers-by came running up to peer at us across the shattered fence. In a moment it was going to be as crowded as the market. Somebody would start asking serious questions – only we didn't have any monster masks as a disguise now.

Then I remembered the words of the woman at the market stall. "*You must be advertising something...*"

"Advertising! We're advertising!" I announced to the lookers-on.

"What?"

“We’re advertising, er, fitness. That’s right. Why try to get fit riding your bike on busy roads, and run the risk of ending up like him?” I pointed at the mummy, who was trying to pull off the tenacious rose-branch.

I was getting into my stride now. “Yes, roads are dangerous! Don’t end up bruised and bandaged from head to toe! You want a nice safe place to ride an exercise bike – somewhere like *Eternal Youth*, the new Fitness Centre at the old museum!”

I grabbed Jake and swivelled him round so they could all see the *Eternal Youth* logo blazoned on his muddy sweatshirt.

“Yes, ladies,” I went on, “join *Eternal Youth* and work out in complete safety on all the latest machines! Turbo-boost triple power muscle manglers! Electronic bone blasters! Extra-high voltage tummy tinglers! Opening next month! And now we must move on to our next location for another exciting publicity stunt. Don’t forget – *Eternal Youth* forever!”

I seized Ptom’s arm and guided him out of the garden with one hand, pushing the battered mountain bike with the other. Jake tried to start the quad bike up, but it was dead. The three ladies shook their heads, muttering.

“Whatever will they think of next?”

“Here,” said one, “Do we get a discount at this Eternal place?”

“Certainly! Just ask at the door,” I said. “Excuse me, please.” With head held high I set off marching down the street towards my own house. Ptom shuffled meekly at my side. Behind me, I could hear Jake groaning as he shoved the muddy quad bike along.

“My mum is really, really going to hate this,” he said in a voice of doom.

“Sorry about the bikes,” I said.

“It’s not just the bikes!” exploded Jake. “It’s my bedroom – and the carpets – and the lawn – and the rare skin disease – and now *this*! And it’s all that stupid mummy’s fault!”

“No, it’s not!” I said, patting Ptom’s arm. I realised he was limping slightly as he lurched alongside me. Now I began to worry in case he had hurt himself coming off the bike. I coaxed him along gently – my house was only a short distance away – but he was slowing down more and more.

Jake didn’t notice that the mummy was struggling. As he trudged after me, I could hear him grumbling about his mother.

“She’ll go spare. She’ll think I’ve done it all just to annoy her. She’ll never listen to me now. She’ll never believe the mummy’s real!”

Good, I thought. With a shrug, I told him, “Not much you can do about that now.”

“I’ll show her! I’ll prove it’s real. I’ll force her to listen.”

“How, Jake?” I asked, guiding Ptom into my driveway. I had to practically push him, he was moving so slowly now.

“I’ll unwrap the mummy. Properly. All of it. That’ll show her!”

I stopped dead outside my door, and stared at him.

“You can’t unwrap Ptom!” I said. “He’d hate it!”

“Hate it?” jeered Jake. “Get real, Amber! This isn’t a person we’re talking about. It’s a mummy! How can it hate anything? It’s brain-dead! It’s a zombie!”

I lost my temper. I’d had enough of apologising to Jake. I was fed up with him going on about his mother, I was anxious about Ptom, and both my knees hurt where the bike had thrown me off.

So I let rip.

“How dare you talk about Ptom like that?” I yelled. “You’re the one who’s brain-dead! *You’re* the zombie! Of course Ptom’s a real person. He’s told us his name! He’s drawn amazing pictures all over your walls! He can ride a quad bike first go! Not bad for a four thousand year-old! But all you can think about is how much money he’s worth. Money, money, money. You’re so greedy you even stole from his coffin!”

“No, I didn’t!”

“Yes, you did, I saw you! You’re a crook, just like your mum! Well, you’re not having Ptom! You can’t unwrap him! He’s not yours! Leave him alone!”

I banged on the door. “Mum! Let me in!” I bellowed.

At first Jake looked stunned at my outburst. Then he looked furious.

“Your mum won’t believe in the mummy either,” he shouted. “Nobody else believes in it, do they? Why should your mum be any different? She’ll think it’s just a trick, as well. You wait and see!”

Standing there with my fists clenched against the door, I was suddenly afraid that Jake was right.

No adult in their right mind would believe in a living mummy. Everyone we’d met so far had accepted the most unlikely explanations for Ptom, because they thought the truth was impossible. Why should my mum be any different?

I had let go of Ptom, and now he fell against the door and slid slowly down it, like a huge rag-doll. When I saw how tattered and exhausted he was, I was stricken with guilt. Although I’d promised to look after him, I hadn’t done a very good job so far.

The door opened, and Ptom and I fell through it in a heap.

Chapter Nine

Mum didn't say a word as she helped us up. She was breathless, and speechless. She hugged me, hard. Next she hugged Jake, to his surprise, and then she put her hands on Ptom's shoulders and began to laugh.

"He's not a joke," said Jake sullenly. "He's *real*."

"Of course he is!" said Mum. "I'd know him anywhere, even with those stripes! It's our own mummy from the museum. He really did get up and walk away! It's a miracle! Oh, clever, clever children! Where did you find him? However did you manage it? Oh, wonderful, brilliant, excellent children!"

"Steady on, Mum!" I was getting embarrassed. But Jake's face had lost its stony look.

"It wasn't easy, I can tell you," he said. "We've had a load of trouble."

"I can see that!" Mum dragged her eyes away from the mummy to look Jake up and down.

He wasn't nearly as smart as he had been first thing that morning. His hair was wild, his face and hands were scratched, and his tracksuit was filthy with mud and pond-slime. I realised I probably looked no better.

"You poor loves," said Mum. "I can see you've had a hard time!"

"The mummy's had the hardest time of all," I told her. "He's been chased, and attacked by a gang, and hit with a shoe, and thrown into a rosebush, and I think he's hurt. I'm really worried about him, Mum." I could feel Ptom trembling as I propped him up.

"Thrown into a rosebush? Come in, sit down, and tell me all about it! This way, Jake."

I saw Jake stare around in disbelief as he walked through our junk-shop of a house. Ptom blundered across the living-room as if it was an obstacle course; he floundered through a heap of laundry, stumbled over a paint-pot, skidded on a newspaper, and nearly tripped over Magpie, our cat.

"*Nyeow!*" Magpie shot to her feet and arched her back, fur bristling. Ptom straightened up and bowed to her, low and reverently. Magpie took one look at him and hurtled out of the room like a black and white bullet.

Ptom's shoulders sagged. He caught sight of his reflection in the mirror over the mantelpiece, stared at it for a moment and then turned his head away. He sat down heavily on the sofa, legs stretched stiffly out, looking weary and dejected. It must feel dreadful, I thought, when even a cat can't stand the sight of you.

"Poor Ptom!" I said.

"Ptom?" asked Mum. "Why do you call him that?"

“That’s his name. Ptomajebshut. He drew it in hieroglyphs in Jake’s room, before Mrs Foxe found him.”

“He *what?* Start at the beginning!”

So we told Mum the whole story.

Well, not quite the whole story... Jake did most of the telling, but I noticed that he never mentioned Ptom’s interest in little boxes. He described everything else in vivid detail, even the argument with his mum – he was rather rude about her, in fact – but he steered right away from little boxes.

I was about to remind him, when he began to cough, and fished in his pocket for his inhaler.

“Oh dear,” said Mum guiltily, “I expect our house is too dusty for you. It is a tiny bit untidy at the moment. I haven’t hoovered yet this morning...”

That was an understatement. She hadn’t hoovered all month. But I didn’t want her to feel bad about it, so I said,

“Jake’s house is as clean as a hospital. You daren’t touch anything in case you leave a dirty fingerprint. It’s awful!”

“No, it’s not!” wheezed Jake indignantly.

“Yes, it is. Your mum won’t allow a single speck of dirt anywhere!”

“Very wise of her,” said Mum, “when you’ve got asthma.” I hadn’t even thought of that. Of course Jake’s asthma was the reason why she kept everything so clean.

Jake turned to my Mum gratefully. “You believed in the mummy straight away, didn’t you?” he said.

“Well, I have known him for several years,” said Mum, patting the mummy’s knee.

“You’re not even surprised to find him alive!”

“In a funny way, he always was alive to me,” said Mum. “Though I’m still amazed that he’s woken up.”

“Woken up?” I asked.

“I think he must have been in some sort of suspended animation all those years, like an animal hibernating: only even deeper asleep.”

“My mum wouldn’t believe me!” complained Jake. “She wouldn’t even listen to me! I was trying to tell her how valuable the mummy is, and all she did was scream and shout. It *is* valuable, isn’t it? I mean, it’s the only walking mummy ever! It’s got the secret of eternal life!”

“Oh, yes,” said Mum, looking thoughtfully at Ptom. “I expect some people would kill for it.”

“Kill?” I said, alarmed.

“Kill Ptom, at least,” said Mum. “They’d cut him open, to find out what kept him alive. Find his secret, so they could use it and sell it.”

“No!” I cried in horror, staring at Jake. Was that what he wanted to do?

“They wouldn’t actually cut him up, though, would they?” he asked uneasily.

“If they were unscrupulous enough,” nodded Mum. “Some people will do anything for money – and eternal youth.”

Jake shuffled his feet uncomfortably. I thought it was lucky that Ptom couldn’t understand. Slumped on the sofa, he looked unhappy enough as it was.

Then, abruptly, he sat up straight, staring at the coffee-table.

“What is it, Ptom?” I said. Following his gaze, I saw what had caught his eye: a small, carved Indian box of Mum’s that sat on the cluttered table amongst the empty mugs and papers.

Ptom reached for it eagerly, and fumbled with the lid. As it opened, a shower of used stamps fluttered out.

“Don’t bother to pick them up, Ptom,” I said. “A few hundred more things on the floor won’t matter.”

But Ptom wasn’t interested in the stamps. He held the box up close to his face, as if hoping to find something hidden inside it.

Whatever he was looking for, it wasn’t there. At last he replaced the box sadly on the table.

“What was that about?” Mum wondered aloud.

“He’s got this thing about little boxes,” I said, glancing sidelong at Jake. “Every time he finds one, he looks inside – as if it might hold treasure or something. He even drew a picture inside a box of Jake’s. I don’t know why.”

“Probably not important,” mumbled Jake, not meeting my eye.

“There must be a reason for it. If only he could talk!” Mum sighed. “I’d love to hear all the things he could tell us. There’s so much that we don’t know about his time, four thousand years ago!”

“He can’t talk – but Mum, he can write! He wrote his name, remember?” I pulled the page of hieroglyphs from my pocket and showed it to her.

As Mum took the page in her hands, amazement and delight lit up her face.

“Real hieroglyphs!” she breathed, smoothing the page with reverent hands. “These are wonderful!”

“He drew loads more on Jake’s bedroom walls,” I said. “Mostly pictures, but there were hieroglyphs too.”

“I wonder if he’d like to draw some now?” said Mum thoughtfully.

“He might. But pens are a bit fiddly for him.”

“Hmmm... Let’s see if we can find something easier.”

Taking Ptom's elbow, Mum persuaded him to stand up, and gently led him towards the paint-pots piled in the corner. She prised open a pot of Midnight Blue, dipped a narrow brush in the paint and put it into Ptom's hand.

"There you are, Ptom. Go ahead!" She gestured at the living-room wall.

"She's not letting him paint on the wall?" gasped Jake. "My mum'd go mad!"

"Ah, but mine is no ordinary mummy," I said proudly.

"You're telling me!" muttered Jake.

I couldn't help laughing at the expression on his face. "Look at it this way," I said. "Our walls aren't exactly up to your standard to begin with, are they? They've been waiting for new wall-paper for the last six months. Ptom can't make them any worse."

But as soon as Ptom began to paint, it was obvious that he knew what he was doing. Squaring his shoulders, he seemed to regain vigour as he attacked the wall with swift, sure strokes. We watched a picture grow across our wall like an outsize comic strip.

First came a river, complete with palm trees and crocodiles.

"Blue palm trees?" I said. "Wait right there!" I ran to fetch my poster paints and finer brushes, and offered them to Ptom.

Bowing politely as he accepted them, he dipped a brush into the yellow paint. Then he coloured over the blue palm trees to make a dark, mysterious green.

Next he drew a long, low house by the river. He used my poster paint to make scarlet birds with long curved beaks, flying overhead. A goat grazed by the house, and a small boy knelt, drawing in the dust with his finger. Beneath the boy's figure, Ptom sketched some symbols that I recognised: an owl, a snake, a twisted rope...

"That's him!" I cried. "That's Ptomajebshut!" As I said his name, the mummy turned and looked at me. And I imagined that he smiled, beneath his bandages.

Then, turning back to face the wall, he painted the same boy again, but bigger – older – seated cross-legged beside an old, hunch-backed man. This time he held a brush and a scroll.

Above him Ptom drew a man with the head of a long-beaked bird, and under him, wrote more hieroglyphs.

"Ah! See that sign?" said Mum excitedly. "That's an ink-box, and it means *scribe*. Ptom started learning to be a scribe from his grandfather when he was ten. He studied writing and drawing for five years, and was very happy. He says he was blessed by Thoth, the god of wisdom and of scribes. That's the one with the head of an ibis."

“You can really read all that?” asked Jake, incredulous.

“Of course I can!” laughed Mum. Jake looked impressed.

In the next picture, the boy grew taller. But it was still the same boy – still Ptom; you could tell by the tilt of his head and the curve of his nose, and somehow the mummy put a laugh in his painted eye.

This time the boy was hunting hippos by the river, spearing them with a group of young men. From the riverbank a woman watched, with wide, black eyes and a serene smile.

By the next picture, Ptom and she were holding hands, surrounded by a crowd of people laughing, and dancing. Ptom laid down his brush and did a little, eager, clumsy dance, his bandages fluttering like streamers.

“It’s a wedding!” Mum exclaimed. “They got married!”

Ptom had reached the corner of the room. Mum jumped up to clear a space as he started on the next wall.

Now a baby appeared, with sticking-up black hair. It crawled along the riverbank, while the nose of a crocodile could just be seen, swimming across the river towards it.

“Watch out!” I cried out without thinking, and then blushed.

But under Ptom’s swift brush, the man speared the crocodile in a shower of tomato-red blood. We all cheered.

Further along the wall, the baby grew bigger. It became a little girl with long dark hair, watching her daddy climb a high ladder. He had a brush in his hand, and was painting a wall.

“Tomb painting,” said Mum, reading the hieroglyphs that Ptom wrote carefully beneath the picture. “That’s what Ptom did for a living. He decorated the walls of tombs with writings and pictures from the Book of the Dead.”

“So that’s why he’s so good at drawing!” Jake exclaimed. “I’d like to be an artist. Not tombs, though. I’d like to design aeroplanes, maybe, or something...” His voice trailed off as if he’d given too much away. *Or spaceships*, I thought, although I didn’t say it. Instead I remarked,

“It must have been a creepy job, painting tombs.”

“They wouldn’t have thought it was creepy,” said Mum. “They’d have thought it was important. Death wasn’t something to be hidden away in those days. It was a fact of life – so many people died young.”

Ptom started on the third wall, but less enthusiastically this time. His brush was slower, almost reluctant.

“Look!” Jake pointed. “Another baby! Do you think this one’s a boy? I hope it’s – oh.”

The tiny baby lay next to its mother. Their eyes were closed. A cloth covered them both, in a long, gentle, midnight stroke.

“His wife and baby died,” Mum murmured. Ptom put the paintbrush down, and bowed his head for a moment, while we were silent.

When Ptom picked up the brush again, he began to paint more slowly. Now there was only the man and his daughter. The girl grew bigger; she was picking fruit from a bush. Under her Ptom wrote:



“Her name’s Tahawa,” said Mum.

“And she’s nine years old!” I guessed.

Meanwhile her father climbed his ladder once again, brush and palette in his hand. Then he toppled backwards from the highest rung, his black hair flying like a flag – and fell.

And that was all. That was the last picture: the man in mid-air, hair and legs and arms all waving, looking more surprised than anything else. Ptom laid down his brush.

Chapter Ten

“You can’t stop there!” protested Jake. “What happened next?”

“That’s when Ptom died,” Mum said quietly.

“But—” Jake opened his mouth and closed it again.

“But what about the daughter?” I wanted to know. “Who looked after Tahawa? Where did she go?”

“Whatever happened,” Mum said, “Ptom can’t draw it. He wasn’t there.”

I thought Ptom had finished. I got up to lead him back to the sofa, for I was sure he was weary. But he ignored my offered hand, and took up the brush again. With giant black sweeps, full of distress, he drew huge, jagged hieroglyphs across the last wall of our living-room.

Mum stared at them, frowning, for a moment. Then she went to fetch a fat book on Ancient Egypt from the shelf, consulted it, and drew a deep breath.

Finally she said slowly, “Ptom says he’s in the wrong afterlife. Those are the symbols for ‘*mistake*’, and ‘*grief*’. He wants to go back to the right after-life. He wants to go to the Fields of the Blessed, where Osiris rules – but he can’t, without, without... I think that sign means *box*.”

Jake shifted uncomfortably, but Mum didn’t notice. She went on,

“I’m pretty sure that’s what it means, though it doesn’t really make sense. I wonder if he means his coffin? But he left his coffin deliberately. Maybe he means an amulet? But that sign is quite different...” She paused, musing.

“Go on, Mum!” I said. “What about the box?”

“He says the box is home, and evening, and sleep, and something else that I don’t understand... But he’s lost it. The box is gone, and he can’t go back to the Fields of the Blessed. He thinks Osiris won’t let him return without it. Poor man!”

Ptom dropped the brush. Now that his painting was done, he looked exhausted. I held his arm as he shambled back across the room. He picked up Mum’s Indian box from the coffee table, and lay down on the sofa, flat on his back, with it clasped to his chest.

For a minute, all was still. I hardly breathed, until Ptom heaved himself up, and cast the box aside in despair.

“Wrong box,” I said. “They’re all the wrong box. That’s what he’s been searching for all along.”

“What do you mean?” asked Mum.

I was about to explain about Ptom’s interest in small boxes when the phone rang shrilly from deep in the cat basket.

Ptom shrank away in alarm as I dived to answer it.

“Hallo?” I said. “Oh! Er, hallo, Mrs Foxe. Yes, Jake is here. Do you want to speak to him?” I held the phone out to Jake, who folded his arms, scowling, and shook his head vigorously.

I shrugged. “I’m afraid Jake’s just gone to the bathroom, Mrs Foxe, but I could take a message. Yes, he’s quite all right. No, he’s not wheezing. Yes, I’m really awfully sorry about your lawn...”

I had to hold the phone away from my ear as her voice rose to an angry squawk. “No, Mrs Foxe,” I said, wincing, “Tommy Jebshut’s not here... What? Oh, er, no, I don’t know where he lives. He’s just a boy from school. Yes, I’ll tell Jake. Bye.”

At last I put the phone down with relief. “Your Mum’s not happy!” I warned Jake. “She says the whole lawn will have to be re-turfed. She’s going to ask Mr and Mrs Jebshut to pay for it!”

“That could be tricky,” said Mum.

“And she says why haven’t you got your mobile phone on, it costs her enough, and she wants you home in half an hour so you can start scrubbing down your bedroom walls,” I added.

“She can get lost,” said Jake grumpily.

Mum sat down next to him. “Your mother’s worried about you, Jake,” she told him gently. “You can’t blame her for being annoyed about the lawn. Or for not understanding about Ptom. He is pretty unbelievable, after all.”

Jake sighed and rubbed his hand across his eyes.

“Perhaps it’s just as well she doesn’t realise who Ptom is,” he admitted, looking over at the mummy slumped on the sofa. “She might want to have him unwrapped and cut open. I was thinking of unwrapping him myself, until I saw his story on the wall.”

He gazed round at the paintings. “But now it’s different. I know who he is. He’s a real person. Like you said, Amber.” His voice was gruff, as if he didn’t like to admit that I’d been right.

“Maybe you’d better go home, Jake,” I said.

“Yes, but there’s no rush,” put in Mum, seeing how unhappy Jake looked. “First, you can sponge down that tracksuit so it looks more respectable, and I’ll have a go at straightening out the bicycle wheel. No point in giving your mum more things to get upset about. Amber, go and put the kettle on, and there’s half a fruit cake around somewhere... I expect you can find it.”

Once I’d found the cake on the kitchen windowsill, I cut us each a slice. I offered a chunk of cake and a cup of tea to Ptom, although I wasn’t sure if he could eat or drink.

But he held up his hand in refusal. Then he lay down on the sofa, face up, quite rigid, like someone lying awake at night and trying desperately to get to sleep.

I watched him. I was worried. If Mum was right, and he'd been in hibernation, wouldn't he need to eat and drink? But could he? And if he couldn't eat, or drink, or sleep, how would he survive?

Since arriving back home, I'd assumed that it was getting tipped off the quad bike that had made Ptom so weak and shaky. But suppose it wasn't that? What was going to happen to him? I wanted to help Ptom, to keep him safe, but I realised that I really didn't know how.

While Mum was banging away at the bike in the hall, I had a peep in her fat book on Ancient Egypt, but of course there was nothing in its index on health-care for mummies who were ill and depressed.

Perching next to him, I carefully peeled the dried-up bits of pond-slime from his legs. I couldn't think of anything else that would be useful.

"Don't you worry, Ptom," I said. "We'll take care of you. Mum's an expert on mummies. And if she doesn't know what to do, she knows the right people to ask."

But then I started wondering what the people at the Museum, or the University, would want to do with Ptom if they knew about him...

I began to feel a bit sick when I thought about it, so I went and fetched Magpie the cat and sat her on my knee to cuddle her. Magpie always calms me down. Ptom's head turned to look at her.

"Do you like cats?" I asked, and sat Magpie on his stomach as he lay on the sofa. She didn't care for it at first, but I kept stroking her till she stopped trying to squirm away.

I saw Ptom's hand reach down to pat Magpie – and hesitate. He was afraid of scaring her. So I took his ancient, bandaged hand in mine, and we stroked her together, hand in hand.

Magpie started purring like an electric toothbrush. I didn't mind the cool, dry touch of Ptom's hand at all. It felt quite companionable.

How strange, I thought. I'm holding hands with a mummy old enough to be my great-great-great... how many greats would I need?

I'd just worked out that Ptom was old enough to be my 165 times great-grandfather, when Mum came back in.

"That wheel's almost straight now," she said. "You'll need to get it fixed properly, Jake, but at least it doesn't look too bad. You can ride it back home, and maybe Amber could wheel the quad bike for you."

"Thanks," said Jake gruffly. He was dabbing the dirt on his trousers with a wet cloth. As far as I could see he wasn't getting them any cleaner, just soggier.

“I suppose I had better go now,” he said reluctantly. “Can I come back later? What will you do with Ptom?”

Before Mum could answer him, the phone rang again. I picked it up and it screeched angrily at me.

“Mrs Foxe,” I groaned, and thrust it at Jake so firmly that this time he had to take it.

“All right, Mum, I’m just setting off,” Jake growled. I was glad I didn’t have a mum who checked up on me every five minutes. I could tell that Mrs Foxe still wasn’t happy. Her voice rasped down the phone like a chainsaw. I could hear every word.

“Jake! Jake! I’ve just rung your headmistress!” Jake and I glanced at each other in mutual horror. “Jake, Mrs Bates says there’s no Tommy Jebshut in the whole school! There’s only one Tommy of any description, and he’s five years old! Jake, can you hear me?”

I saw Jake swallow. “He wasn’t actually from our school, Mum, I think he might be from St. Bede’s or somewhere—”

“Jake! It wasn’t a boy at all. It was the mummy from the museum! Wasn’t it? Wasn’t it?”

Jake gasped and began to stutter. “No, Mum – just h-hang on, wait a—”

“It was the mummy, Jake,” rasped his mum’s voice, harsh and determined. “I’ve realised that it all adds up! The mummy disappearing from the museum, those bits of bandage all over the house – they’re antique, Jake! They’re the real thing! You were telling me the truth. I believe you now.”

“Mum!” said Jake urgently. “Don’t believe me! It was just a silly joke. It was just fancy dress, like you thought!”

I don’t think she even heard him. She kept on talking right over his protests.

“Stay right there!” she shrieked. “Don’t move an inch, Jake! I’ll be round in five minutes.”

“But Mum—”

“Don’t touch that mummy, Jake. Do you hear me? Don’t touch it, don’t do anything until I get there! I’ll take charge! Just let me get my hands on it!”

“But Mum—” Jake stared at the phone. “She’s rung off,” he said, appalled. “She believes me now. She wants the mummy. She must have realised how valuable he is. She’ll probably want to sell him!”

He looked over at Ptom, still slowly stroking Magpie who had gone as floppy as a damp flannel.

“She says she’ll take charge of Ptom – but it’s not going to happen!” declared Jake defiantly. “I’m not going to let Ptom get unwrapped, and experimented on. My mum can’t have him!”

Chapter Eleven

“Maybe when she sees Ptom’s paintings, your mum’ll change her mind?” I suggested. But Jake shook his head.

“The trouble with my mum,” he said bitterly, “is that when she wants something, she never gives up.”

“We’ll have to hide Ptom,” I decided. “When she arrives, we’ll just pretend he’s... oh, I don’t know. Run away, escaped, or something.”

“She’ll never swallow that,” said Jake gloomily. “Anyway, where could we hide him?”

I gazed around our chaotic living-room, willing my brain to come up with a brilliant solution.

There weren’t many hiding places in our little house. Behind the sofa? Too obvious. In the garage? Mrs Foxe might demand to see in there. Inside Mum’s wardrobe? Glancing at Ptom, collapsed on the sofa, I doubted if we could even get him up the staircase.

For once, I was completely stuck. Not a single idea would come into my head.

“I can’t think of anywhere!” I wailed. “What are we going to do? She’ll be here in five minutes! We’re running out of time!”

“Jake!” said Mum urgently. “Do you truly think that your mother would harm Ptom?”

Slowly, reluctantly, Jake nodded.

“You’re convinced we need to hide him from her?”

Jake closed his eyes as if they hurt, and nodded again. “I’m afraid so.”

“All right,” said Mum. “Well, we can’t hide him in this house. There’s no room.”

“Where, then?” I yelled. I was practically jumping up and down with impatience.

“Easy! We just put him where everyone expects him to be – and where Mrs Foxe can’t get at him.”

“But where’s that?” I wailed.

“In the museum, of course!” said Mum.

“But the museum’s closed!”

“The *old* museum’s closed. I mean the new one: the Museum of the Future. That’s where Ptom’s coffin is right now. I arranged for it to be moved over there this morning.”

My mind flew. The new museum... If we could just get Ptom inside it, Mum could probably spin some story to the curators about him being delivered unexpectedly. It might just work!

“You’re right. Mrs Foxe couldn’t kidnap Ptom from there!” I exclaimed.

“Well, it might do as a temporary hiding-place for now,” said Mum. “But we’ll still have to decide what to do with him in the long run. Come on, old chap! Let’s get you in the car.”

Easing her arm under Ptom’s shoulders, she made him sit up, so that Magpie slid off his stomach with an indignant yowl. He needed to lean heavily on Mum as he got to his feet. She helped him walk, slowly and unsteadily, outside to our car.

“Put him on the back seat,” she advised. “He’ll be less conspicuous there.”

Hurriedly, I brushed all the papers and sweet wrappers off the car’s back seat onto the floor, and somehow we squeezed him through the door. We ended up squashed in the back together, with Ptom wedged between Jake and me.

Mum jumped in and turned the ignition key. It took a few goes for the engine to start, while I watched anxiously for a lime-green Jaguar to appear and block our way.

But at last, with a cough and a rattle, our old biscuit tin on wheels began to judder unwillingly up the road.

Not a moment too soon! An instant later, Mrs Foxe’s Jaguar sped past us, going far too fast.

Certainly, too fast for her to turn round quickly when she spotted us. Craning over my shoulder, I saw the Jaguar pull up with a hideous screech of tyres, and then begin to reverse across the road, its engine snorting like an angry bull.

“That won’t do her car much good,” Mum commented.

I glanced at Jake, who had shrunk down in his seat, looking pale and unhappy. I peered out of the back window again.

“She’s after us!” I said. “Put your foot down, Mum.”

“I’ll try,” Mum answered, “but I don’t think this old thing will out-drive a Jag. And the last thing we want is to be stopped for speeding. Maybe we can lose her. Hold on to your hats!”

As she spoke, she spun the wheel. The car squealed as it veered sharp left, then right, so that we were all thrown against each other in the back. A moment later we were lurching down the road and leaving Mrs Foxe behind.

I looked anxiously at Ptom, hoping mummies didn’t get car-sick. But he seemed to have perked up. He leaned over me to stare out of the window at the landscape flashing by.

“Do you know, I think Ptom likes going fast,” I said, and then suddenly had a thought. “Jake! We’ll have to take all these day-glo bandages off. We can’t arrive at the Museum with him looking like a lollipop. Give me a hand!”

Carefully, I unpeeled the Sporteeze bandages from Ptom’s arm, while Jake started on a leg. It was a tricky job. The car was bouncing and jumping down the road like a kangaroo with a stutter.

“Mum!” I protested. “Take it easy!”

“Sorry,” Mum yelled back. “I’m trying, but it’s not used to doing over thirty.”

I looked over my shoulder and gasped. Mrs Foxe had pursued us, and was closing the gap. “She’s after us, Mum! Try harder!”

Behind us, Mrs Foxe began to honk her horn imperiously.

“I can’t go any faster,” said Mum, as we joined a line of crawling cars. We had reached the middle of the town, but we still needed to go right through it to get to the new museum, and the usual Saturday afternoon traffic jams slowed us almost to a halt.

“At least Mrs Foxe is getting held up too,” I said. She was hooting and gesticulating at the pedestrians crossing the road in front of her. Some of them had stopped to point at us, staring at the mummy.

“Shove off, nosy parkers!” muttered Jake.

“They’re not doing any harm,” I said, but they worried me. There would be lots more curious bystanders outside the museum. “Mum? How are we going to take Ptom into the museum without anybody noticing?”

“I don’t know!” she sighed. “Even if this car makes it there, I don’t know how we’re going to get Ptom in! I hadn’t thought that far. I’ve got the keys to Ptom’s glass case – but none for the museum’s doors. So we can’t smuggle him in through the back. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all!”

I put my hands to my head. “Think, Amber, think!” I implored myself. “How do you get a mummy into a museum? Any ideas, Jake?”

He shook his head, and groaned as he glanced back at the Jaguar.

“My mum’s looking seriously mad,” he said despondently. “She looks even madder than the headmistress was when I stuck that label on the student teacher’s back.”

Label...? Teacher...?

Something clicked in my mind. Suddenly, I had the answer.

“Thanks, Jake, that’s brilliant!” I grabbed a piece of paper from the littered floor of the car, and smoothed it out. “Mum? Have you got a pen?”

“Handbag,” said Mum, without turning round. I found a pen, and began to write. I’d almost finished when I was thrown back in my seat.

We'd got through the traffic jam, and Mum had put her foot on the gas. "Now or never," she said with gritted teeth. But there was no way we could out-run that Jaguar on the open road, even with the biscuit tin clanking along at full pelt.

"Mum! Do something!" I cried.

Mum didn't answer. Her hands gripped the wheel tightly; her face was set. I could see the Museum of the Future ahead. Its steel and glass roof reared up above the houses.

Groups of children and parents were heading towards it. It was a popular place – far more popular than our little old museum had ever been. I felt a jealous pang.

When we reached the car park, it had a "Full" sign. All the streets round about were tightly jammed with parked cars.

"Wonderful! There's nowhere to park," I muttered. In answer, Mum took a sudden dive down the narrowest side street.

"Mum! You can't go down there! There's no room! We'll scrape the – *eeargh!*" Cringing, I huddled up to Ptom as we missed a van by about half a centimetre.

"Don't worry," said Mum, as we clashed wing-mirrors with the next car. "I know what I'm doing." I felt bumpers nudge us as we squeezed through the narrowest of gaps between the parked cars.

"What *are* you doing?" I wailed.

"I'm going where Mrs Foxe can't follow. Let's see her drive that big Jag down here!" As she spoke, Mum steered us out of the tunnel of cars with hardly a judder.

"She's stuck! She's stuck!" I cried triumphantly. There was no way the Jaguar could follow us. It hooted and flashed its lights, but it was well and truly wedged at the other end of the street.

Mum drove to the museum entrance, where children galloped up and down the wide stone steps.

"You lot jump out quick," she ordered. "I'll find somewhere to park – and if I see Mrs Foxe, I'll try to decoy her."

I was busy pulling the safety pin out of my jeans. With fumbling fingers I pinned my sheet of paper to the bandages on Ptom's chest.

In big, bold letters, I had written:

VISIT YOUR LOCAL MUSEUM!
GASP AT THE MYSTERIES OF THE FUTURE
AND THE PAST–
LIKE ME!

“We’re ready,” I said. “Where do we go?”

“Ptom’s case is at the back of the museum, past the atom bomb. Here. You’ll need this.” Mum handed me a tiny key.

Jake helped Ptom clamber out of the car. Without the Sporteeze bandages holding him together, Ptom looked more frail than ever.

He gazed around at the bustling crowds warily, and they stared back with puzzlement. As the car pulled away, *everyone* was looking at us.

“Don’t be afraid, Ptom!” I told him. “Just do your mummy thing. Be proud to be a mummy!”

Jake and I linked arms with him, and together we marched stiffly up the steps to the Museum of the Future.

Chapter Twelve

When we walked in, a flock of small children were drawn towards us like pins to a magnet. I held on tight to Ptom's arm as we approached the desk in the foyer.

The man behind the desk eyed us with bemusement.

"Hallo, hallo? Who are you?" he demanded. I gave him my widest smile, and spoke with all the self-assurance I could muster.

"Hi there! This is our school project! Our teacher told us to think of a way to advertise the new museum. Most people just made posters or leaflets – but we wanted to do something different!"

"It's different all right!" The curator read Ptom's notice, and chuckled. "Very realistic!"

"It ought to be!" I said. "It took us ages to wrap him up like this. Please can we go in? We want to take some photos inside the museum to put in our project folder."

"Go ahead!" He waved us through quite happily.

"You know what?" murmured Jake. "You're a pretty good liar!"

"Huh!" But I felt quite flattered.

We marched the mummy through the museum with a swarm of children behind us. They followed us all the way through Energy, Forces and Space Travel, and past The Environment and Pollution, right to the far end where you could Make Your Own Atom Bomb with flour. I could see atom bombs exploding with little mushroom puffs every two minutes.

Behind the Atom Bomb display was a narrow doorway; and beyond that lay a small, dim alcove – empty, but for the long glass case that held Ptom's coffin. I felt a tremor go through Ptom, like a huge sigh. He held my hand tightly.

A dozen giggling children scampered in there after us. They clustered round Ptom, fingering his bandages and poking at his stomach.

Ptom didn't seem to mind. When they pulled at his bandages, he brushed them away gently. He even patted a couple on the head.

"We've got to get rid of this lot!" muttered Jake. He clapped his hands until the little kids were all looking at him, and then raised his voice. "Listen, everyone – they're showing a film back in the foyer in five minutes. It's all about mummies!"

"What about mummies?" called one boy.

“It shows you how they used to make them. How they cut out their lungs and livers, and mashed their brains up and pulled them out through their noses—”

“Wow!” breathed the boy.

“That sounds top! We’ve got to see that!”

“Quick, we don’t want to miss it!”

And they all jostled out in a noisy surge. We were left alone, in peace.

“You know what?” I told Jake. “You’re not such a bad liar yourself!”

He didn’t even smile. He was gazing at Ptom wistfully.

“I wish I’d never told my mother about Ptom,” he said sadly. “I don’t want her to find him. I don’t want him to get unwrapped and cut up. What’s going to happen to him?”

I’d never heard so much anguish in Jake’s voice. Ptom’s head swivelled, and he stared at Jake.

Then – although he couldn’t have understood a word – he reached out and patted Jake’s shoulder in a stiff, ‘there, there,’ grandfatherly sort of way.

“Oh, Ptom!” said Jake. He bit his lip. Then, in a sudden rush of words, he blurted out, “You’d better have this back. I didn’t know what it was when I took it. But I guess it’s important to you.”

With a flushed face, he dug deep in his pocket. “I took it because I – I thought it might be valuable,” he muttered. “Sorry.”

From the effort it took him, I guessed Jake wasn’t used to saying sorry. He unclenched his fist. On his outstretched palm lay something small and square: a plain, dark, wooden box.

He offered it to Ptom.

Slowly, with a trembling hand, Ptom reached out for the box. Clasp it to his chest, he bowed his head.

The stillness was broken by a screech.

“Jake! *Ja-ake!* Where are you?”

“Oh, no,” cried Jake. “It’s Mum!”

All of a sudden, there she was in the doorway, wildly dishevelled and out of breath. “I’ve run all the way from the car!” she panted. “Thank heavens I’ve found you!”

“You can’t come in!” Jake shouted, and he held his arms out across the doorway to bar her entrance. “You can’t have the mummy!”

“I can’t have the mummy?” said Mrs Foxe. She sounded bewildered.

“No! You mustn’t cut it up! You mustn’t unwrap it! I won’t let you!”

“Cut it up?” she echoed, her eyes round with horror. “Unwrap it? What a ghastly idea – all those ancient germs! Jake! You haven’t touched it, have you? You’ve stayed well away? Tell me you haven’t touched it!”

“What?”

“I don’t want the mummy!” cried his mother. “I couldn’t care less about the mummy! All I want is you, Jake – safe and sound. I was so worried! Your asthma – your lungs – the germs! That dreadful old thing could be carrying any sort of bug. It could have made you really ill!”

“It’s not a thing,” Jake began indignantly, “It’s a pers—”

The rest of his sentence disappeared. Mrs Foxe had leapt on him and enfolded him in a stifling hug.

“My baby!” she crooned.

I didn’t think Jake would really want me to watch this, so I turned back to Ptom.

I was alarmed at what I saw. He was stumbling towards the glass case that held his coffin with anxious, shuffling steps, like a tired old man barely able to walk. He fell to his knees beside it, and banged on the lid with his hand.

“It’s all right, it’s all right! I’ve got the key!”

Quickly I pulled it out and fitted it into the lock. Ptom tried to raise the glass lid, but his strength was failing. I did it for him, and the coffin lay open to the air.

This close, I could just make out the faded pictures on its side: the owl, the snake, the leg, the twisted rope... I could see them all, now that I knew what they were.

Stiffly, Ptom stepped into his coffin, and lay down. I didn’t like to see him there, so straight and still.

“Ptom?” I said quietly. “It’s all right! Mrs Foxe hasn’t come for you after all!”

Indeed, she had already dragged Jake out of the alcove, away from the mummy.

“You don’t really need to hide here now,” I told him. “You can come home again with me.”

Ptom’s head turned to face me, as if he were listening.

“You’ll have loads of fun with us, Ptom!” I whispered. “You can have a go on my bike, and paint my bedroom, and learn to skate-board, and play with Magpie. We’ll look after you. You’ll have everything you want...”

Ptom held up the little box, and opened it with eager, clumsy fingers.

I could see inside it. The box was empty; and not empty. It was painted on the inside, in tiny brush-strokes on the wood. The colours were still clear and unfaded after being shut away in the dark for so long.

There was an orange sunset over a winding indigo river: a scarlet bird flying against the clouds; a house surrounded by a field of golden wheat...

And as I looked, the paint began to glow. It wasn't just my eyes playing tricks; I swear the tiny landscape flickered.

I saw the river ripple in the evening light, and the wheat fields shiver in the breeze. Outside the house, a man played with a child on his knee: the scarlet ibis flapped slowly past the setting sun...

Ptom's hands relaxed upon his chest. His head fell back. I looked down at his still body, and understood that he had gone home.

I rubbed my eyes. Everything was wet and blurry. When I reached for the wooden box, its landscape had faded back to paint once more. Gently I closed the lid, and tucked the box away, safely out of sight, amongst Ptom's bandages. I unpinned my paper notice, and folded Ptom's hands over the hidden box, across his chest.

"I never said goodbye," I whispered. "Goodbye, Ptom."

But Ptomajebshut was no longer there.

Chapter Thirteen

“*Beep... WHOOSH... PING!*”... Our atom bomb went off in a puff of flour.

It was my first Saturday at the new museum.

“This place is brilliant!” said Jake enthusiastically. “Those space-ships were cool!”

“I suppose it’s not so bad, if you like this sort of thing,” I said, pressing another button or two.

“Your Mum seems to like it all right,” he commented.

I glanced over at Mum, in her bright red uniform, helping a toddler make a giant bubble in the bubble machine. She *did* look happy.

“I think it’s better than she expected,” I said. “The old museum really was a bit too quiet. There’s more for her to do here. She says this place is always busy – even busier since Ptom arrived.”

“Can we go and see him?”

“Sure! He’s still round the back of the atom bomb. They’ve made a special display.”

I led Jake round and showed him the new, printed sign over the doorway:

THIS IS THE MUSEUM OF THE FUTURE
BUT DON’T FORGET THE PAST!

Underneath, on a notice-board, were pinned newspaper clippings about the mysterious reappearance of the mummy in its coffin.

WHERE DID OUR MUMMY GO? said one headline. Another said, MUMMY GOES SHOPPING, followed by a report of strange sightings in the market.

Then there was an article called MUMMY’S MOTOR MADNESS! in which various people reported seeing the mummy on a motor bike, a tractor and a jeep.

Jake read it aloud.

“It’s suspected that students borrowed the mummy for University rag week, then dressed up one of their number to hoax the local populace before sneaking the real mummy back into the museum...’ Why, they think the whole thing was a joke!” he said indignantly. “They don’t even mention us!”

“Just as well,” I said. “Ptom’s safer if nobody realises he came back to life. Nobody knows the truth about him except us – and our mothers. My mum’s not telling anyone. What about yours?”

Jake shook his head. “She’s promised not to tell. I don’t think she’s that bothered about the money after all. She couldn’t care less about Ptom. All she cares about is her fitness centres, and her house – and me, I guess,” he said with a sheepish smile.

“Her baby!” I said, grinning.

“Watch it!”

“Well, then, Ptom should be safe. And the best thing is, Mum says since he’s been in the newspapers, the museum’s had so many enquiries about him that they’ve decided to keep him after all. So he won’t have to go to the university. He can stay here for good.”

We stepped through the doorway into the darkened alcove, and gazed down at the glass case.

It bore a label with Ptomajebshut’s name: Mum had insisted on that. She told me the Egyptians believed that a person’s soul would live on for as long as their name was remembered.

So now there was an engraved brass plate; and under it, in his coffin, lay the mummy, as peaceful as he had ever been, if a little more ragged.

In a way, it didn’t look like Ptom at all. Just part of the furniture.

I felt an ache of sadness. “He’s really gone,” I sighed.

“We could bring him back,” said Jake. “All we need is the box.”

We looked at each other.

“I think the box brought him back from the past,” said Jake. “I think it makes a loop in space-time, a sort of doorway through the fourth dimension.”

I wasn’t quite sure what he was talking about, but remembering the way the box had shimmered, I was ready to believe it. I felt a sudden longing to see Ptom sit up, and turn to me...

“If the box brought him back once, maybe it could do it again,” I whispered.

“I’d love to know how it works,” murmured Jake.

“My mum’s still got the key.”

“Could we?”

“Should we?”

Slowly, Jake shook his head. “He wouldn’t want to wake up here again.”

“No,” I agreed, laying my hand gently on the glass case. “Once was enough. At least he left all his paintings. Mum reckons there are hieroglyphs on our wall that no-one’s ever seen before. She’s thrilled to bits. We’ll never be able to re-decorate now.”

“You mean they’re still there?”

“And always will be!”

Jake laughed, and shook his head. “She’s off her rocker, your mum!” he said. “She’s all right, though. My mum made me scrub my walls down first thing!”

“Oh, no!”

“Don’t worry,” said Jake. “I took loads of photos on my new camera first. I don’t mind, anyway – because I’ve told Mum I want to paint my own pictures on the wall, and she’s actually agreed!”

“Paint your own pictures? That’s excellent! What will you do? You could have pyramids, with the setting sun behind them, and the Nile winding away in the distance, and a sphinx, and camels.” I could just see it in my mind’s eye.

“No way!” snorted Jake. “I don’t want ancient history! I want something up-to-date. Maybe a star fleet zooming through the solar system. There are a few models here I’d like to copy, and I’ve got a great idea for a space station. Only it’s going to take me ages.” He paused, and then added casually, “You could give me a hand with the painting if you like.”

“Really?”

“You’ll need some old clothes to wear.”

I glanced down at my torn, patched jeans and laughed.

“No problem! I’ll even lend you some!”

“Want to see my designs?” said Jake, a bit hesitantly. “I’ve got them on the computer. You could come back to my place now, and have a mayonnaise sandwich, and I’ll show you.”

“OK,” I said. “I’ll race you!”

And leaving Ptom behind, we ran out of the past, through the future, and back into today.



THE END

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