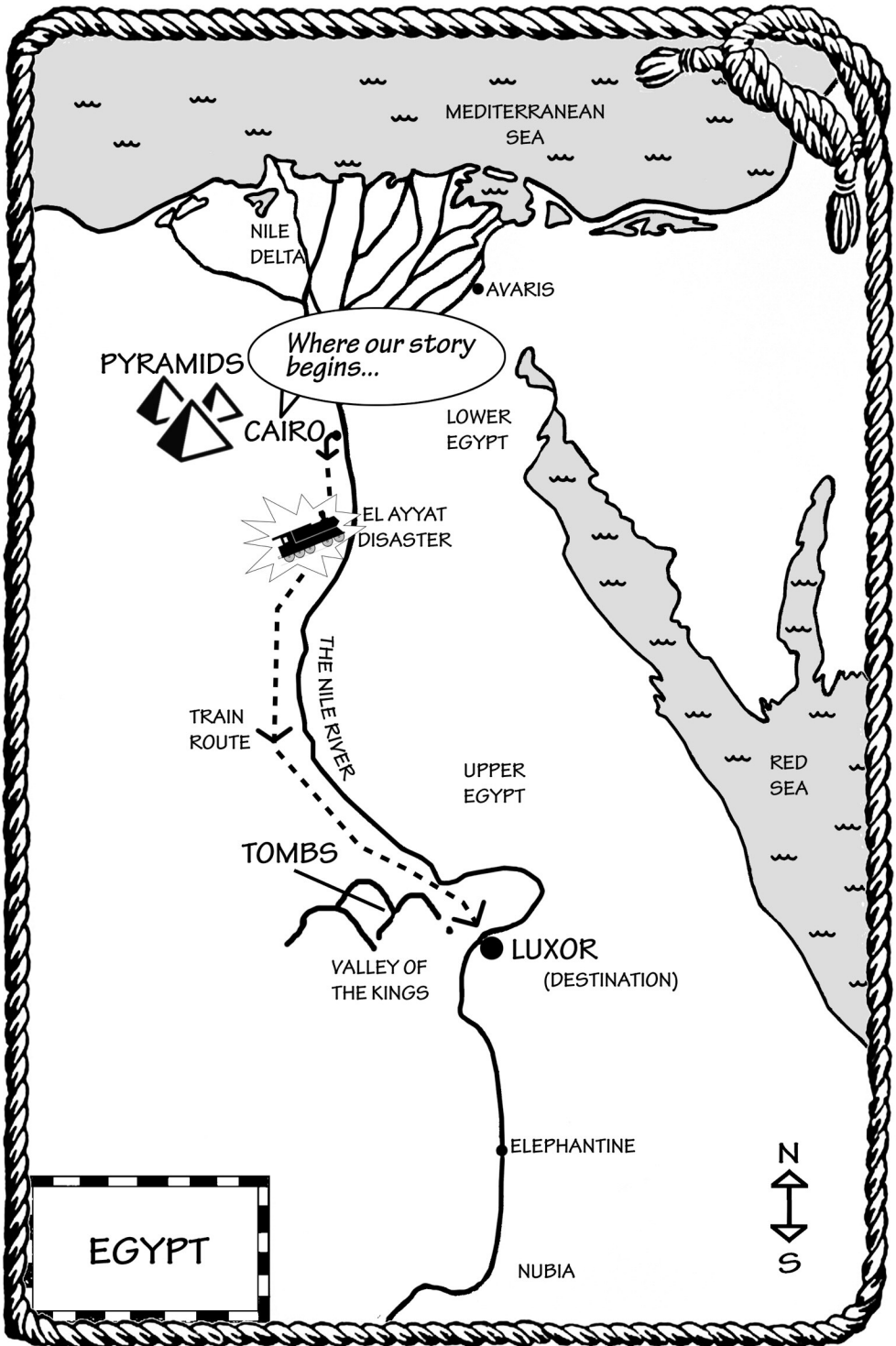


**I ESCAPED EGYPT'S  
DEADLIEST TRAIN  
DISASTER**

A TRAIN FIRE SURVIVAL STORY

SCOTT PETERS  
SUE WYSHYNSKI



MEDITERRANEAN SEA

Where our story begins...

PYRAMIDS

CAIRO

LOWER EGYPT

EL AYYAT DISASTER

THE NILE RIVER

TRAIN ROUTE

UPPER EGYPT

RED SEA

TOMBS

VALLEY OF THE KINGS

LUXOR (DESTINATION)

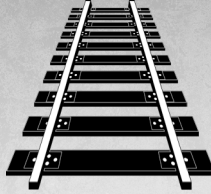
ELEPHANTINE

NUBIA

EGYPT



# CHAPTER 1



Egypt  
Twenty-Five Miles South of Cairo  
February 20, 2002  
Half-past Midnight

**F**ifteen-year-old Sam stared around him in horror as smoke filled the train car. The burning locomotive raced southward as people shoved and panicked, trying to escape the flames.

Sam and his new friend, Zahara, were knocked down and fell to their knees in the narrow aisle.

“Get up, Zahara,” Sam said. “The crowd’s going to crush us!” Frantic, he tugged at her arm.

“I’m trying,” she gasped.

They struggled to help one another to their feet.

“Move back! Try to make it to Car Six,” Sam shouted.

His heart pounded in his throat as they charged along. On

the overhead luggage racks, chickens squawked. He was a long way from America, and he'd never felt so far from home.

Tendrils of smoke wound through the open windows. A spark singed his forearm, and he risked a backward glance.

The door from which he'd come was wedged open by writhing people. He could see back into Car Four. Orange licks of flame quivered, throwing ghastly shadows around the frenzied passengers.

The locomotive screeched around a bend and picked up speed, careening deeper into the darkness.

What was the driver's problem? Did he not know they were headed for disaster? Was it possible the engineer had no clue his train was on fire?

Sam thought of his parents trapped in the second car. At least, up there, they were safe from the fire but they must be going crazy with worry.

"Where's the alarm on this thing?" Sam gasped.

"The alarm?" Zahara glanced around wildly.

"Yeah, you've ridden these trains before! Where's the alarm?"

Cinders swirled through the air, whipping on wild currents through the windows. The smoke thickened, and the shouts grew.

"Zahara, hurry! We have to pull the alarm. We have to make the driver stop this thing. Where is it? We're in serious trouble if he doesn't stop soon!"

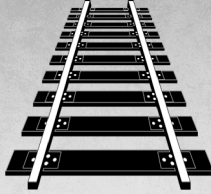
Zahara frowned and shook her head. "I've never seen one."

"Are you telling me there's no way to warn the driver?" Sam said.

Zahara swallowed, her eyes bright with fear.



## CHAPTER 2



30 Minutes Earlier

**D**arkness surrounded the train as it rocked and swayed and screeched through the night. Next to the tracks, the ancient Nile River gleamed like spilled ink. In the distance, the crumbling pyramids grew smaller, disappearing into the shadows.

The locomotive driver propped his feet up, settling in for the long ride south. In the second carriage, one train car back, yellow lights cast a pale glow over the crowd packed inside.

Fourteen-year-old Sam stood in the aisle, both feet planted firmly to the floor as they careened around a bend.

*Lucky I'm on the rowing team back home in Washington, DC, he thought. Standing on a swaying train isn't a whole lot different than standing in a rocking boat.*

It was handy having good balance since seats were hard to

come by. The train was jammed from end to end with travelers. There was barely room to move.

“Your turn to sit down,” his dad said, grinning and starting to get up.

“No, thanks, I’m fine, Dad,” Sam said, grinning back.

“Suit yourself but let me know when you want to trade-off.”

“Will do.”

This commuter train was exactly where you ended up when your parents worked at the Smithsonian Museum. Compared to the trains back home, it looked antique. Wooden seats, rickety windows, rusty overhead racks, and lights that flickered as though preparing to die. Plus, you didn’t often see chickens perched atop someone’s luggage, a goat nibbling a stranger’s scarf, or hear people singing in boisterous voices in the middle of the night. Sam was pretty sure they were the only Americans aboard.

Most tourists chose the cushy, first-class trains over these slow-poke ones. But according to Mom and Dad, traveling was all about blending in with the locals. Seeing life from a different perspective.

Which was pretty cool. When there was an adventure to be had, Sam wanted to be there. Careening along with this jam-packed crowd for the next ten hours definitely qualified.

His mom shouted up at him. “Do you want your headphones? They ended up in my purse.”

“No, but I’m kind of hungry,” Sam said. “Do you think they sell food anywhere?”

His dad said, “Should be a couple of vendors hawking potato chips and drinks, I’m guessing.”

“Can I go look?” Sam asked.

“Sure. Sounds like a worthy crusade. Here’s some money.”  
His dad fished in his pocket and handed him a bunch of Egyptian *piastre* coins. “Have fun.”

“Thanks.”

His mom grabbed his forearm. “Tiger chips for me.”

“Got it. Dad? You want something?”

“Soda, or water. Whatever they’ve got.”

“Sounds good. Pass me my backpack? So I can carry my haul.”



His dad shifted their luggage, which lay piled under his feet. He was careful with the case that held the ancient, mummified cat that they were bringing home to display in the museum.

The tiny cat mummy had ears, and a face had been drawn

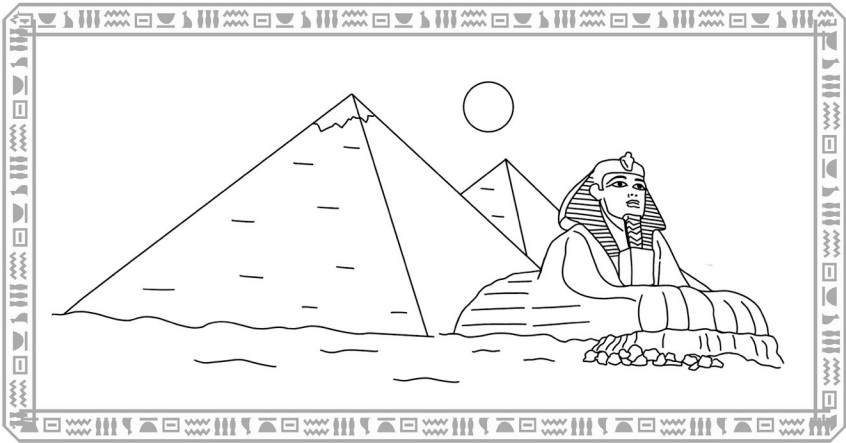


on the wrappings. Sam had never seen anything like it. He wasn't sure if it was creepy or cute. Maybe both.

After some rummaging, Sam's dad pulled the backpack from under the seat and handed it over.

The pack was half empty, containing Sam's wallet, a jack-knife, a flashlight, a book, his baseball cap, and the souvenirs he'd bought for his friends back home. A glow-in-the-dark mummy keychain for Jack. A pad of actual papyrus paper for Aria. A 'Pop Tut' for Noah—a mini sarcophagus that worked by sliding open the lid to make King Tut pop up from inside.

He couldn't wait to tell them how cool the pyramids were inside and how huge the Sphinx looked up close.



He'd even gone behind the scenes at the Cairo Museum with his mom and dad—into the secret storage vaults. Plus, their trip was only half over. They still had to visit the Valley of the Kings, the Karnak Temple, King Tut's tomb, Abu Simbel, the ruins of Amarna—all sorts of mysterious places.

Sam strapped his pack to his chest, a trick he'd learned when traveling in crowded locations. Wearing it on your front

made it easier to weave through crowds. You didn't risk accidentally bonking someone in the face.

"See you in a bit," Sam said.

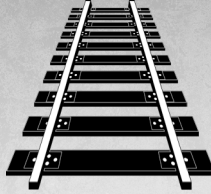
His mom said, "Be careful, honey."

Sam rolled his eyes. "Mom!"

"What?" In the heat, her blond hair stuck to her forehead. "That's my job—to worry."

"I'm going for chips and soda. What could possibly go wrong?"

## CHAPTER 3



Sam set off toward the back of the train. There was no point in going forward since he was in the second carriage, and forward only led to the engine car.

Sweat beaded on his forehead. The press of bodies made it feel like a sauna.

The seats were wooden, mostly laid out like his school bus back home. Except some faced backward, allowing families to huddle with their knees all jammed together. Mothers held babies on their laps while little kids stood balanced on their father's legs and peered out of open windows. Despite the rushing air, it smelled of diapers and unwashed bodies.

Sam stopped to watch a pair of grizzled, gray-haired men playing a game of cards on a piece of cardboard. How on earth were they managing to balance the card game on their knees in all this chaos? How did they keep the cards from falling off?

Shaking his head and grinning, Sam turned away. He stum-

bled over something in the aisle. Looking down, he froze. It was a body, and it wasn't moving.



But then the body shifted, and a teenager's sleepy face blinked up at him. The teen growled something in Arabic and shook his fist.

"Excuse me, *'afwan*," Sam said, having learned a few basic words for the trip.

The teen nodded, turned onto his side, and tucked his head under his arm.

Probably not the best place to sleep, but hey, what did Sam know? Maybe he'd crash out on the floor later, too. It was after midnight, and they still had countless hours to go on this rollicking ride.

Hot wind snaked through the open windows, ruffling

Sam's hair. He carefully hopped over the snoozing passenger, using the seatbacks for leverage. Walking onward, he checked the floor for bodies. He didn't want to crush any fingers or toes.

After a scramble, he finally reached the rear of his train car.

A closed, metal door blocked his way into the third car beyond.

There were eleven cars in total. He'd seen them all lined up at the station before they climbed aboard. Maybe in the third car, the one behind theirs, he'd find some hawkers. Or even a café service! He'd heard some did contain café cars, but maybe those were only the tourist trains.

His stomach growled, and the Egyptian heat made him thirsty.

A boy could hope.

Sam peered out through the soot-smearred window before trying the door handle. It was only then that he realized what should have been obvious since he'd seen the train from the platform. The door led outside. No enclosed walkway connected the cars.

But there must be a way across. Right? He'd watched someone come through fifteen minutes earlier and hadn't thought much of it at the time.

Cautiously, Sam twisted the handle. It was tight. He twisted harder.

Suddenly the handle gave way.

The door swung wide.

Sam pitched outward. Holding onto the door for dear life, he shouted in alarm and stared down at the rails whizzing past. The only thing between him and the ground was a heavy mechanical linkage connecting the cars.

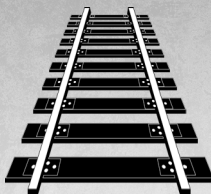
Hot wind battered his ears.

The screech of turning wheels sang in the night.

The ground flew past, a blur of metal rails, wooden ties, and scrub.

And Sam's free hand struggled to find a grip on the gaping doorway behind him.

## CHAPTER 4



Sam sucked in a breath of oily diesel fumes, his heart pounding out of his chest. His sweating fingers were losing their grip on the door handle. His backpack jolted up and down on his chest, the straps smacking him in the face.

This was crazy. He was supposed to be hunting down chips and sodas, not falling to his death from a speeding locomotive!

Sam gritted his teeth and clenched the handle with everything he had. But his free arm kept windmilling wildly. The speeding vehicle flew over a bump. He reeled, his feet sliding on metal, and was flung back against the car. His grip on the latch began to slip. Flailing, he found a hold. Rusty, paint-chipped metal dug into his palm. With a shout, he hauled himself to safety.

Then he straightened, backed into Car Two, and slammed the door shut.

Sam stood gasping. Who knew a simple errand could turn

into a life-or-death experience? Had other people fallen off? Why were there no caution signs?

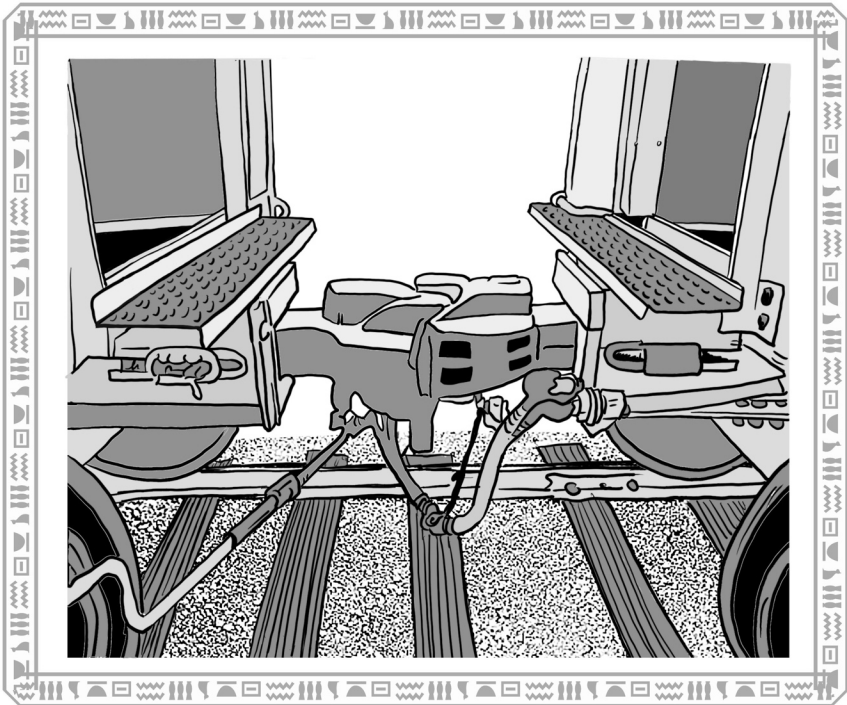
Glancing over one shoulder, he saw a little dark-haired girl watching him, wide-eyed. Sam swallowed hard and wiped the sweat from his forehead. After a moment, he waved.

The kid waved back.

Seemed like she was the only one who noticed his near-death experience. Everyone else on the train was either sleeping, playing games, singing, or having some heated conversation. It was a relief. He felt pretty stupid.

This really shouldn't be that hard.

Bracing himself, Sam put his weight on his back foot and wrenched the door handle downward. The door released, swinging wide. This time he was prepared.





He took a last glance behind him, trying to catch sight of his parents. He thought he could just spy the top of his dad's blue baseball cap over the seatback in the distance, but he couldn't be sure. Well, at least they hadn't seen him nearly fall. Sam would probably never get to go wandering around on his own again!

The clattering noise of the moving train assaulted his ears as he held the door wide and inspected the flimsy platform between the two cars. A narrow metal ledge jutted from the door.

Beyond the platform, the grimy steel coupling thrummed and shuddered.

One hand on the doorway, Sam held his breath and stepped onto the ledge. There were no guard rails to keep him in place. The warm night air smelled swampy, signaling that the mighty Nile River must be nearby.

Stretching forward as far as he could with his free arm, he couldn't quite reach the far side. That left only one choice. Sam inhaled a deep breath and jumped. His fingers found the far door handle, and he clamped onto it for dear life. Quickly, he turned the handle. To his relief, the door to Car Three opened easily. He stepped inside.

If anything, this car was even more crowded than Car Two. He sensed eyes on him and looked up to see a guy around his dad's age stretched full out in the overhead rack. Wow, that was a different way to ride. On the other hand, it beat sleeping on the aisle floor. It was probably somewhat comfortable. Plus, no one would step on you!

The guy gave him a huge grin, his buck teeth gleaming in the flickering yellow light. Lean and wiry, he stuck out his hand, blocking Sam's way.

“Hey, America,” he shouted. “High five!”

Sam laughed and slapped his palm against the man’s leathery one. He loved how friendly people were here.

“Nice bunk bed,” Sam shouted.

“Eh?” The wiry man wrinkled his face.

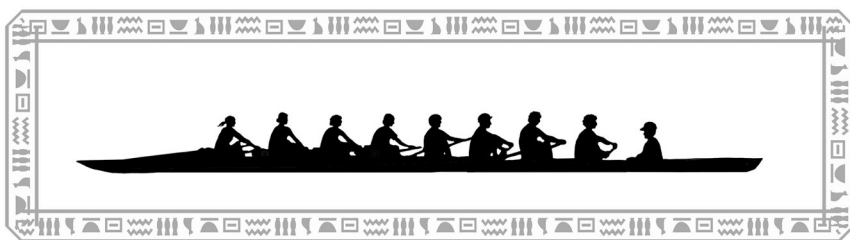
Sam pointed to the rack and gave him a thumbs-up.

“Ah!” the man cried, then laughed and nodded vigorously. “Good, yes.”

Sam moved on, weaving his way slowly down the crowded aisle. He scanned left and right, searching for a food vendor but saw nothing of the kind. Next to him, two small boys fought over a toy gun. Their mother tore them apart. Somewhere, a baby cried.

A few seats ahead, a local girl clambered over two passengers and stepped out into the aisle. She looked around his age, and her sporty, dark ponytail bobbed as she turned away from him.

Wait—was that what he thought it was, emblazoned on the back of her shirt? Sam stared in surprise. He couldn’t read the Arabic words stenciled above the image. What he could see was the picture: *a rowboat*.



A coxed-eight rowboat—eight rowers, one coxswain—to be exact. Just like the team he rowed on back home.

Curious, he walked closer.

The girl reached into some luggage in the overflowing overhead rack and pulled out a book. Then she returned to her seat by climbing back over several passengers.

Sam wanted to say something to her, but it felt awkward now that she was seated again. She probably didn't speak English anyway. She probably didn't even row. Most likely, she bought the shirt because she liked the picture.

As he neared, she glanced up. Bright, intelligent eyes met his. They stared at one another for a moment, and Sam nearly said something, but then he put his head down and kept walking.

He reached the back of the car without spotting a food vendor. Standing at the rear door, he once again peered out the round window into the night. Then Sam grasped the latch, turned the handle, and began another treacherous crossing, heading into the fourth car.