

Prologue

Yale Campus

October 1987

Midnight

Tab Pendleton knew what was coming. He'd been preparing for it by holding his breath for long periods of time. He wasn't sure how that would prepare him, but he wasn't afraid. Not really.

"C'mon, Tab," his roommate, Josh taunted.

"Time for Tab-in-the-box," laughed another.

The men walked across the darkened campus with flashlights. Tab thought they were surprisingly quiet in the cold, crisp October air. Mostly he could hear the crunching of the leaves underfoot. *Dead. Just like I'll be in a few hours.* It was a symbolic death and rebirth followed, he knew. Just like those leaves he trampled underfoot, they became their brilliant, colorful true selves on their way to oxidation and death and were reborn in the buds of spring.

The men were getting closer to their destination.

"Tab-in-the-box, Tab-in-the-box," they began to chant.

"Quiet!" Josh silenced them.

Tab just wanted to get this over with. He took deep breaths to center himself.

Just stay calm, and it will be over before you know it.

As they rounded the corner, Tab saw the building in front of them -- a storage facility that held campus gardening supplies. It was a little known fact that a large sarcophagus was also stored inside. Most of the student body, would never see it, but for

the chosen few, the elite, it represented an age-old ritual. A coming of age rite that they couldn't escape – literally.

In ancient Egypt, religious initiates were placed inside a coffin and sealed up for several days. Alone in the dark their greatest fears chased them in living color. Vivid hallucinations haunted them as they sought eternal life and rebirth. Many perished. The lack of air and sheer terror of facing their own fears took their lives. No rebirth there. But for those who survived, respect and higher service to Isis followed.

Not for the first time, Tab wondered who had started this tradition at Yale and how it would continue. He felt his pulse quicken as the key was placed into the door's tumbling lock.

Once inside, the flashlights flickered against the dark stone walls. Tab was thinking of those first initiates and how torches must've lit their way down narrow halls to their fate, eyes wide and hands sweating, wondering if they would survive.

At the end of the hall was another door. This one was unlocked. The hinges creaked against the old wood as Josh swung the door open.

He brandished the flashlight beam inside. There, up on a platform was a huge stone sarcophagus – a coffin.

He swung the light around and gave Tab a big grin, "There it is my boy, your home for the night."

The thick stone smelled mildewed and for a moment Tab was afraid to breathe. He was to be shut up in there. Locked up tight. There was enough air to get him through; if he could stay calm enough. Tab swallowed.

"Don't worry, Tab. We haven't lost one since the 1800s," Josh said.

“Yeah, but I figure that means we’re about due,” another said.

There was laughter, but Tab wasn’t paying attention. He was only focused on the job at hand.

“C’mon, c’mon, I know it’s not a suite at the Four Seasons, but these are your accommodations for the night, so let’s get you settled,” Josh suggested.

Tab nodded. He walked toward the platform and stood on it. Looking down into the tomb, all he saw was black. Flashlights lit the path for him and he noticed there was an old mildewed pillow for his head. From the look of it, it used to be purple – the color of royalty.

Tab stepped into the coffin and stood there staring at the faces of his classmates.

“Have a nice nap,” one offered.

“We’ll see you in the morning,”

“Hopefully,” another echoed.

Tab lay down inside the coffin and the cold stone quickly seeped through his light clothes. The faces of his contemporaries peered over the edges of the sarcophagus’s heavy stone cover. And the chant began in earnest then:

“Tab-in-the-box, Tab-in-the-box, Tab-in-the-box,” it was still echoing in his ears as the coffin lid slammed shut.

Outside the sarcophagus, Josh swigged from a bottle of Glennfedich and passed it around. Some of the underclassmen had been charged with stashing pillows and blankets in the storehouse earlier in the week and the men lounged on them now, drinking and

playing cards. They were taking bets on how long Tab would last in the tomb. So far odds had him at less than two hours. But Josh wasn't so sure.

Confined in the coffin, Tab choked on the pungent sting of mildew in his nose. He was cold against the stone slab and felt as if all the blood was draining from his body. The darkness was so complete he couldn't see his hand in front of his face. Dust and dirt collected in his eyes and mouth. He coughed and sputtered, knowing he had to regulate his breathing. Tab had never been fond of enclosed spaces and there wasn't much room in here. He closed his eyes and tried to push that thought from his mind. Immediately, images began to spring before him. Dark beings enveloped in cloaks swirled around him in a cloud of ebony. He could feel their ominous intent and started to panic. They came closer and closer. An army marching in unison, swords raised. He could see their eyes and the emptiness behind them. Tab was struggling for breath; he couldn't get any air into his lungs. He wanted to scream, but couldn't. His chest heaved with effort, still no breath would come. He thought his heart would burst with the fear. He saw it burst into a million little pieces in front of him, his blood eddying everywhere. Filling the casket. Washing over him.

“Only with blood can there be forgiveness,” he heard in his head and then loud, bellowing laughter. He watched the blood in horror; saw it even with his eyes squeezed shut. Fists clenched. Throat closing up. He's choking; he can no longer even gasp for air.

For a moment he isn't breathing and then a moment more. He knows his heart will stop now, but he feels so light, he doesn't care. He is ready to surrender to whatever comes when he hears an angelic voice, “Breathe now, fill your lungs.”

Tab is uncertain but opens his mouth and this time draws air in filling his lungs and pulling it down into his diaphragm. He releases this first breath quickly, but is able to draw another and another, slowing the rhythm each time.

“That’s it,” she soothes. “Relax and breathe. I am with you,” she tells him and now he sees her. She is fair-complexioned and her hair is red burnished copper swirling around her oval face. Her eyes are vibrant blue, like the waters of the Carribean.

He is so struck with her beauty that he almost forgets to breathe. She laughs at him: A high-pitched giggle. “Concentrate now, keep to your breathing. There is much to show you,” she says and fades from his view.

He sees his grandmother sitting at her kitchen table, the tarot deck spread before her. “There is much work to do,” she says. “You have been well-prepared,” and she is gone too.

Red, white, and blue balloons drop from a high ceiling onto a crowd. He is at a podium on stage. People are cheering and chanting his name. “Pendleton for President, Pendleton for President,” he hears.