

Return of Bastet

Chapter 1

Mysterious Alarms

This whole crazy adventure began while I was working in a bar. Well, I really wasn't working in a bar, I was in a bar working. There's a difference. Someone had pilfered a hundred and thirty-seven dollars from the register and there was no surveillance recording to expose the thief. It was my job to find out why. That's what I do. I'm an alarm tech.

I wasn't always an alarm tech. Before that I was a computer geek and before that I was in high school. I was also a wizard, a thief, a warrior, and a werewolf. But those were role playing occupations so they don't count. Back to my story.

The owner, of course, was furious – shouting obscenities, ranting on about thieving employees, and cursing the “effing” alarm system. He was big as a bear and his booming voice filled the entire bar. But he didn't seem to care. I, on the other hand, was trying to focus on finding the problem.

Fortunately, it didn't take long. Someone had cut a cable inside a junction box and tucked the pigtailed through the exit port into the wall. To the casual observer it would look like that's the way it was supposed to be. Resplicing the cable was a simple job once I found the problem.

I tried to explain to the owner it wasn't really a failure of the alarm system per se. Somebody had cut a cable and hid the evidence. My explanation failed to appease the irate owner. And since I had no way of restoring the unrecorded video, he was no closer to being a happy customer now than he was when I walked in.

But that's a side story and dealing with unhappy customers seems to be part of my job. In the middle of it all I received an urgent call from my boss, Matt Shiffler – a call that would change my life forever. It seems the alarms at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM for short) were sporadically sounding during the night for no apparent reason. The curator was having a hissy-fit because the museum was going to be fined if the alarms continued. Apparently, our tech was back there this morning for the third time and couldn't find the problem. That didn't surprise me, considering who they sent. I was told in language laced with explicatives to get the “effing” alarm system fixed or else. Yeah, I seemed to be hearing that word a lot lately. I packed up my tools and headed for the museum.

It was midafternoon when I walked up to the front desk with my tool bag in hand and announced I was here to repair the alarm system. A gorgeous young receptionist with languid brown eyes and dark hair looked up from her iPad and gave me the requisite welcoming smile. I immediately wished I wasn't covered with sweat and dressed like a janitor.

“Why yes, that would be the Egyptian Gallery. Mr. Cloutier is quite upset about it. And what is your name?”

“Cotton. Mike Cotton.”

“Just a moment, Mr. Cotton.” She punched numbers into a communications panel and waited for a response.

“Mr. Cloutier, there is a Mike Cotton here to repair the alarms in the Egyptian Gallery.”

After a short pause, she responded, “Yes, I will send him that way.”

She hung up the phone and looked at me with chocolate brown eyes and moist lips. I felt a warm rush inside and wondered if she was spoken for but saw no ring on the matrimonial finger. Lucky me.

“Mr. Cloutier said he will meet you in the Egyptian Gallery. Do you know where it is?”

I knew where it was but wondered if I played dumb, she might escort me there. Probably not. She would likely call one of their student docents.

So, I responded with, “Yes, I’ve been there,” and reluctantly left her to her eBook. At least I think that’s what she was doing. I hoped she would be there when I left, but wondered if I would have the guts to approach her. Probably not.

Mr. Cloutier was waiting for me when I arrived. He was tall thin, dressed in a chic business suit, and looked as French as his name implied.

“Ah, Mr. Cotton. So glad to see you. I am Antoine Cloutier, Senior Curator for the Egyptian Gallery.” His accent confirmed my suspicions. We shook hands.

“I’m here to troubleshoot your alarm system.”

“Mr. Cotton, I hope you are here to repair it. We have had three false alarms and the city has informed me we will be charged a fine for the next one and each one after that. The museum is on a tight budget, Mr. Cotton. We need to be spending our money on restoration and maintenance; not on superfluous alarms from a malfunctioning alarm system.”

Like I said, dealing with unhappy customers is what I do – and as usual – everybody wants to blame the system. I had just finished correcting one that had been tampered with by an ingenious thief. But I chose not to refute what he said. Nothing had been stolen, so it wasn’t likely a thief. Maybe a rat or wayward squirrel.

“Where is the alarm control panel?” I asked.

Although I knew where the Egyptian Gallery was from previous visits, I had never been assigned to work on the alarm system.

“This way, Mr. Cotton,” he directed and led me to the back of the exhibit.

The curator described with practiced eloquence the history behind selected artifacts as we passed – assuming without asking, that I had an interest. I did have a mild interest, of course, most people do.

About halfway across the room he brought us to a halt in front of a large, glass-paneled exhibit, several feet tall and nearly as wide. Included were statues of housecats – standing, sitting, lounging, or nursing their young. Some were adorned with beaded collars, diadems, and earrings.

Also displayed were glass, clay, and alabaster cosmetic jars. All decorated with images of cats. But the majority of the artifacts, perhaps a dozen or more, were mummies. Cat mummies, wrapped in linen with carved wooden or molded clay heads and painted faces. There were also cat-shaped coffins made of wood and bronze. On the back of the display case was an X-ray showing the stark white skeleton of a mummified cat.

The curator turned to me. “This, Mr. Cotton, is an exhibit on loan from the Grand Egyptian Museum in Cairo.” He gestured proudly at the display. “It just arrived last week,”

He continued as if conducting a tour – likely something he did a lot. “The ancient Egyptians held all animals, wild and tame, in the highest regard. Beloved pets were often mummified so they too, could journey into the afterlife. Archaeologists have uncovered mummies of cats, dogs, birds, baboons, and even crocodiles. But cats were the most common. This exhibit focuses on the religious significance of cats in Egypt.”

I spotted a statue of Bastet in the case and said, “Yes, I know about the cat goddess.”

“Then you may be aware there were actually two cat goddesses in Egypt. Bastet was the cat goddess of the Lower Nile and Sekhmet the cat goddess of the Upper Nile.”

He pointed to a second statue with the head of a lioness.

“As you see here Bastet had the head of a domestic cat, whereas Sekhmet had the head of a lioness.”

“I thought they were both the same.”

“Well, it is a bit confusing. Bastet was initially worshipped as a goddess of war and had a lioness head as well, but over time she began to be thought of more as a protector of the home and the goddess of beauty. Some say they were different aspects of the same goddess; others claim they were sisters. The center for worship of Bastet was in Bubastis and the center of worship for Sekhmet in Memphis. There was a temple dedicated to Bastet in Bubastis but it lays in ruins today.”

He pointed to a photograph of the ruins and a map showing its location in the Nile Delta. A timeline traced the shifting beliefs of the cat goddess from a lioness and war goddess to the later view of her as a domestic cat and protector of the home.

“She was also known as the goddess of the ointment jars,” he added, “and referred to as the Perfumed Protector.” Sounded like the name of an action hero in Marvel Comics.

“It’s an impressive display,” I said, trying to sound interested. I was, however, taken by the number of cat mummies in the exhibit. So once again, I tried to contribute to the conversation.

“Little wonder you’re concerned about the alarm system. With that many cat mummies in one place it has to be a valuable display.”

“Well, Mr. Cotton, every artifact is valuable for it carries with it the history of our past. But with respect to monetary value, no, not so much. Cat mummies have been dug up all over Egypt. So many that in more ignorant times they were used as fertilizer. Over 300,000 were unearthed when the temple was first excavated, and it is estimated there may be millions buried on the grounds. It was, after all, the center for the worship of Bastet. Cats were raised there by the priesthood, sold to supplicants, and sacrificed on their behalf.”

“If they held cats in such regard, why would they sacrifice them?”

“The belief was the cat, once properly mummified and buried, would search out the goddess in the underworld and carry their petition to her. In the minds of the Egyptians, assigning the cat with such an important mission and facilitating its journey into the afterlife would be considered a form of respect in itself.”

“I would say the cat got the bad end of that deal.”

“Well, Mr. Cotton, had you been there you might have felt differently,” he replied with a bit of a huff and continued on without further word.

We approached the end of the gallery and he led me through an inconspicuous doorway near one of the display cases. We followed a utilitarian hallway noticeably lacking the luster and décor of the exhibition halls. A sandy-haired youth in a museum issued polo shirt and black trousers stood by a door labeled, “Fire and Security Systems.”

“This is Thomas,” the curator announced. “He will assist you in your repairs.” For some reason that rubbed me the wrong way.

“If he’s an alarm tech, why doesn’t *he* fix it?”

“Oh no, Mr. Cotton. You assume wrong. He is an Assistant Curator and will accompany you while you are here. We cannot have strangers running up and down the interior halls unattended.”

That bugged me even more. Just what I needed, an underage chaperon. The kid didn’t look much older than a freshman at the University. He opened the door and ushered me into a small room with electrical panels mounted on concrete block walls and conduit running into both the floor and ceiling. I walked over to the one labeled “Security System.”

“If you need anything, Mr. Cotton, I am sure Thomas can get it for you,” the curator offered from outside the door.

“I do hope you discover the problem. I am required to come and search for missing artifacts with each one. It is beginning to create a problem at home.”

“Yes, I would imagine. Wives get suspicious when their husbands keep getting called out in the middle of the night.”

I shouldn’t have said it, but the Frenchman was getting on my nerves. He gave me a patronizing smile and trotted off. Maybe I should steal something just to annoy him.

Thomas propped the door open with a cardboard box. Good move. The room was musty with uncirculated air and smelled like concrete.

“Make yourself at home, Thomas,” I said. “This may take a while.”

Thomas leaned with his back against a wall and pulled his phone from his pocket. I opened up the security panel and dug my laptop out of the toolkit. I had tested dozens of alarm systems since I joined the company and intermittent alarms were the worst. The chances of pinpointing it on the first try were zilch.

As expected, an hour and a half later, I had run the full gamut of diagnostics (twice) and checked all of the wiring to both the sensors and audible alarms. To test the wiring inside the walls and pipes would require running a continuity check on each and every cable, a time-consuming process, but most problems are at the connection points. I made sure they were all secularly fastened. I even put the system in test mode and tapped on the sensors to see if I could trigger an alarm. No luck. I looked at the kid. He had brought in a chair and was tilted precariously against the wall on its back legs.

“Well, Thomas, I hope you enjoyed your exciting afternoon in the electrical room.”

The shaggy-haired intern looked up from his phone. He claimed to be working on an essay, but the muffled shouts and gunshots told me otherwise.

“I can’t find anything wrong with the system. So, I need to talk to your boss.”

“He won’t be happy.”

“Well, I’m less happy than he is because it means I’m going to have to spend the night here. Something is setting it off and I need to find out what it is.”

“What could do that?”

“Rats, squirrels, bats, cockroaches...”

“Really?”

“Well, maybe not cockroaches. So which way to his office?”

“I’ll give him a call.”

Thomas pulled out his trusty cellphone and dialed the Guardian of the Gallery. Lame humor. It helps me get through the day.

“A brief conversation ensued during which Thomas let drop that I wanted to spend the night in the museum – something I would have preferred to request in person. That news was followed with Thomas pleading that he could not spend the night in the museum. He had a test tomorrow, at least that was what he said. He looked up with doleful eyes and handed me the phone.

“He wants to talk to you.”

“I’m not surprised.” I took the phone.

“Yes?”

“You cannot spend the night here, Mr. Cotton. We would need to turn off the alarms. The entire museum would be a risk.”

“No, that will not be necessary. I will come back before your guard sets the alarms and I will place myself in the Egyptian Gallery. I will stay inside the gallery until the alarms are turned off in the morning.”

“What about the sensors in the gallery, Mr. Cotton? If you move, they will sound the alarms and the system will contact the authorities. Is your company going to pay the fine?”

“Mr. Cloutier, I will set the alarms in the gallery in test mode. That way if they trigger, I can spot the cause. While in test mode, no audible alarms will sound and the authorities will not be contacted.”

“If you say so, but should the alarms go off, there will be consequences and you will likely be looking for employment elsewhere. Is that understood?”

“Perfectly. At what time does the guard set the alarms?”

“When he completes his eight o’clock rounds.”

“Tell your guard I will meet him at the front entrance at 7:45 and he can escort me to the gallery. I will set the gallery alarms on test mode. After that he can activate the system alarms.”

“Very well. Mr. Cotton, and I do hope you find the problem, because your boss will be the first person I call. Now let me talk to Thomas.”

Well, that went well. But I had to admit the man is responsible for the gallery and even though the cat mummies might not be worth much, there are other things here worth a fortune. I handed Thomas the phone and started packing my things. He repeated his excuse two more times. A minute later he said, “Okay, I’ll see you Friday.”

“Is he going to make you spend the night?” I asked.

“No. He said he would have the guards keep an eye on you.”

“Maybe he thinks I’m going to run off with one of his new cat mummies.”

Thomas repaid me with a condescending smile. I finished packing my tools. He escorted me back to the lobby and we said goodbye, hopefully for the last time. I was disappointed to find the front desk closed for the day and the attractive receptionist gone. Oh well, I had other plans for tonight anyway. Would I have really asked her out? Maybe. I’ll have to come back to find out.

I was back at 7:45 as promised with both my backpack and tool bag. Inside the backpack was a rolled-up blanket, a flashlight, a folding campstool, a bottle of water, some snacks, and my trusty Spiderman flip knife. I never go camping without it. But then, I never go camping, at least not since I was a kid.

I was met at the door by an overweight security guard dressed in gunmetal gray, complete with badge, boots, and a belt full of tactical gear. It helped support his bulging belly. A two-way radio was pinned to his shoulder and a badge proclaimed he was Louis Bakerfield. He said I could call him Louie.

“You here to fix the alarm?”

“There’s nothing wrong with it. I’m here to find out what’s triggering it.”

“Yeah, I hear you’re spending the night with the mummies – a spooky place even in the daytime. Those shrunken cadavers give me the hibejeebies. I make quick work of that place when I do my rounds.”

“Well, I should be fine. They’ve been dead a long time. No reason why they should wake up tonight.”

“Hey, it’s your party.”

I watched him from behind as he waddled down the hall. The guy had to weigh three hundred pounds. He ushered me into the gallery.

“Well, here we are,” he said, waving to the entrance. “I’ll check in on you during my rounds.”

“Thanks, I’ll be fine.”

“Well, if you need anything just holler. A good scream will echo through the halls and can be heard from one end of the museum to the other.”

“Nice to know. See you later.”

Louie turned and made his way back down the hall, swaying side-to-side with each ponderous step.

I set up camp in a corner of the room. That allowed me to survey most of the gallery from one spot. There were areas blocked by statues, upright sarcophagi, and display cases, but it was the best I could do. Once settled in, I set the sector alarm in test mode using the app on my phone. Although the system would not sound the alarms or notify the police, it would alert the app and cause my phone to beep and vibrate.

Having completed my preps, there was nothing left to do but wait. My money was on *Ratus ratus*. Although the sensors were set to ignore things crawling around on the floor, a rat running across a display case would be enough to set it off. It was unlikely that any squirrels had slipped into the museum, but bats, or a wayward bird were possibilities.

The first false alarm had occurred on Sunday at 2:59 am, the second Monday at 4:25, and the third at 3:36 last night. If that meant anything, it was going to be several hours before something happened. My perpetrator was a late riser.

I decided to lay down and get some sleep, confident the alarm on my phone would wake me if anything happened. I tucked the phone up against my stomach just to make sure. Not that I was going to fall asleep anytime soon. Like the guard said, the Egyptian Gallery is a spooky place. The dim lighting gave the room an eerie green cast. Much of it lay in shadow. To make matters worse, I was spending the night with statues of animal-headed gods, embalmed mummies, and jars filled with human organs. The stuff of nightmares. Amazingly, I fell asleep.

A snake found its way into my bedroll! The tail was buzzing against my stomach. A diamond back! Poisonous! I struggled to move. I couldn’t get free. My legs were tangled in my blanket. No, no. It’s not true. It’s a dream. Wake up you fool.

The buzzing was my phone. Something had triggered the alarm. I calmed myself and looked at the display. A blip was flashing in sector eight – the Egyptian Gallery. A fragrance tickled my nose. It reminded me of incense, maybe sandalwood, but sweeter, more seductive.

I rose slowly, scanning the gallery interior in the dim light. There was something to my left – by the mummified cats. A woman. A chill ran down my spine. The museum doors were locked. How could she be here? Even if she had a key, how could she wander around the halls without being seen by the guards? And why this gallery? If she had stepped into any of the others, the alarms would have sounded.

The mystery woman stood by the display case with her back to me. Thick black hair hung to her shoulders in strands woven with beads and ornaments. She wore a white, nearly transparent gown that fell to her ankles. I moved to the side for a better look, accidentally bumping my toolkit. Idiot! She turned. Her gaze settled on me. A chill ran down my back and goose bumps rose on my arms. She had the head of a cat!

Was this another dream? I pressed my fingernails into my palms. I could feel them. No dream. I watched in disbelief. I was seeing something that should not be there. The cat goddess – Bastet.

Feline ears protruded through the thick mat of black hair. A pectoral collar covered her shoulders and a belt woven with gold ornaments bound her gown at the waist. She wore a jeweled diadem on her forehead and gold rings hung from her ears. The flimsy gown rippled as if in a breeze. But there was no air movement in the room. My stomach felt weightless and the room suddenly cold. Was this a ghost or was I going bananas? There's no such thing as ghosts.

Then she spoke. Her voice was a deep, velvety alto. Seductive, sensuous. I was captivated by it – drawn to it. The language was like nothing I had heard before, yet I knew the meaning of every word.

“So, it is you that Ra has appointed to free me?”