

PAST INDISCRETIONS

By Susanne Marie Knight

PROLOGUE

"She *can't* play with us! Shit, she's just a namby-pamby little kid!"

Ouch. Whoever said names could never hurt you? From inside her Grandma's house, Savannah Alexander stood alone by the guest bedroom window, listening to and watching the big kids fight. Fight over whether to allow her to join their game. Tempers were *hot*, no mistaking the boys' stuck-out jaws and swinging fists. Almost as hot as the wispy breeze trying to ease its sluggish way through the open window. The baseball team's angry voices weren't as shy: coming from the vacant lot next door, impolite curse words made her turn strawberry red.

Savannah sucked in part of her lower lip. What would happen next?

"I count nine to eight," said Tommy, one of Savannah's cousin's friends.

"Uneven, Jacko. She comes in or you lose one from your team."

Savannah held her breath. Jacko was something of a bully. Big with a sandy crewcut--he had a fist the size of a melon.

"C'mon, let her play, Jacko. She'll have fun. Besides, we need her, and she'll only be here for a few more days. It ain't forever." Her cousin Drew, nervously tossed the baseball from hand to hand. He was a little afraid of Jacko. Even now Drew paled under his summer tan and darted his gaze at anyone and anything but Jacko. And Drew was fourteen!

But Tommy was also fourteen, and he didn't seem to mind Jacko staring him in the face and stomping his bare feet like an irritable bull. That in itself was amazing.

Then Jacko did the unexpected. He threw back his head and laughed. There was a meanness about it though. An uneasy feeling tingled down Savannah's spine.

"All right, Tommy boy. You punks can have the squirt on your team. Not that she'll be any good. Nine years old 'n she throws a ball like the prissy sissy she is!" Jacko pounded Tommy on the back, but the other boy didn't flinch.

Instead, Tommy pointed to Savannah's other cousin, Drew's sister Glenda--the only girl outside with the boys. "Why don't you go find Savannah and ask if she wants t'play?"

"Ask if she wants t'play with *us*?" Jacko and some of his teammates hooted.

"Why, what does she need, one of those engraved invitations since she's from *Noo Yawk*?" The snickering was downright disgusting.

Glenda, three years younger than Drew, bobbed her head, then ignoring the hubbub, sped off to Grandma's house, blonde pigtails flying behind her. Savannah didn't have much time. She yanked out the neatly tucked in tee-shirt from her matching shorts and pulled off her sneakers. Every kid in this small Missouri town went barefoot but her own feet weren't used to pebbles and grit. Maybe they wouldn't make fun of her

if she wore sandals. Maybe not too much fun, anyway. Buckling them up, she was almost ready when Glenda burst through the front porch door.

"Savvy? Where are you?" A second later, she rushed into the bedroom. "Hey Savvy, guess what? We're gonna let you play ball with us. C'mon, the guys are waitin'."

It really was an honor to be with the big kids, but sometimes a girl had to draw the line at certain things. "I'm coming, but don't call me Savvy, Glenda."

Her cousin wrinkled up her freckled moon face. "Yeah, yeah, quit your jawin' and c'mon! What were Aunt Natalie and Uncle Hank thinkin', namin' you after a city in Georgia!"

It wasn't a question, just something everybody, even the relatives, always asked Savannah. How many times did she have to tell them her name was a remembrance of where Mom and Dad met: some type of grassy land--in Africa, of all places? Having anthropologists as parents was really too weird. Why couldn't her dad be something normal--like a truck driver? And Mom... she sure was no Betty Crocker.

And if "Savannah" wasn't bad enough, with "Emma" as middle name, everyone always made fun of her initials. SEA. Gosh, sometimes it was really tough being a kid.

Glenda then swung an arm around Savannah's shoulders and ruffled her short, curly hair. "Hey, after the game, why don't you 'n me go down to the drug store and get a pop, okay? Cherry Pepsi?"

"Okay!" Cherry Pepsi was Savannah's favorite soda. She couldn't get it back home. Now outside under the blazing July sun, she nodded at her new teammates, but saved a shy smile for Tommy. Out of all Drew's friends, she liked him the best. Wavy, dark hair; a big, friendly grin; strong arms....

Tommy winked at her, then gathered everyone together to go over the rules of the game.

Savannah sighed. She'd try her hardest, but she'd never played baseball before--not even stickball. Of all the rotten luck. If there was one person she didn't want to let down, it was Tommy. Squeezing her eyes shut, she prayed as hard as she could. Maybe she wouldn't embarrass herself too much.

* * *

Many people found shelter in the night. Wrapped in the cloak of darkness, they hid from the slings and arrows of the day. Not Savannah--she couldn't. Tonight, she was having that dream again; the same dream that had haunted her ever since she could remember. Only this time it was worse--much worse.

She couldn't move. Rooted in the bed, every part of her body weighed a million pounds. No matter how hard she concentrated, her eyelids refused to open. Held like a virtual prisoner, she was forced to relive this afternoon's humiliation. And it *had been* humiliating. Every time at bat, she struck out. In the outfield, she missed the ball. Jacko had laughed and laughed until his ugly face turned blue. Now, in the dream, he grew in size and strength until he seemed to fill the sky.

"You cannot escape, Selena. I will get what I want until there is nothing left of you. Do you hear me? Until there is nothing left of you!"

Savannah couldn't help but hear. His voice roared through her ears, blasting down into her soul. Her heart positively quaked. And still she was powerless to move--to

wake up. He'd called her Selena, but he was talking to *her*. Now came the familiar part of the dream. The helplessness... the panic... the spreading horror that something unspeakable was about to happen. Maybe once a month, she'd have this nightmare. She'd wake up frozen with fear. But it had never been this vivid. Never this... close.

She *had* to get away. If only she could scream to call Mom and Dad. Or Grandma. Anybody! If only she could break free from this... this spell.

Wishing must've made it so, for suddenly Savannah was able to open her eyes. For a second she took stock of her surroundings. Still the same worn, flowered wallpaper covering the guest bedroom walls; still the same cracked pitcher and bowl on the bureau waiting for someone to wash hands; still the same sweet picture of baby Jesus in his mother's lap, hanging over the cedar hope chest. Nothing had moved. Nothing had changed.

Except Savannah could have sworn she'd been someplace else. The urgent need to flee remained, however. Not caring she was barefoot, she jumped out of bed and, avoiding the creakier floorboards, left her room and opened the front screen door. She made her escape out into the starry night. Not looking back, she ran. Fast, faster, fastest. Away. Away. Had to get away.

The hot, humid air clung to her, trying to slow her down. Mosquitoes buzzed around her, glad for the chance to have a midnight snack. A symphony of sounds enveloped her--country noises. Humming, moaning, hissing. The singing cicadas were the worse. Some kind of bug, Dad had said. But Savannah kept going, disregarding the rocks, twigs, and slimy feel of muddy ooze beneath her feet.

"Ouch." In the dark, she missed the sharp, jagged stone in front of her. Falling on hands and knees, she then cradled her wounded left leg in her arms. Blood seeped out from a two-inch gash while tears flowed freely from her eyes. A fine mess she'd made of things. How could she explain her muddied, bloodied babydoll pj's to Mom?

"What am I gonna do?" she sobbed softly.

A light bounced across the vacant lot next to Grandma's. The flashlight's beam zigzagged across the field, looking for someone, looking for her. More sooner than later it would find its mark. "Who's there?" a harsh voice whispered.

Savannah turned to stone. How could she have forgotten? The boys had constructed a tent house made of blankets and were all sleeping outside tonight. What if... what if she ran into Jacko?

The light exposed her crumpled form, coldly illuminating the mishap. "Savannah! What happened? Why are you out this late?"

It was Tommy, in frayed jean shorts and a white undershirt. His dark hair, indistinguishable from the night, ruffled up in an endearing way. He was, in a word, gorgeous.

She stopped sniveling to wipe the tears on her puffed up sleeve. If only she were thirteen.

"Savannah? You okay, kitten?" He bent down and examined her injury.

"I, um, I had a bad dream, that's all."

Tommy held her lower leg and scraped off some dirt and grass. Peculiar shivers vibrated up and down Savannah's insides. She felt so weird. Not bad, but not good... exactly. She stared at him, not knowing what else to do.

But she did have a question. "Why do you call me 'kitten'?"

He grinned. "Cause you're so small and helpless." To her embarrassment, he got really close to her leg--peering at it from only an inch away.

"There, all the foreign stuff's out. We'll have t'wash it, though, or it'll get infected. Your granny's got a pump out back, right?"

Grandma's water pump was a throw-back to the old days. She even had an outhouse, but thankfully, that was no longer in use. Imagine sitting on a hole--

"C'mon." Tommy helped her up. "Your ma's probably missing you."

"Thanks, Tommy. I--"

He put his finger to her lips. "Shh. Jacko's sleeping right over there. We don't want t'wake him, do we?"

She trembled. "No."

Tommy then curved his arm around her and walked her over to Grandma's backyard. She'd never felt so... safe and protected in all her life.

"I didn't think so, Savannah. I bet anything he's the one who gave you the nightmare in the first place."

Never fond of her own name, she drank it in when Tommy used it. A giggle bubbled up and refused to be held back. "You're right! How'd you guess?"

"Hey, he gives me nightmares, too!" Tommy primed the hand pump a few times, and then water began to flow. "Here, stick your leg in."

The sensation of him running his hand up and down her lower leg in no way could compare with Mom's touch... or Dad's. For some reason, Savannah wanted to jump out of her skin from the sheer pleasure of it.

"Okay, it's clean." He glanced at her dirty pajamas, then down at his undershirt. Without saying a word, he whipped the shirt off and started drying her leg.

The only time Savannah had seen the unclothed upper part of a boy was at the beach back home, or at the pool near Grandma's house. To be truthful, she'd never really paid much attention. But Tommy's body. Well, he was beautiful.

Something unusual coursed through her veins. Something that hadn't been there before. Something grown-up.

"You... you should be a doctor," she offered timidly.

"Me? Nah. I'll be lucky if I graduate high school." He handed her the shirt. "Keep this in case it bleeds some more--so you don't dirty your granny's sheets."

Their hands met and he looked at her, eye to eye. She wanted that moment to last forever.

"Er, you'd best get back t'bed, Savannah. And no more bad dreams."

He couldn't go! Not just yet. "I, um, I'll get your shirt washed and give it back to you, Tommy."

"Nah, throw it away." He turned and headed toward the blanket house. "See you tomorrow, kitten."

It sounded like a promise. Hugging the shirt to her chest, Savannah skipped back into her bedroom. Slipping under the cotton bedsheet, she sank into the mattress and sighed. It really was a miracle that everyone still slept.

Tomorrow. She was going to see him tomorrow.

As it turned out, Savannah never saw Tommy again. Until....

CHAPTER ONE

“Nooo! Get away from me!”

Savannah woke up, jumped out of bed, and raised her fists to a fighting position--all in the same second. He was coming after her; she had to defend herself; he--

Reality hit. As did vertigo. Her mind reeling, she quickly sat on the hotel bed and lowered her head between her knees. She didn't need to turn on the light to know that she was alone.

Man, oh man. Not again. Not now. Not in St. Louis.

The adrenaline pumping from the horrors of her dream and her head light from the suddenness of her leaping out of bed, she stayed put. Soon her body would return to normal.

Why was that awful nightmare coming back? The nameless menace looming over her, the eerie desperation paralyzing her with fright... It had been so long since she'd last had to deal with this terror. So long. The last time was when she'd been fifteen; now she was twenty-eight--too old for this kind of thing. That monster-under-the-bed stuff was just something that happened to kids.

Or so she'd thought. Evidently pure evil had no age limit.

She sank back down on the pillow. Why now? Why here?

A knock on the door pulled her back into the tastefully decorated but impersonal hotel room. “S.E.? S.E.? Are you all right?” came a muffled voice from the other side of the door.

Lizzie. Darn. Had she heard Savannah's ramblings from the dream? Had she been *that* loud? After all, she hadn't screamed or anything.

Or had she? Savannah's cheeks burned. Drat. These hotel walls were really thin.

“S.E.?”

“Coming, Lizzie.” Not forgetting to put on her slippers, Savannah hurried to the door, switched on the light, then let her coworker and friend in.

Lizzie took no time at all taking charge. “Sheesh! You scared the living daylights out of me, kiddo. I heard all this noise, like a fight going on, and--”

Grey eyeballs bulging, Lizzie placed her pudgy hands on her rapidly vanishing waistline. “Holy moly! You look like you've gone ten rounds.”

“I just had a bad dream.” An understatement if ever there was one.

Lizzie wouldn't be pacified. She pulled on Savannah's arm and carted her over to the standard issue hotel mirror. “Take a look at yourself. Ordinary dreams don't do this!”

Reluctantly, Savannah obeyed. With Lizzie, a person didn't have a choice. “Let's see, thong slippers, skinny legs, crumpled nightshirt, not much chest to speak of. What more do you--”

“Higher!”

When Lizzie got a maggot in her brain, there was no stopping her. Savannah continued her perusal. “Scrawny neck, stringy this-way-and-that brown hair, and...”

Who wouldn't have paused at the sight of the creepy, undead-looking reflection staring back at her? It was *that* bad.

“Oh my gosh!” Savannah's normally healthy complexion had gone white--

bloodless. Smoky blue bruises appeared under her eyes, as if she hadn't slept in a week. And her eyes, usually a soothing, peaceful brown color, were wide open and wild--still shocked at what she'd just seen, just experienced in her nightmare. She'd make a great extra in a low budget vampire movie.

With her hand, she flicked strands of hair back to their correct shoulder-length position. "So I'm a mess. What else is new?"

Lizzie wasn't buying the flip attitude. She had a classic Type "A" personality. "Sit down, S.E. Or you'll fall down. Look at you. Your hands are shaking like you're holding a grenade. What gives?"

Savannah sat--gladly. Her hands did tremble a bit. Well, to be truthful, much more than a bit. Not a good trait for someone in her business. As a conservator for New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, she was a part of the team of people responsible for maintaining and restoring the museum's vast art collection--about four million separate items at last count. Savannah's specialty was in Egyptian art. Usually museum couriers, like Lizzie, supervised the unpacking, installation, and repacking of the loan items at the borrowing institution. But Savannah was so engrossed in her field, she often traveled to help set up the special art exhibitions touring the country... and the world.

Which was why she and Lizzie were here in St. Louis. "Predynastic Egypt: The World Before Pharaohs" was scheduled to publicly open at the St. Louis Art Museum on Tuesday, with a Friends of the Museum preview on Sunday. Plus there was a gala Members'-only fund-raiser reception Saturday night. Here it was, Thursday night. Most of the unpacking, checking for transit damage, and setting up was done, but how could Savannah finish the remaining tasks... with unsteady hands? These artifacts were five thousand years old and more. Each and every piece deserved handling from competent professionals--not from someone suffering from some kind of weird psychosis.

Lizzie plopped down beside her. "I've never seen you so rattled. Something else must've upset you. Tell me about it."

"It was just this dream. A recurring bad dream. I... I haven't had it in a long while, though. It's foreboding. Something horrible is going to happen."

Savannah could bet her life on that. Unfortunately her sixth sense agreed: her very life was going to be at stake. She shuddered.

"Holy moly, you've turned white again!" Lizzie dashed to the sink and poured some water into a glass. "Here, it's not Perrier but drink this."

While Savannah complied, Lizzie tapped her fuzzy-slippered foot. She looked like a pink cuddly teddybear. "Listen, you're a big girl. You don't need me to tell you what to do. But--"

Savannah smiled. With Lizzie, there was always a but.

"But if you don't shake this thing, you'll be in no condition to take care of Dumbo and his buddies, S.E.," she continued.

Sighing, Savannah finished the water, then fluffed up her pillows. She leaned against the headboard, allowing all her muscles to relax. Dumbo was the museum nickname for a small pottery elephant, with big ears of course. It easily could've been the oldest object in the Egyptian collection.

"It's my job, Lizzie. And I love my work. I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize the exhibit."

"I know, kiddo. And there's no other conservator quite like you either." Lizzie

stood, then pulled the summer-weight blanket over Savannah. "You go back to sleep now and try to forget this dream. But promise me if you have it again, you'll go see someone about it."

"When I get back to New York--"

"*Here*. You'll see someone here. My gut tells me that if you don't, you won't make it home." A cuddly teddybear didn't quite describe Lizzie's demeanor. It was more like a drill sergeant's.

A shiver zigzagged its way down Savannah's spine, chilling her to the bone. The funny thing was, she had that same feeling, too.

"Promise, S.E.?"

"Okay, I promise." She slid further under the blanket. Not looking forward to the possibility of another dream, she closed her eyes anyway. So tired.

"You'll be fine then?"

"Yeah, thanks a lot, Lizzie."

Lizzie walked over to the door and hung out the "Do not disturb" sign. "There's not that much else left to do. St. Louie's staff and I can finish. Don't worry. It's no big deal."

No big deal? To use Lizzie's word, *sheesh!*

The light switch flipped off and the room was plunged into darkness. Lizzie, however, wasn't done with her free advice yet. "You know what your problem is, kiddo? You lavish your love on these artifacts. These things are special, of course, but they belong to a world long since dead and buried. What you need is a good husband and family."

With the timing of a Broadway actress, she dramatically closed the door, not allowing Savannah a chance to retort.

In the blackness of the room, Savannah had the last word. "Husband and family? Get real. I'd rather have a good hole in the head."

* * *

The next day, in the Museum's lower level special exhibition gallery, Savannah put the finishing touches on the display case containing a buff colored, earthen vessel of the predynastic period. Even though the lighting intensity level had been determined, Savannah checked it again. It was extremely important to make certain the indirect lighting was low enough to prevent heat buildup. If damage were to occur, all too often it was irreversible.

Although the large room fairly hummed with activity, a calm and peaceful quiet filled her as she observed the ancient pottery piece through the glass. Distinct female figures with long, close skirts were painted in red on the surface. Some Egyptologists theorized this meant they were goddesses or priestesses. Positions of power and responsibility.

Savannah circled the pedestal and reflected on that thought. What would it have been like to be a goddess or a priestess in those times?

As if answering, a deafening roar thundered through her skull. Hands to her ears, she staggered back, trying to escape.

"You cannot escape, Selena. Don't you know that by now? I will capture you..."

and imprison you... and exploit you... forever! Until there is nothing left!"

Laughter--male laughter--wickedly echoed louder and louder. "*Until there is nothing left!*"

Her eyes squeezed shut, Savannah stuffed her fist in her mouth to keep from screaming. She couldn't think, she couldn't speak, she couldn't do anything with that inhuman monster invading the privacy of her mind. Taking another step back, she found her way blocked by something. If she pushed harder....

"Ms. Alexander, what's wrong? a concerned male voice questioned.

"S.E.! Snap out of it!" Someone else--Lizzie--roughly shook her.

Savannah opened her eyes. Two of the Museum's staff were staring at her as if she'd just sprouted horns and a tail. Lizzie, on the other hand, looked mad enough to spit fire.

Savannah knew her friend Lizzie better than any person on earth. Looking mad meant she was scared as hell.

"She's okay, you guys. You can go back to work. I'll take care of S.E." Lizzie flicked her imperious plump wrist, indicating dismissal.

Puzzlement on the two men's faces, they shrugged and walked back to their previous workstations. Although she had only been here a short while, everyone learned fast not to argue with Queen Lizzie.

Savannah wasn't capable of arguing, even if she wanted to. She allowed Lizzie to escort her out into the hallway, down past the Museum gift shop, and over to the nearby women's restroom. Fortunately, no other visitor lingered in the lounge. She and Lizzie could speak freely.

Glancing into the mirror, Savannah shuddered. Her auburn hair appeared obscenely dark against the nonexistent color of her skin.

"That dream again?" Lizzie prompted.

"Yeah." Savannah turned her back on her disturbing image and rested against the washroom counter. "But technically speaking, since I was awake, it couldn't have been a dream."

Lizzie's sparse lips thinned further. "You're going to see a doctor."

Denial was immediate. "No, I'm all right. I--"

"Kiddo, technically speaking, one more push on that display pedestal, and your beloved Egyptian pottery piece really would have become ancient history."

That stopped Savannah cold. Had she come that close to doing the unthinkable? Visions of red-on-buff broken shards from the vessel haunted her very soul.

Lizzie didn't lie. Savannah needed help... and fast.

"I took the liberty of scheduling an appointment with a Dr. Bacardi. Specializes in psychiatric medicine, so I'm told. To get you in quickly, I had to promise my firstborn. Fortunately, Howie gives me so much trouble, it's no great loss."

"Lizzie! How could you?" Not the joke about Lizzie's son, but an appointment with a shrink? This time she went too far.

"Presumptuous of me, I know." Lizzie also rested her bottom against the counter. The added weight caused the marble top to groan. "Listen, I'm worried. Haven't thought much about anything else since last night." She took Savannah's hand. "Will you go?"

Lizzie was right--as usual. And who knew? Maybe this Dr. Bacardi could help. "Bacardi. Isn't that a brand of rum?"

"Maybe that's what he prescribes, S.E. A tipsy patient is a happy...."

Savannah laughed--which was a wonderful release after that terrifying incident. Awake, the "dream" had been a million times worse. And why did this nightmare guy, whomever he was, insist on calling her Selena?

"You win, Lizzie. So when's my appointment with Dr. Rum-and-Coke?"

Although Lizzie smiled in response, her grey eyes remained clouded. "1:30, so you'd better get ready. He's at some medical center close to here. I'll call a taxi."

After her friend left, Savannah turned back to the sink and splashed cold water on her face. Who would've believed she'd go off the deep end, in broad daylight, around her peers?

That she almost destroyed the Egyptian pottery was inexcusable. She *had* to get to the bottom of these dreams.

One session with this psychiatrist wasn't going to cure her, but perhaps he could suggest ways to make the nightmares stop. She had to try. Dear God, she had to try.

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