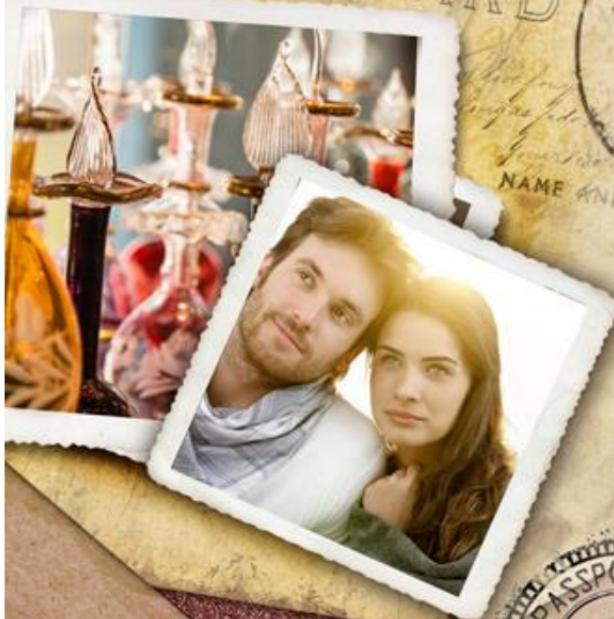


POST CARD



Lily of the Nile

BLAIR ST. JOHN

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Lily of the Nile
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Dedication

To my family, for all their support and encouragement.
To my sounding boards, for always stepping up to the
bombardment of questions.

Most importantly, to God, for giving me vision and
guidance, and for His unwavering love.

Prologue

Glass shattered downstairs and Mahreena Azari tried to make herself smaller. *Please, God, don't let them find me*, she prayed silently. She hunkered in the back of her closet.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. She should have taken the one page and left the rest. It might have been weeks before they discovered the theft, but she'd been cocky, and now they would probably kill her.

Heavy footfalls clomped up the stairs. Mahreena held her breath.

The bedroom door swung open and slammed against the wall. A framed picture crashed to the floor. A shadow passed through the sliver of light from under the closet door. She heard her drawers being pulled out and dumped, her bed getting shoved, the ruckus of her bathroom being searched.

Light poured in as the closet door swung open. Yusef Al-Hashimi, a man she knew well, stepped inside and pulled the string to turn on the closet light. The naked bulb swung like a pendulum, casting bright lights and shadows across his deep-set eyes, full beard, and muscled mass. He pulled boxes from the upper shelf, dumped their contents, and then felt around at

the back of the shelf. He grabbed handfuls of clothes on hangers and tossed them behind him. It took only a few seconds to uncover her meager hiding place.

"Look what we have here." He grabbed a handful of her hair and jerked her to her feet. "Zamir will want to see you."

He shoved her toward the hallway. She tripped on the bedspread on the floor, and he grabbed her hair again and yanked her to standing. She stumbled along behind him down the stairs.

Zamir Haddad stood in the middle of Mahreena's ransacked living room, watching as a dozen of his henchmen searched every crevice and hiding place they could find. He turned when she stumbled off the last step as Yusef yanked her from behind and pushed her in front of him.

"Reena, my darling, I'm so glad you're here." As usual, he looked impeccable with his short-cropped, black hair, clean-shaven face and tailored suit, giving the appearance of one who'd stepped from a boardroom in New York City. Like many within the Cairo Brotherhood of Progressive Fundamentalists, he eschewed the standards of dress adopted by most Muslims. His carefully cultivated image was one of modern sophistication and civility, hiding the monster underneath.

If she didn't know how lethal he was, she might have believed his false concern. She only hoped he wouldn't kill her.

Yusef shoved her onto the now cushion-less couch. She sat, frozen in place, sure the slightest movement

could be her last. Zamir walked over and stood in front of her.

She looked up at him.

"Where is it, my love?"

"I don't have it."

The slap sent her careening sideways onto the couch frame, and she winced as a spring dug into her arm. Yusef righted her, and she looked back at Zamir. His false smile was gone.

"I know you took it. Tell me where you hid it."

"It's not here."

Zamir grabbed her throat so fast she didn't have time to evade him. He lifted her until her eyes were level with his. Her feet dangled, and she kicked, trying to find purchase. Spots danced before her eyes, and her vision blurred at the edges as the pressure of his hand on her throat cut off circulation and oxygen.

"I will kill you."

She grasped at his hand, trying to pull it away, but he was too strong.

"Kill me,"—her voice was small and strained—"and you'll never find it."

His lip curled into a snarl as he released her. She collapsed to the ground and clutched her throat, gulping air.

Whatever they did to her, the cipher was safe. Thank God she'd had the forethought to send it to Lily for safe keeping. No one would even know about their connection. Lily coming to Cairo for work was a small miracle.

"Take her hand, Zamir." Yusef's words pulled her

from her thoughts.

She whipped her head up and turned a pleading eye to Zamir. His hard gaze bore into her, and he nodded to Yusef. She jumped to her feet and made a run for the door. Maybe she couldn't fight half the Cairo Brotherhood, but she might be able to get away. Two steps before she got to the door, she slipped on broken glass and crashed to the ground. She didn't have time to brace her fall and felt the hot sting of glass cutting her face.

Two soldiers grabbed her and forced her back onto the couch frame, holding her still while another set an end table in front of her. She strained against their grip, but one of them wrenched her right hand forward, gripped so tight her struggles were useless, wrapped a piece of cloth around it, and secured it to the table.

What did she know about Sharia Law? There were dozens of exceptions which could spare her hand. "The map didn't belong to you. You can't— I promise, I will never take anything again."

Zamir placed his hands to either side of hers on the table, and leaned in so close their noses touched. "Do I look like a court of law to you?"

His spittle hit her in the face, and she winced from the volume of his voice.

"As far as you are concerned, I *am* the law."

He snapped his fingers and Yusef pulled a machete from a sheath on his belt.

She tried yanking her hand free, but they held her secure. "Zamir, please." She was horrified that she was begging, but she couldn't halt the words as they fell

from her mouth.

He stared at her for a moment, and she thought a flicker of regret flashed in his eyes. He brought the machete up, and she held his gaze as he swung it. At the last second she pinched her eyes shut.

Pain exploded in her brain. Not the hot sting of the blade slicing into her wrist, but the agony of obliteration.

Her eyes flew open and she cried out. Through hot tears, she saw her hand, not severed, but smashed under the butt of the machete.

"Consider this a mercy." Zamir murmured in her ear and thrust the blade handle to Yusef, who sheathed the machete. She clutched her mangled flesh to her chest and took slow deep breaths, trying to will away the pain.

Zamir gave a few orders to his soldiers and walked out the door. One of the soldiers who had been holding her stomped upstairs and the rest of them followed Zamir out the door. Yusef picked her up and tossed her onto his massive shoulder.

1

“Come out to Cairo. We’ll have a blast,” Lily said in her best Jack Glade movie impression as she closed the hotel room door and leaned against it. She supposed it wasn’t a fair comparison, since in *A Christmas Terror*, Jack Glade was battling terrorists and she’d been battling flight delays, horrid airplane food, motion sickness, lost luggage, international customs, and outrageous airport currency exchange fees. All things considered, had Glade gotten off easy?

She either needed a large cup of coffee, or a long nap. As strong as the temptation to take a nap was, the conditioning of her youth was stronger. She could nap later. For now, she had luggage to unpack. With a sigh that bordered on a groan, she pushed herself off the door and started by hanging the handful of travel clothes from her garment bag.

Some of her colleagues at the American Biblical Archeology Foundation ribbed her about the way she dressed when she travelled, but no amount of ribbing could undo the decades of fashion principles and poise her mother had hammered into her brain. While she may never be as comfortable in high heels as in her dusty boots, she was now a master at faking it.

She finished unpacking her barely tolerated travel

clothes and picked up her large, beat-up suitcase, covered with stickers from every city she'd ever gone for work—including a brand new one she'd picked up at the Cairo airport—and unpacked her much beloved day clothes, boots, and her go-to, beat-up leather messenger bag.

Outside, muffled by the balcony door, she heard the pre-dawn call to prayer playing on loudspeakers throughout the city. She stepped out onto the balcony and watched the sun creep up over the horizon and glint on the Nile flowing across the street from the hotel. The bustle of the city waking up made her want to laze on the balcony all day, order room service, and adjust to the jetlag of flying around the world.

Well, she couldn't afford to waste a day, but she could spend an hour or so resting before getting to work. It wasn't as if buried artifacts could walk away. She stepped back in the room and took off one black pump, but as she reached for the second one, someone knocked on the door.

She sighed, slipped her shoe back on, and answered the door.

"Good morning, Miss Gentry. The front desk forgot to give you this."

She looked at the scribbling on the package, but couldn't make out what was written. Slop Powel? Shod Rawd? What in the world? She squinted and turned it around and it clicked: Short Round. Lily laughed. No one had called her Short Round in years. Which meant the package could have only come from one person.

Mahreena's handwriting had always been more

akin to chicken scratches than actual writing. But from the looks of this package, Lily wondered if her friend had decided to give up on legible writing altogether and become a doctor.

She pulled the strip of cardboard to open the envelope, and dumped the contents on the bed. A second, sealed, manila envelope, fat and heavy, hit the comforter with a muted thunk, and a loose sheet of paper floated to the floor.

She left the manila envelope on the bed and picked up the crisp, white paper to decipher the scribbled note.

Hey Short Round~

I need you to hold on to this package and don't let anyone know you have it! I know you have some work you have to do, but as soon as you're done, you should get on a flight back home. Cairo is pretty dicey right now for tourists. If I don't collect this from you before you head back to the states, take it with you when you go. I'll touch base soon. Love you!

~Ravenwood

Lily rolled her eyes. Mahreena could be incredibly melodramatic. Sure, as a fair-skinned, red-headed, American woman, she would stand out from the locals and could be pegged as an easy victim for pick-pockets, but she had a lot more street smarts than Mahreena gave her credit. She would be as safe in Cairo as she'd been in Morocco, Peru, and the Yucatan Peninsula.

She pulled out her phone and looked at the time, grateful that the internal clock automatically adjusted,

and she didn't have to do the math to figure out the local time. Just past 5:00 AM. Napping now would kill her later with the jetlag. The debate was settled. She needed caffeinating. Maybe over a cup of coffee she could convince Mahreena she was perfectly safe in Cairo.

She dialed Mahreena's number, and voicemail picked up. "*This is Reena. I'm not available. Leave me a message.*"

"Hey, Reena, it's Lily. I'm at the Conrad, and I got your package. I know it's early, but I need caffeine, and I'm taking you with me."

~*~

The cabbie sped off as soon as Lily paid him, not even waiting for her to close the door of the cab. She looked around the neighborhood to see what spooked him, but didn't see anything to cause alarm.

She started up the steps to Mahreena's house and froze on the second step. The door was ajar; but not just open, the jamb was broken. Was this why he sped off? The hairs on the back of her neck snapped to attention, and she faltered on the step. She wished she had a gun, even though she wasn't used to using one.

She approached the door and listened for a moment before nudging the door the rest of the way open. She stepped over broken glass inside and looked around. Furniture had been tossed, cushions cut open, papers were scattered across the floor, drawers were pulled from their tracks, the contents dumped on the

floor. On instinct, she pulled out her cell phone and punched 9-1-1 in her phone, but stopped before hitting the call button. Idiot. She couldn't dial 9-1-1 in Egypt. She had no idea what local authorities she could call. She was on her own. She cancelled the call, put the phone away, and took another step farther into the house.

"Dear Lord, please let my friend be safe," she prayed out loud as she made her way through the wreckage.

Glass crunched under the spike of her heel, and she cringed. She wished she was wearing her field boots and some khaki pants. They would allow for free movement, and a more silent walk. She probably didn't need to worry about noise; the house was eerily quiet, only the ticking of a clock and the hum of the refrigerator breaking the silence. But some primal instinct made her wary of announcing her presence when she didn't know if the place was empty.

After walking through the main level and finding no signs of Mahreena, she ascended the stairs, freezing on a step when it creaked, sounding like a seagull squawk against the silent backdrop of the house. She held her breath and listened, but she heard only the faint humming and ticking from the kitchen. She continued up the stairs with her breath held. Only at the top landing, when no other stairs creaked, did she release her breath.

The first door on her right stood open and she entered. The wreckage of downstairs was mirrored there with clothes, knick-knacks, jewelry, and bedding

covering the surfaces. Her skin crawled with trepidation, and she shuddered. If Mahreena were home when this happened, would she have gotten out OK? Lily hoped so, but given the level of destruction, she doubted it.

She looked in the closet, the en suite bath, and under the bed. When she stood, she saw a picture standing upright on the table beside the bed, looking out of place amongst the chaos.

She picked it up and a smile touched her lips as she stroked the glass. Two young ladies in hairnets and aprons grinned at her. Her mother had taken the picture when Mahreena came to visit one Christmas, and they'd spent part of the holiday volunteering at the homeless shelter in Boston.

The quietness of the house seeped into her consciousness and the smile disappeared. What if that Christmas was the last time she saw her friend? Again, she forced the thoughts away and squared her shoulders. Her senses tingled, as if someone were looking at her, and again, she wished she had a gun, but it wasn't as if she could have brought one with her.

She started to set the picture back on the bedside table and saw what had caused the sensation of being watched. In the reflection of the picture frame's protective glass, she saw the silhouette of a man standing in the doorway to the room. He had a gun in his hand. Just her luck.

She didn't think he knew she was aware of his presence. Which gave her the slightest edge. Her ex-boyfriend in college had insisted she learn some basic

self-defense, and she remembered the element of surprise was her best weapon. Did she remember anything else she'd learned? Of course not. She figured she'd never need it. A mirthless chuckle at the thought sounded in her head.

So, she wasn't Jack Glade. She wouldn't disarm this guy and use his gun against him, jump out a second story window, and make a narrow escape on a motorcycle while the bullet riddled baddie lay bleeding on the floor. She still needed to get past him and out the front door. After that...well, she'd figure something out. First thing she had to do was incapacitate him so he didn't shoot her.

Surreptitiously, she glanced around to see if there was anything she could use as a weapon. The dinky plastic alarm clock was more likely to break than to hurt anyone. The lamp was bolted to the table. The stuffed animal was useless. The only thing left on the bedside table was a bottle of apple-scented, moisturizing lotion. It wasn't much, but maybe it was enough to distract him.

She eyed it for half a second, scooped up the lotion, and spun around in a single motion, throwing the bottle as soon as he was in view.

It hit him in the face. A window behind her shattered and a loud bang echoed in the room. She screamed and covered her ears, half ducking. The man had shot at her!

She glanced up and saw he was rubbing at his eyes with his free hand, his gun pointed to the ground. Good.

She ran for the door.

After a couple steps, she stumbled and crashed to the floor. The picture in her hands slammed hard into her chest and the frame broke. She should have thrown the picture. She chucked the now busted frame at him for good measure, and heard a clatter as it knocked the gun from his hand. She thanked the Lord for the abnormally good aim and started to get up, but her high heel caught on the bedding.

Stupid skirt and heels! They would make her mother proud, but they weren't practical.

She glanced up at the man to see if he was coming at her and was pleased to see him on his knees, feeling the ground for the gun and wiping away the last of the lotion that had exploded into his eyes. She stood, avoiding the bedding, and ran.

As she made it to the door, a pair of strong arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her down. Instinctively, she reached out to claw at his eyes. But he was too quick. He pinned her beneath him, grabbed both of her arms with one hand, held them to the ground above her head, and covered her mouth with his other hand.

"Shut up," he whisper-yelled at her.

She bit his hand. He pulled it away, shook it, and placed it with his other hand, holding her arms still. Certain he would kill her—or worse—if given half a chance, she bucked her hips, trying to throw him from where he sat, but her efforts were wasted.

As she struggled beneath him in her vain attempt to break free of his clutches, she breathed in a potent

mix of fiery, woody cologne, the musky odor of man, and an acrid, sulfuric smell that niggled at her memory. Her mind raced, trying to figure out where she knew the smell from, but she couldn't place it.

She grunted from the effort to break free of him, and he shushed her again. She glared at him, and he glared right back at her through a smear of lotion, his dark eyes filled with rage. Something about his eyes struck a chord of familiarity. Was he a person of interest she'd seen on the news? But that wouldn't explain why she recognized his scent.

She bucked her hips again, but he was ready for it and didn't budge. She kicked her knee up, but it didn't get far with the slim skirt. She tried to wrench her arms free, swung her head forward, and heard a satisfying crunch as her forehead connected with his nose. The pain was well worth it.

"Calm down, Lily," he said in a whispered, but stern, ragged voice. "I won't hurt you."

Lily? She fell silent and quit thrashing. She knew that voice. She looked up at the face hovering inches above her own and the tumblers fell into place. The scent, the eyes, the mouth, the voice: she knew them all. There could only be one infuriating being on the planet with them all.

"Azari?"

2

When Lily stopped squirming and said his name, Ezekiel Azari released his grip and reached up to feel if she'd bloodied his nose with her head butt. His hand came away clean, and he scowled at her.

Now that she recognized him, he would be safe from further attack—she slammed her palm into his chest so hard it knocked the wind out of him, and when she bucked again it threw him, freeing her.

She scrambled back until she reached the bed, but she wasn't afraid. The fury blazing in her eyes could have scorched the sun. It had been ten years since they'd seen each other, which evidently hadn't been long enough for her to forgive him. Which was fine with him. He hadn't forgiven her either.

He stared at her, taking in how she appeared to be as she had been a decade ago, at the same time being completely different.

She looked as if she'd stepped out of a fashion magazine with her impeccable style and flawless makeup. Even sprawled on the floor, she exuded elegance. Her fiery red curls were half up in what he remembered her mother calling a "coiffeur," though several strands had come loose in their tussle. The aroma of peaches wafted from the loose curls. Her lips,

full and tinted pink, pulled at him deep inside, just the sight of them, despite how they snarled at him.

On the surface, it looked as though she'd gracefully matured into her thirties. If he didn't have an eye for details, he would say she was the same little rich girl he'd almost married. But he did see the details. Amid her curves, he spied some muscle definition indicating regular exercise, and not in the aerobics and treadmill way, but in the rock climbing and running on rough terrain way. Then there were her eyes. They had lost their playfulness and looked an awful lot like the eyes of the guys he worked with: observant, experienced, and cautious.

Even if he hadn't seen the look in her eyes, it was evident in her actions. He'd noticed the subtle change in her stance as she'd become aware of him standing in the doorway, but her swift and agile attack had surprised him, something he was loathe to admit. He was a trained agent of the Order of the Temple's anti-terrorism unit. He shouldn't be caught off guard by anything, let alone have discharged his weapon. It was a rookie mistake. He was glad he hadn't shot her.

He knew the longer it took to get her out of the apartment, the more likely it was someone else would shoot her. "We need to leave." He spotted his gun to the right and picked it up, stood cautiously, and glanced out the shattered window to gauge the distance to the ground, should they have to jump.

"Leaving? Oh, you're good at that."

He gritted his teeth at the waspish comment, but let his breath out in a slow hiss; maybe he deserved

that, but it wasn't the time to get into the blame game. With a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows in the bedroom, they were too exposed, and the location was compromised. His errant shot when she'd thrown the lotion at him had already shown the glass wasn't bulletproof and likely had drawn the attention of any nearby insurgents.

"Yeah, well, I'm taking you with me this time."

"I can't leave until I find Reena."

"I've swept the house. Reena's not here. But clearly someone else was. Come on, Short Round. We need to get out of here. Now." He held out a hand to help her up.

She slapped away his hand and used the edge of the bed to stand. "Don't call me that. And I'm not going anywhere with you. Y—you stupid jerk!"

She stormed toward the door and a tiny red dot danced on the shoulder of her suit coat. For the second time in as many minutes, he tackled his former fiancée.

"What do you think you're—" Her protest was cut short when another window shattered and the wood of the doorjamb above her splintered. A small scream escaped her lips.

Without waiting for another objection, he took her hand and dragged her out of the room. "Stay low and keep close." He lifted his handgun and crept down the stairs, checking the kitchen and beyond to ensure they were empty before letting her follow.

~*~