

OLMEC
OBITUARY

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OLMEC OBITUARY

DR PIMMS,
INTERMILLENNIAL SLEUTH

L.J.M.
OWEN



echo



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About the series

Dr Pimms, Intermillennial Sleuth is a series of A-B mysteries (archaeo-biblio mysteries).

Ar·chae·o·bib·li·o·mys·tery [ahr-kay-oh-bib-lee-oh-mis-ter-ee]
{a-b-mystery} – noun.

A puzzling crime or event that requires the application of both archaeological and philological principles for its explanation.

Can involve historic or prehistoric societies, their culture, writing and communication systems, artefacts or skeletal remains.

About the author

Like many bookworms, the best parts of my childhood were spent in the story worlds created by others. A bad day saw me escape under the covers, with a torch and an orange, to faraway lands where mysteries were solved, hard work was rewarded and bad guys got their comeuppance. As an adult I decided to create another place for us all to run away to.

They say you should write what you know. As I'm a trained archaeologist, a qualified librarian and I have a PhD in palaeogenetics, I thought: archaeological mystery series, with a librarian protagonist – naturally!

So if you like the idea of curling up in an armchair, tea in hand, fireplace crackling, and immersing yourself in a world of archaeological wonders, forensic science and really good food, then this might be just for you.

Welcome to the world of Dr Pimms, Intermillennial Sleuth. *Really* cold cases.

L.J.M. Owen

*To Smokey, my constant companion and heart's keeper for
so many troubled years. I will love and miss you all of my days.*

Without waiting to be asked whether it was his or not, the fellow cried, 'That's mine, that's mine,' and stretched out his hand eagerly for the prize.

Mercury and the Woodsman, Aesop's Fables

Prologue

One Year Ago

Al-Fayum Oasis, Egypt

Pinpoints of light studded the inky sky, taunting Dr Elizabeth Pimms with their stubborn persistence. The distant pyramids were dark triangles of nothingness, made conspicuous by an absence of stars. Sitting cross-legged atop a sand dune, breakfast laid out before her, Elizabeth willed the day to begin.

The cacophonous call to prayer that had woken her for the past two weeks echoed throughout the valley. At first, she thought she would never get used to the bewildering, invasive sound. Now, she couldn't imagine starting the day without it.

Roused every morning by that eerie wailing she had quickly developed a routine: kiss Luke's rumpled hair, crawl from their tent, then begin her predawn rituals of impatience. She was washed, dressed and fed before anyone else even stirred. How could they bear to waste a single moment of their time here?

As she picked through boiled eggs, soft cheese and fresh fruit, a hint of apricot appeared on the horizon. Then, a blush of pink. Finally, a faint blue announced the approach of the rising sun. Why did dawn have to take so long?

There was just enough light to make out the glyphs on her cherished cartouche necklace. As she had a thousand times before, she traced the silver pictographs with her finger: Amun, the Sun God; Tut, an image; Ankh, the Waters of Life. She imagined how Howard Carter must have felt the very first time he spied the wonders of Tut-Ankh-Amun's tomb through a tiny crack in the wall – fantastic!

Just like her hero, Khaenweset the Restorer, fourth son of

Ramesses the Second and Egypt's first celebrated archaeologist, Elizabeth was bent on a life of uncovering lost treasures. It was her all-consuming passion. After twenty years of yearning, planning, and dedicated study, she was finally here, following in Khaenweset's footsteps. Now a skilled archaeologist and knowledgeable Egyptologist, Elizabeth was ready to make her mark.

Dawn inched closer. Elizabeth had learnt the hard way that she must wait for the sun to be fully over the horizon before attempting the descent into the excavation's trenches; she wouldn't risk another twisted ankle.

Shafts of gold played on the edges of the pyramids as the sand around her grew warm. More than three thousand years ago, Khaenweset had excavated these very same pyramids. . .

Finally! The bottom edge of the sun was visible. She could start her day's work.

Elizabeth grinned, retrieved her provisions, and slid heel-first down the sand dunes to her tent at the edge of the camp. She moved as quietly as possible, gathering her hat and toolkit, receiving a protesting groan from Luke. The rest of the team also cursed her early morning starts. Honestly, how could they stand to sleep in? There were ancient puzzles to solve, long-forgotten stories to tell and groundbreaking research to publish. Come on, people!

As she hurried to the trenches, Elizabeth savoured her recent triumphs. She recited them every day, like a personal mantra of joy: earning her doctorate, joining this dig, winning Luke's heart. Rapture. She missed her family, of course, but Dad was able to look after Matty without her now. By filling her days with gridlines and trowels, then sorting finds in the evening with Luke, she was bound to discover something momentous – she just knew it.

Kneeling next to her section in the sand, meticulously

unpacking her brushes, Elizabeth recalled the first time she'd seen Luke. Just eight short years ago, in Archaeology 101, her very first class at university. There he'd been sitting in the front row, dazzling. Part of her mind had daydreamed of kissing him as she'd devoured the lecture on archaeological hoaxes, Egyptology and the Neanderthals.

She couldn't have predicted that, only three weeks ago, she'd be standing in Khaenweset's actual tomb, clutching Luke's hand. Pure bliss.

Okay, enough daydreaming, woman, time to concentrate on work.



At mid-morning a skinny arm stuck a glass of apple tea under Elizabeth's hat, breaking her concentration. Elizabeth peered into the pedlar's face. It was Hālid. Although she never accepted drinks at the markets, she trusted the regular site visitors not to drug her.

'*Shukran.*' Thank you.

Sipping the piping-hot sweetness, Elizabeth picked over the scarab carvings she had uncovered that morning. She looked forward to cleaning and sketching them tonight. She thanked Hālid again, and handed back the glass with a little baksheesh.

Elizabeth returned to her square to brush away the next layer. She revelled in her fellow diggers' chatter, the blazing sun on her back, and her deeply fulfilling labours. Life as an archaeologist was everything she had imagined it would be.



That afternoon, beneath a brilliant blue sky, Elizabeth watched Luke's head bob towards her over the dunes.

As he drew nearer she could see that something was wrong. He was ashen, expressionless. She felt a chill.

'Lizzie, I'm so sorry,' he sputtered. 'It's . . . your . . . it's your dad.'

Time slowed.

'What? What do you . . . What?'

Silently, Elizabeth begged him not to answer.

'He's . . . A message came. It could be wrong,' Luke pleaded. 'I'm so sorry, Lizzie, but, it said he's dead.'

In the space of a single breath Elizabeth's father, and her new life, were gone.

The world went cold. Grey.

She had to go back.



CHAPTER ONE

*Olmec date 4.15.9.17.17 5 Kab'an 5 Murwan
(21 March 1231 BCE)*

*The Tok's ceremonial city, near Lord Ajaꝝ's lands,
ancient Olmec (central modern Mexico)*

Two women drew aside the umbilical cords covering the cave's entrance. A man in skull make-up emerged from the cave, a limp child in his arms.

Kat screamed. 'He's dead! He's dead!'

Ix remembered her own terror the first time she saw the Great Birthing Ceremony. She laughed and pulled four-year-old Kat onto her lap, then pointed at the ceremonial platform opposite their seats. The drooping child in the man's arms began to struggle.

'Look, Kat. It's all right. The maize child lives. . . and it's a boy.'

Ix jiggled Kat on her knee, making her giggle. 'The Lord of Maize's fire is hot.'

The Lord of Maize held the child aloft, triumphant. The crowd around Ix and her family roared.

'Mother, what's he doing?' Kat asked.

'Celebrating being A Man Who Has Fathered Sons,' said Tzikin, squeezing Ix's leg. Ix appreciated her twin sister answering Kat's question. Despite Tzikin's reckless spirit, she had always been kind.

'Mother! Mother!' Ix's three other daughters squeezed through the throng. 'Can we go and get another pink maize husk? Can we? Pleeese?'

Ix huffed. Her daughters had eaten three days' worth of maize already, and the sun had yet to reach its zenith.

Tzikin nudged Ix. 'Go on, let them.'

Tzikin's youngest five girls emerged from the crowd. 'Us too. Us too.'

Ix and Tzikin's mother, Imox, rattled her token bag from her seat beside Tzikin.

'I may have enough to buy one more for each of you.'

All nine girls squealed with pleasure. 'Grandmother, Grandmother, thank you.'

'But,' their grandmother continued, 'all your sisters and brothers must have one. Go and find the others and tell them to come here. You can only have treats if everyone gets one.'

'Yes, Grandmother!' Chimalmat, Ix's eldest, turned and clambered down the stands as fast as she could, tripping over bags of food and blankets as she went.

'Hello, hello.' Kimi and her brother Kej settled beside Ix's family. Ix smiled: she liked the old midwife and her brother. They had both been very kind to Ix since she joined Lord Ajaw's household, helping to shield Ix from Lord Ajaw's more extreme demands.

'Kimi, Kimi, look. Another tooth!' yelled Kat, pointing at her own mouth.

'Kat, shhh,' Ix said. 'Don't shout.'

'It's all right,' Kimi, hauling Kat onto her lap. She reached into her bag and pulled out a small gourd. 'Here, Ix, more medicine for the girls' headaches.'

'Thank you, Kimi,' Ix said, accepting the flask. 'You're so good to us.'

'It's no trouble,' Kimi replied.

'How are you?' Imox asked, squeezing the older woman's arm.

'Good,' Kimi said. 'I just checked on Iqchel, gave her a strengthening potion. The poor girl, she's pregnant again. I hope this one's journey is uninterrupted.'

'May the Lords of Maize hear your prayer,' Ix said. 'How many has she lost now?'

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‘Three.’

‘What do you mean, Kimi?’ Kat asked, her eyes wide. ‘How can you lose a baby? Did Iqchel leave them in the jungle and forget where she put them?’

‘No, Kat. Sometimes . . .’ Kimi’s eyes sought Ix’s. Ix nodded. ‘Sometimes a maize child doesn’t finish forming properly in the womb, Kat. Or it loses its fire before it reaches this world, because the fire isn’t hot enough.’

‘Unlike the Lords of Maize,’ Ix said, ‘who will burn you up if you don’t be quiet. Now shush, Kat, and watch the ceremony.’

‘And the rest of you,’ Tzikin pointed at the children gathered around the seated women and Kej, ‘stand here in front of me and stop wriggling. The fire is coming!’

On the platform above the Great Ballcourt, the Lord of Maize shot a ball of fire from his loins, lighting the torch in front of the womb-cave.

Like everyone else, Ix knew that a maize child began when a man sparked a fire in a woman’s womb. If the man continued to add his fire, and it was hot enough, the maize child became a boy. If his fire was too cool, it became a girl. A man with very hot fire could even build two children at once, as Ix and Tzikin’s father had in their mother, Imox.

The Lord of Maize re-entered the womb-cave, ropes of Sky Mother’s umbilical cords trailing behind him. The crowd chanted encouragement as he disappeared from view. He re-emerged from the gloom with another boy and the crowd cheered.

Ix sighed. She wanted so much to make her husband, Aqabal, A Man Who Has Fathered Sons.

Tzikin poked Ix in the ribs. ‘Stop thinking about it. You have four beautiful daughters, and Aqabal loves you. Enough.’

‘Easy for you to say,’ Ix countered.

Tzikin’s husband was renowned through all the villages as the man with the hottest fire. In just fifteen years of marriage he had

built three sets of twin boys, two sets of twin girls, and one set of triplets in Tzikin's womb.

'Ix, you're lucky to have had any maize children at all,' said Tzikin. 'We all thought you were going to die after you took that ball to the stomach.'

'But the Lords of Maize heard my prayers, and you survived,' Imox added.

'I still won that game!' Ix said.

'Yes, you did,' Imox smiled. 'My jaguar girl of fire.'

Ix stroked the pouch around her neck. It contained the ballplayer figurine created to commemorate her historic win: the first female ever to score two goals in one game, right here on the Tok's Great Ballcourt.

The crowd roared again as the women beside the womb-cave cut the umbilical cords from Sky Mother, freeing the maize children to run from the platform to the Great Ballcourt below.

Chimalmat reappeared, trailed by the rest of Tzikin's children. Ix looked at Tzikin's six boys and suppressed another sigh. Tzikin had so many sons, and Ix only wanted one. The Lords of Maize could be deaf sometimes.

As Imox distributed a token to each of her seventeen grandchildren, Kej leant forward.

'Ix, Tzikin, may I buy each of the children a butterfly toy as well?' he asked.

'I want a crocodile.'

'I want a toad.'

'I want a water lily.'

'Don't be so rude!' Tzikin admonished her sons. She turned to Kej. 'That's very generous, but there's no need. Another pink maize husk each is plenty!'

'I have no children of my own to spoil, so it would be my pleasure. How about I take them all to the stalls?'

Ix and Tzikin glanced at each other.

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‘Yes, Kej, thank you,’ Ix answered for both of them. ‘Leave Kat here with us, though. She will be happy with a butterfly.’

Kej patted Kat’s head as he passed Ix. The older children trailed him down the stairs.

‘Your brother is so generous towards my grandchildren,’ Imox said to Kimi.

Kimi shrugged. ‘As he says, he has no children of his own, or grandchildren, so he likes to take care of his friends’. I think he feels less lonely this way.’

On the platform opposite Ix and her family, the Great Birthing Ceremony concluded. The opening dance of the Ballgame began as hundreds of dancers poured onto the Great Ballcourt below the womb-cave. The Hero Twins – the Divine Ballplayers – ran onto the court, sending large rubber balls bouncing with enormous swings of their hips.

Red, yellow and orange feathered headdresses swayed in time to the drumming. Lost in the whirl of colours and movement, Ix failed to notice Lord Ajaw’s approach until he was just two steps below her in the stands. She nudged Tzikin, who tapped Imox and Kimi in turn. All four women sat quietly, and Kat grew still.

Lord Ajaw sat beside Ix. His second son, Aqabal’s brother Tijax, trailed him up the stands and sat next to him.

‘Good day, Lord Ajaw,’ Imox said. ‘May the Lords of Maize hear your prayers.’

‘Thank you, Woman Who Has Borne Children.’

‘And good day to you, Lord Tijax,’ Tzikin said.

Tijax stared at the ground as he replied, ‘Good day, wife of A Man Who Has Fathered Sons.’

Kat burrowed her head into Ix’s armpit and grabbed on to the pouch around Ix’s neck that contained her ballplayer figurine.

‘How are you today, Lady Ix?’ Lord Ajaw asked.

Ix wished Aqabal were here. ‘Well, Lord,’ she answered her father-in-law.

‘Have the Lords of Maize heard you yet?’ Lord Ajaw looked at Ix’s stomach. ‘Will you make my son A Man Who Has Fathered Sons?’

Ix tensed. It would be much easier for Aqabal to build a maize son in her if only Lord Ajaw would stop sending him away to work on Ajaw’s great new ceremonial city. Ix prayed daily to the Hero Twins to keep Aqabal by her side.

‘I pray to the Lords of Maize every day,’ Ix said. ‘I beg them to hear me.’

‘Good. Continue to pray,’ Ajaw replied.

On the Great Ballcourt below them the opposing teams took their starting positions. From his platform, the skull-faced Lord of Maize threw a rubber ball into the centre of the Great Ballcourt and the game began.

The fire in Ix’s blood burned as she remembered the fierce joy of competition. With the raw, wild power of a jaguar in her veins she’d won every game she’d played. Facing a single opponent, or as part of a team, it didn’t matter. She was always surprised afterwards to discover she had injuries, be it broken ribs or a deeply bruised hip. Only the pain of a ball to the stomach, which had almost killed her, had registered while she’d been playing.

One of the women on the court bounced the ball high with a swing of her hips, falling to the ground afterwards. Ix knew the padding around the woman’s hips would cushion her against most of the impact, but she groaned in empathy nonetheless.

The ball flew near the vertical hoop, hitting the rim. The crowd sighed. No-one would ever surpass her record, Ix crowed silently to herself.

Kat poked her mother in the chest. ‘That ballplayer is like you,’ she whispered.

‘Yes,’ Ix whispered back.

‘When will I play?’

Ix glanced at Lord Ajaw beside them.

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‘You won’t, Kat. You belong to Lord Ajaw’s household. Noble women don’t play the Ballgame.’

‘But you did. And Father did.’

‘Yes. Noble men and ordinary women may play, but not noble women or ordinary men.’

‘Why?’

‘Because the Lords of Maize say so,’ Lord Ajaw said, interrupting.

Kat drew back from his smile. ‘But Mother is noble.’

‘I am now,’ Ix said, desperate to end the conversation. ‘But only because your father was kind enough to marry me. I started as an ordinary woman.’

‘Like Grandmother?’

‘Yes.’ Ix glanced at Imox. Her mother appeared to be fully engrossed in the Ballgame, but Ix knew she would be concentrating on every word Lord Ajaw said.

‘What about Chimalmat, Eb and Aqmaq?’ Kat listed her sisters. ‘Are they noble? Am I noble?’

‘Of course.’

Kat touched the side of her head. ‘Is that why our heads are different?’

‘Yes. Now be quiet and watch the game. No more questions.’

As the Ballgame continued Ix recalled her many triumphs on the Great Ballcourt. She was a child of the jaguar, and she could do anything she put her mind to. Her determination made her a champion, which in turn had made her famous enough for Aqabal to marry her.

With that same fire Ix would build a son for Aqabal in her womb. Even if Aqabal’s seed was cool, with help from the Lords of Maize and the fire from her own blood, she would do it.



CHAPTER TWO

Now

Canberra, Australia

Sitting in Addendum, a cafe at the Mahony Griffin Library, Dr Elizabeth Pimms stared at the surrounding stained-glass windows. As a child, she had been mesmerised by their marvellous colours and patterns. Today, besieged by driving rain, the windows seemed dull, lifeless.

Through her fog of dejection Elizabeth tried to pay attention to the conversation between Taid – her grandfather, Rhys Evans – and Judy.

‘Thank you again,’ Taid said, his voice rich and smooth. ‘It was so good of you to help us.’

‘Of course, Rhys,’ Judy said. ‘I didn’t do anything, really. Elizabeth submitted such an excellent application she would have been chosen anyway. I’m so sorry. . .’ Judy’s voice trailed off. ‘I’m so sorry you lost William.’ She looked at Elizabeth. ‘All of you.’

‘Thank you,’ Taid said. ‘It’s been a difficult year, but thanks to you, here we are.’

‘And you have another book wrangler in the family!’ Judy said.

‘Yes,’ Taid grinned broadly.

‘So,’ Judy turned to Elizabeth, ‘first day on the job. Are you excited?’

Tears stung the back of Elizabeth’s eyes and her fingers sought the cartouche around her neck. Her attempt to smile emerged as a grimace.

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ Judy continued. ‘First day at a new job is

always nerve-wracking. You'll be fine. You practically grew up here. And Rhys said you flew through the Diploma of Library Management in record time.'

Elizabeth managed to smile this time. She had completed the year-long course in just seven months, and still came first in the class.

'Everyone who worked with your father or grandfather is glad you're joining us. The third generation from one family. . . It's a bibliographic dynasty.'

Elizabeth knew Judy was only trying to be kind, but she really wished she would stop talking about it.

'Yes, we're very proud of my Beth *bach*,' Taid said. 'You asked about Mathieu before, Judy. Would you like to see a recent school photo?' Taid must have sensed that she was struggling, Elizabeth realised, for him to change the subject so abruptly. She was certain Grandmère Maddie had armed him with photos for just such a distraction.

'Yes,' Judy said. 'It's a couple of months since I've seen Matty or Sam. How are they?'

As Taid and Judy pored over pictures of her brother and sister, Elizabeth stared at fat raindrops attacking the cafe windows. Lost in the deluge, pulling distractedly at her necklace, Elizabeth let her mind drift away from the conversation.

Just half an hour until the horror began: her first day working as a librarian, and the official end of her career as an archaeologist. Until today, Elizabeth had harboured a tiny hope that somehow – somehow – enough money would appear in the family coffers to free her to return to archaeology, and to Luke.

Despite the insurance payout from Dad's death, which had reduced the mortgage, there simply wasn't enough to cover household bills and Matty's surgeries. Elizabeth knew her grandparents' pensions couldn't stretch that far, and – she huffed – the layabout Sam couldn't be trusted to hold down a

job. They could sell the house and downsize, of course, but the very idea was anathema. So many years of love and care had gone into the enormous, beautiful building that it was part of the family now.

That left just one option: Elizabeth realised it was down to her to keep the family financially afloat. Dad would have expected no less. And while her income as a fledgling archaeologist was grossly insufficient, working at the country's premier library meant Elizabeth could more than cover their needs. And that was that.

'All right, time to go and meet the others,' Judy said brightly. Elizabeth's shoulders sagged. There was no avoiding it now.

After a quick pause in the bathroom to finger-comb hair and neaten clothing, Elizabeth and Judy headed to the auditorium. A group was gathered by the podium at the front; eight heads swung towards the two women as they step-shuffle-stepped their way down the oversized stairs to the front of the hall.

Judy introduced everyone, her hands, her thatch of wild curls, and her gossamer clothes in constant motion. Elizabeth kept a smile on her face as she shook hands with each person in turn. The woman at the centre of the gathering, Margaret, was the program coordinator. The other graduates turned out to be Paul, short and dapper, and Sarah, tall, thin and no make-up. Next came the graduates' initial supervisors. Elizabeth's boss, Mark, seemed reasonably benign.

The final two people she was introduced to were graduate 'buddies'. Apparently each graduate was assigned a buddy to help them adjust to working in the Library. Paul and Sarah's buddies were present; Elizabeth's was currently on a customer-service desk. She would meet him later.

‘Please, everyone, help yourselves to tea and coffee, and take a seat for the presentation,’ Margaret said. She then moved into an explanation of the year ahead. Each graduate would complete three rotations of four months. Paul was to start in Exhibitions, move to General Collections and finally to Corporate. Sarah would start in IT, her speciality, then rotate through Asian Collections and the Main Reading Room.

Elizabeth swallowed at the mention of Asian Collections, her Dad’s division. Elizabeth didn’t care where she was placed, as long as it wasn’t there. She barely heard Margaret say she would start in Maps, move to the Main Reading Room, which was Judy’s domain, then finish the year in Preservation.

At the conclusion of the presentation, Margaret announced a general tour of the Library buildings. Paul and Sarah made noises of anticipation; Elizabeth’s stomach dropped.

As feared, the tour provoked a flood of childhood memories. It began at the staff entrance, the very spot Dad first saw her mum standing beneath a red umbrella on a rainy day just like this one. Dad kept that tattered old umbrella for years.

Elizabeth’s throat constricted as she posed for her security-pass photo. She tried not to scowl at the camera as Paul delivered an enthusiastic monologue on his background in public relations. Even Sarah, who seemed quiet and shy, was irritating. Elizabeth caught herself wanting to snap at both of them, and poked herself in the metaphorical ribs. Just because she was hurting, there was no need to alienate people. So, as the tour moved on, she asked first Paul then Sarah where they had studied. She catalogued their answers for future reference.

The group entered the newly refurbished Main Reading Room, where Elizabeth had sat countless times with Mum and Sam, waiting for Dad to finish work. It was so long ago; Matty hadn’t even been born then. She was brought back to

the present by Judy pointing out the Meirionnydd Reading Room in the corner.

‘This is a service for seriously dedicated library-goers,’ Judy was saying. ‘Competition for a desk in there can be fierce. Rumours of attempted bribery and corruption abound.’

Next, they clattered downstairs to the underground cavern of books known as ‘the stacks’. As a small child, Elizabeth had been both entranced and terrified of the Library’s subterranean level. Taid’s evening tales of dark fantasy and danger had convinced her that huge Tolkien-style dragons lay in the shadows of the compacti, jealously guarding literary treasures.

After one particularly distressing visit to the stacks, Elizabeth was forced to reveal her fears to her mother. Taid was scolded by both his wife and his daughter after that, and his ‘inappropriate’ choice of bedtime reading material was replaced by traditional European fairytales and Roald Dahl, an irony not lost on Elizabeth, even as an eight-year-old.

‘Stand aside, please,’ an electronic voice commanded, causing the group to jump. It was one of the stacks’ robots. Dependable and officious, the robots were indispensable as they transported heavy loads around the bowels of the Library. Bibliophilic versions of *Doctor Who*’s K-9, thought Elizabeth, as the squat unit trundled past.

‘All right,’ Margaret said, ‘now we’ll head to the staff offices. First up, Asian Collections.’ A wave of nausea struck Elizabeth.

The ten of them fitted into the lift, just. Elizabeth’s limbs tensed with each passing floor. Bile rose in her throat as the doors opened and the group piled out.

‘How beautiful,’ Sarah exclaimed, pointing at the intricately carved desks and terracotta warriors in the Asian Collections Reading Room. While Sarah and Paul explored the room, Elizabeth focused on breathing slowly and deeply. . . She could do this.

A small woman stepped out from behind the service desk, looking directly at Elizabeth as she walked towards the tour group. Elizabeth was struck by a similarity between this lady and Nainai, her Chinese grandmother. Perhaps this woman's family came from the same part of China as Nainai?

'Hello, Margaret,' the woman said. Her voice jarred in Elizabeth's mind. She had an Australian accent, not the Chinese one Elizabeth expected.

'Hello, Mai,' Margaret said. 'Everyone, this is Mai. She will be your supervisor in your second rotation, Sarah.'

'Hello,' Mai said, shaking Sarah's hand. 'It's nice to meet you.'

Mai turned back to Margaret. 'We're ready for you, if you'd like to bring the group through? I've prepared some handouts.'

She has lovely manners, thought Elizabeth, following the group through a staff doorway. A huge desk-filled room opened before her. Elizabeth started to shake. This was the room where Dad had worked. Don't overreact, stay calm. It's been a year, you can do this.

'I'll just get the handouts from my desk,' Mai said.

Trailing behind Mai, Elizabeth realised they were all headed to Dad's desk. A welter of memories swallowed her: Dad, sitting in that chair, talking to her, teasing her, laughing with her.

Kaleidoscopic needles of light danced before Elizabeth's eyes. She felt strangely cold, and a buzzing filled her ears. Somehow, rough carpet fibres were scratching the side of her face. She was distantly aware of Judy thrusting through the group and pulling her to her feet.

Humiliated, the last thing Elizabeth saw before Judy pushed her from the room was Mai's deep frown of disapproval.

Judy splashed icy water on Elizabeth's face again and again. She was not gentle.

'Breathe slowly,' Judy instructed.

Elizabeth held her breath for a second, then started convulsing with tears.

Judy patted her back roughly. 'No, slower than that,' she commanded. 'Slowly in. . . one, two, three. . . and out. . . one, two, three.'

Elizabeth complied. Gradually, her breathing slowed and her sobbing stopped. She raised her face to the mirror. Her eyes were a startling, almost preternatural green, made even more vivid by her flushed cheeks. Her mascara was everywhere, her hair was stuck to the side of her face, and her scarf was half-soaked. Oh, brilliant. Shaking her head at the sight of herself, Elizabeth reached for paper towels.

Judy stopped patting her back and leant against the bathroom bench. 'So, can you tell me what just happened?'

Elizabeth nodded, but found her voice gone. She swallowed and tried again.

'I truly thought I was all cried out, but, that was Dad's desk. . .'

'Oh. I'm sorry,' Judy said. She dragged one hand through her curls. 'I didn't realise you were still so upset. Well, obviously you'd be upset, but. . .'

'I didn't expect to react like that either,' Elizabeth said. 'I don't want to be here, of course, but. . .'

'What do you mean, you don't want to be here?' Judy asked, frowning.

Elizabeth drew a sharp breath. Oops.

'Well, my family – Matty – needs me. But if I didn't have to stay for them I'd have gone back to Egypt after the funeral,

finished my dig there, and then moved to Mexico with Luke. Instead, I'm here doing. . . ' Elizabeth caught herself before she insulted Judy's profession, ' . . . um, doing something that I don't love the way I love archaeology.'

'I see,' Judy said. She paused for a few seconds. 'Elizabeth, I'm going to give you the same advice Rhys gave me when I lost my husband. I didn't listen to it myself, but I wish I had.'

Elizabeth looked at her blankly.

'Losing your father was an enormous shock. Then, you lost something else you love, in your case, working in archaeology. And you feel distanced from Luke. There is one remedy, and one remedy only.'

'What's that?'

'Time. And as time passes, as you wait to feel better, you must be as kind to yourself as you can possibly be. I wasn't, and it was a huge mistake.'

'What do you mean?'

'I drove myself.' Judy was still for once. 'I punished myself, acting as though nothing had changed, when of course *everything* had changed. I worked myself into the ground. Your grandfather noticed, and tried to help me, but I wouldn't listen. Then I collapsed at work, and I had no choice but to listen.'

Ahh, that was why Judy felt indebted to Taid and remained such a close family friend.

'Rhys must have given you the same advice, surely,' Judy said. 'Even while you grieve, you must do the little things you love as often as possible. Drink your favourite drinks. Eat your favourite foods. Do whatever makes you feel better. It's the only way.'

The terrible pain under Elizabeth's breastbone eased slightly at Judy's words. Taid *had* given her the same advice, but it only made sense now. Even the idea of sipping hot apple tea was comforting.

‘And, most importantly,’ Judy continued, ‘you must spend time with your closest friends. They know you the best. Better than your own family, usually.’

‘I can’t! Luke is in Mexico and Tanya is in Mongolia.’

‘Use Skype,’ Judy suggested.

‘I do, but it’s not the same.’

‘It’s something, though,’ Judy countered. ‘And you have your family; your grandfather, your grandmothers, your brother, your sister. They all love you.’

Elizabeth let the reference to her dratted younger sister go without comment.

‘Now, let’s finish tidying you up.’

Elizabeth washed her face, reapplied her make-up, and used the hand-dryer to bring her wet scarf back to its original mint-green colour. At least the damp patches on her black top and cargo pants weren’t visible.

‘Come on,’ said Judy, chipper again. ‘Pop a bit more colour on your lips and let’s go meet your colleagues.’



Judy led Elizabeth through a seemingly endless maze of corridors and stairs until they emerged into a large public space filled with couches. A staff canteen sat on one side of the room; the entrance to Maps beckoned on the other.

Entering the Maps Reading Room, with its enormous globe atlas, ancient wall charts, and sturdy desks, Elizabeth felt calmer. The rear wall of the room was glass, and behind that was a fern tree-filled courtyard that opened onto the Library grounds.

‘Wark-ark!’

Elizabeth jerked her head towards the bizarre sound. What on earth was that? Peering through the fern trees she spied . . . a peacock?

‘Oh, that’s Andrew,’ Judy said, ‘our poor, lonely birdy boy.’

Elizabeth walked cautiously towards the glass wall that separated her from the peacock. Beyond his glorious tail she could see it was still raining outside; Andrew must have been sheltering from the downpour. ‘Where did he come from?’ she asked.

‘We think he wandered over from the colony of wild peacocks on the other side of the lake. Everyone here loves him. He even has his own Facebook page.’ Judy turned to face the reference desk. ‘Let’s introduce you to your buddy. Elizabeth, this is Nathan.’

‘Hi.’ Elizabeth extended her right hand.

Nathan didn’t move to take it. He just stared at her. Uh oh, he could tell she’d been crying. Awesome first impression.

Judy cleared her throat. Nathan started, as though prodded, then returned Elizabeth’s ‘Hi.’ He smiled as he took her hand.

‘I should introduce you to Lynton, as well,’ Nathan said. ‘Lynton!’ he called through a doorway, ‘Come and meet our new graduate.’

An older woman dressed in slick layers of purple and black barrelled through the doorway. At the same time, Elizabeth’s new supervisor, Mark, walked through the Maps entrance. Judy moved towards him as Nathan introduced Lynton to Elizabeth.

‘Lynton’s the other member of the team here in Maps,’ Nathan explained.

Elizabeth offered her hand to Lynton while watching Mark and Judy enter his office. She assumed Judy was explaining to Mark what had happened in Asian Collections. Elizabeth was concentrating so intensely on trying to overhear their conversation that she missed Lynton’s question.

‘Sorry?’

‘Did you have to move to Canberra for the graduate program, or are you a local?’ Lynton repeated.

'I'm from Canberra.'

'That's good,' Lynton said. 'It's harder on the ones who move here from out of town. It's better if your friends are here.'

Elizabeth felt her face fall, but tried to sound positive. 'Unfortunately my boyfriend and best friend both work overseas, but I do get to see them at Christmas time.'

Nathan groaned. Elizabeth looked at him quizzically.

'Uh, I'm sorry to hear that,' he said. 'You must be lonely, if they're both away for most of the year.'

It hurt too much to think about today. She shrugged. 'Well, I'm pretty keen to get started on some work. Is there something I can help with?'

Nathan took a few seconds to respond. 'Okay. . . um. . . Let's give you a quick tour, then get you started on cataloguing maps.'

'That sounds good.'

After a brief inspection of the staff area that overlooked Lake Burley Griffin, Nathan led Elizabeth to a climate-controlled vault. Entering the room, she detected the hint of urea that in the past had always whispered, 'Books. Lots and lots of old books.' Now it said 'Maps' as well. Hundreds of tightly curled scrolls nestled between the shelves, reminiscent of piles of papyri in ancient Egypt. Elizabeth relaxed as the cool, serene space took hold of her.

Hoping to make a better impression on Nathan, Elizabeth reminded herself to run the making-friends protocol: show a little interest, ask personal questions, ensure you get a detail or two wrong when you recite their answers back later.

'So, how did you get into maps?'

Nathan's face split into a wide grin. 'Fra Mauro.'

The name didn't ring a bell for Elizabeth. 'Fra Mauro?'

'He painted an incredible world map in the fifteenth century. The first time I saw a picture of it, I was lost.' Nathan grinned again. 'I was only eight at the time. After that, all I

wanted for birthdays and Christmases were books about maps. I even named my cat PE Mandeville, short for Poor English Mandeville.'

This Nathan was clever. 'I haven't heard of him before. Poor English Mandeville?'

'Well, actually, it was Sir John Mandeville. He wrote a travelogue in the fourteenth century, as good as Marco Polo's, but because he was English he wasn't believed. He influenced Shakespeare, Coleridge and Swift,' Nathan paused, looking anxious. 'Sorry, once I get started on maps I tend to go on. You can tell me to shut up.'

'It's okay, I understand. I'm the same with archaeology and genetics.' Or at least, I was.

Nathan made a show of breathing a sigh of relief.

'Archaeology. . . Egyptology maybe?' Nathan asked.

Elizabeth was surprised. 'Good guess.'

'The cartouche was a big hint.'

Elizabeth grasped her necklace involuntarily.

'If you'd like to get started on some work, how about this?'

Nathan pointed at the compactus in front of them. 'Everything here needs to be catalogued. They're all Chinese maps, with no English. Your CV said you speak Chinese?'

'Enough for this, as long as I have a dictionary.'

'Excellent. I've put a copy of the AACR on your desk, and we have a selection of dictionaries next door. Maybe translate the information on ten maps to start with, then we'll catalogue them together? Once you're comfortable, we'll let you loose on the whole collection.'

Elizabeth sighed with relief. 'That sounds good.'

'Really?'

'Yes. For me, working quietly on old things, finding out what they are and where they come from, is. . . bliss.'

This time Nathan genuinely sighed. Elizabeth didn't know

what to make of him. He was tall, medium brown hair, medium brown eyes, pleasant-enough looking. He was probably a few years older than her. Something about him wasn't quite 'normal', though. . . but then, who was she to judge? She wasn't exactly normal herself.

Ten minutes later, Elizabeth was firmly ensconced in the room of compacti. Armed with her Chinese–English dictionaries and a copy of the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, she immersed herself in translation and categorisation. She enjoyed both the monotony of the work and the challenge of memorising the AACR, flicking back and forth between the pages in her mind.

It was good to have something to concentrate on other than the loss of her former life.



After what seemed like only minutes, Lynton knocked on the door of the vault. Lunchtime. Negotiating her way through map-laden trolleys, Elizabeth retrieved her lunch from her desk and joined Lynton and Nathan at the staff table. She noticed Nathan reading a book with a curious title: *The Island of Lost Maps*.

'That looks like an interesting read.'

'It's about international map crime.'

'That's a thing?'

'Yep. Lots of rare-map thefts have been discovered recently,' Nathan said. 'Even a famous map – the fifteenth-century *Ulm Ptolemy World Map* – was stolen from Spain and ended up here in Australia.'

How had Elizabeth never heard of this before? It sounded like the archaeological black market. 'People who steal from public collections are the lowest of the low!'

Nathan gave her an odd smile. 'The lengths they'll go to are incredible,' he continued. 'Disguises, briefcases with hidden panels, concealed scalpels. . . real cloak-and-dagger stuff. I'm actually writing a paper on map security for the national librarian conference.'

He was publishing something? Elizabeth burned with jealousy, which quickly turned to shame. She had made her choice, and she had to live with it. She had no right to resent other people's success. 'Ah, that sounds interesting,' she managed.

Nathan smiled again.

'Someone in the cafe said your dad used to work here,' Lynton said, munching on her boxed salad.

Elizabeth felt her cheeks redden.

'I wondered about that,' Nathan said. 'You've got the same surname as William Pimms, a man who worked here until about a year ago, only you don't look like him.'

Elizabeth heard the question in the statement, took a deep breath and recited the stock explanation. It was easier that way.

'Yes, he was my dad. We're a typical Australian family, quite mixed. Taid, my grandfather, is Welsh. His wife, my grandmère Maddie, is French Berber. My other grandmother, Nainai Cho, was Dad's mum. She's Chinese. I take after the Welsh side of the family, that's why most people don't see the resemblance between Dad and me straight away.'

'I'm so sorry,' Lynton said, her cheeks now matching Elizabeth's. 'I shouldn't have asked.'

Elizabeth willed herself to nod.

'That's okay Lynton, you weren't to know,' she said, casting about for another subject. Her eyes fell on a photo frame on Nathan's desk. 'Who are the two cuties?'

'My intrepid cats, Bass and Flinders,' he answered.

‘Intrepid?’

‘They’re adventurers, like the real George Bass and Matthew Flinders.’

The grey tabbies in the photo looked identical. ‘Are they twins?’ Elizabeth asked.

‘I think so. I can only tell them apart by some scars on Flinders’ legs. Otherwise they’re indistinguishable.’

‘They sound like Loki and Paris, two of our cats,’ Elizabeth said.

‘One god of mischief, one instigator of war. Sounds serious!’

Elizabeth was tickled that Nathan knew the mythological references.

‘Do you have any photos?’ Lynton asked.

‘Yes, hang on.’ Elizabeth grabbed her phone from her satchel. ‘Here we are.’

First she showed them a photo of one tiny grey cat and one large black-and-grey-striped tabby. ‘This is Seshet and Thoth.’

Next she scrolled to a photo of two sweet, innocent-looking caramel tabbies.

‘Paris and Loki. Don’t ask me which is which, you can only tell by their tails.’

‘Oh?’

‘Loki is missing the tip of her tail. Otherwise they are a perfect pair of double-trouble.’

‘Why is she missing the tip of her tail? Is it a congenital thing?’ Nathan asked.

‘No, she lost it last year when she brought an entire bookshelf down on herself. She compressed the end of her tail, and the vet said it had to come off.’

‘Definitely used one of her nine lives, then,’ Lynton said.

‘I’m surprised she has any left,’ Elizabeth smiled.

‘I’ll tell you what,’ Nathan said, ‘if your Seshet and my Flinders got together, we’d have to call their kitten Petrie!’

Elizabeth laughed loudly. She was pleased by Nathan's knowledge of Egyptology.

Lynton looked puzzled. 'As in petri dish?'

'Um, no. Seshet, my cat, is named after the Egyptian goddess of writing. And Matthew Flinders, the cartographer Nathan's cat is named for, had a grandson called William Matthew Flinders Petrie,' Elizabeth said. 'He was a famous early British archaeologist.' Fabulous Egyptologist too, she thought. Shame about his views on eugenics.

'Oh,' was Lynton's only response.

'How about you, any pets?' Elizabeth asked.

It turned out that Lynton had two small dogs, whom she loved just as passionately as anyone might love their cats, despite the smell.

Returning to the rare maps vault after lunch, Elizabeth noticed it had finally stopped raining outside.



Elizabeth awoke on Friday morning looking forward to the end of her first week at the Library. Despite the rocky start on Monday, she was adjusting. It wasn't archaeology but she quite enjoyed the process of cataloguing maps, and she was slowly making friends with Lynton and Nathan.

At three o'clock that afternoon, Elizabeth and Nathan left the Maps wing for a graduate afternoon tea. Everyone connected to the program was invited, including future graduate supervisors for the whole year. Elizabeth fervently hoped she wouldn't make a fool of herself in front of everyone again.

Around thirty people gathered in the shade on the terrace outside Addendum Café, overlooking the Library's Llewellyn residential wing. They couldn't escape the fierce heat of the

Australian summer, though. The Library's concrete walls radiated with the energy they had soaked up from the sun that morning, baking anyone who stood too near the building. Elizabeth took a large glass of iced water to the edge of the terrace, hoping to catch a breeze.

In the distance, Mount Ainslie slumped skyward, its darkly mottled shape a perfect background for the intensely green trees lining Lake Burley Griffin. In the foreground, dragon-boat crews raced past the blazing white pillar of the Carillion, nestled among willow trees on its own little island. Canberra could be so beautiful, despite the heat.

'This is sensible.'

Elizabeth jumped, and turned to see that Judy, Nathan, Paul and Mai had joined her.

'No hogging the breeze!' Paul said. 'It's so hot. In Tassie, it's only like this one or two days a year. Do you ever get used to it?'

'Yes,' chorused Nathan and Judy. They glanced at each other and smiled.

'I've only been here for a few years,' Nathan said, one hand in his jeans pocket, the other holding a large glass of fruit punch. 'The first one or two are rough, but you adjust after that.'

'And I've lived here my whole life,' said Judy, shaking her head of curls ferociously as she spoke. 'It doesn't bother me at all.'

'How about you, Elizabeth?' asked Paul, rolling his cool glass across his forehead. 'Where are you from?'

'Canberra. I've lived here most of my life, too. I'm not used to the heat, though. My grandfather says it's my Welsh blood. . . We're built to survive an ice age, not an Australian summer.'

'Elizabeth certainly is from Canberra,' Judy said.

Elizabeth grimaced. Here it came.

'Her whole family comes from the Library. Her grandfather

worked here. Her father worked here. And her mother and father met here. Isn't that romantic?'

Elizabeth thought Nathan was looking at her sympathetically, though it was hard to tell. Everyone had sunglasses on. Mai stood next to Nathan, strangely quiet through this whole exchange.

'Oh, I remember now,' Paul said. 'That's why your name is familiar. *The Body in the Library*. Your dad died here, didn't he? I saw that when I was googling the Library.'

Elizabeth was stricken.

'Oh. . .' Paul trailed off. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything.'

That stupid reporter. He'd headlined Dad's death in the local paper as *The Body in the Library*, making it into some form of sick entertainment. Poor Grandmère Maddie, an avid Agatha Christie fan, had quietly buried her copy of the novel in the garage.

'How about we get another cold drink, then go into the air-conditioning?' Judy suggested, seeming to realise her mistake. All too late. Elizabeth's distress had returned with full force.

Paul trailed Judy back to the drinks table. Elizabeth considered following them.

Suddenly Mai leaned across Nathan, coming close to Elizabeth's face. In the split second timing of her thoughts Elizabeth assumed Mai was going to be consoling.

'You're such a spoilt princess,' Mai hissed. 'Everyone fawning over you because you're the poor little girl who lost her daddy.' Mai's voice rasped with loathing. 'You're just lucky you had your father for so long!' she spat, then strode away.

Elizabeth's heart pounded in her ears.

Nathan touched her shoulder, making her jump again. She turned to him as he lifted his sunglasses. His eyes were very wide.

OLMEC OBITUARY

'What's going on? What was that about?'

'I have no idea,' Elizabeth said, adrenaline tremors running through her legs.

'Come on, back inside. You've had a tough week. I think it's time you went home.'