



# THE GAME

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**T**he scarab catches the torchlight, gold flashing between my fingers. Lighter than it should be. I turn it over—smooth seam along the belly, plastic under the paint.

The torches flicker—tissue paper and LEDs, but the shadows move right, jumping across sandstone walls and a jackal-headed statue in the corner.

“One more number!” Lisa’s voice bounces off the walls. She’s bent over the pedestal, her fingers tracing the grid carved into its surface.

The hourglass in the center of the room is half my height. The sand has dropped past the red line—five minutes, maybe less. I weave around a sarcophagus, duck under a hanging ankh, and crouch beside her.

Lisa’s fingers move across the grid, sliding tiles into place. Click. Click. Click.

“Fireplace numbers. Book of the Dead numbers. I’ve tried everything.” Her jaw is tight.

I reach around her, find the forty-five tile, and slide it to the end of the row. It catches and then clicks into place.

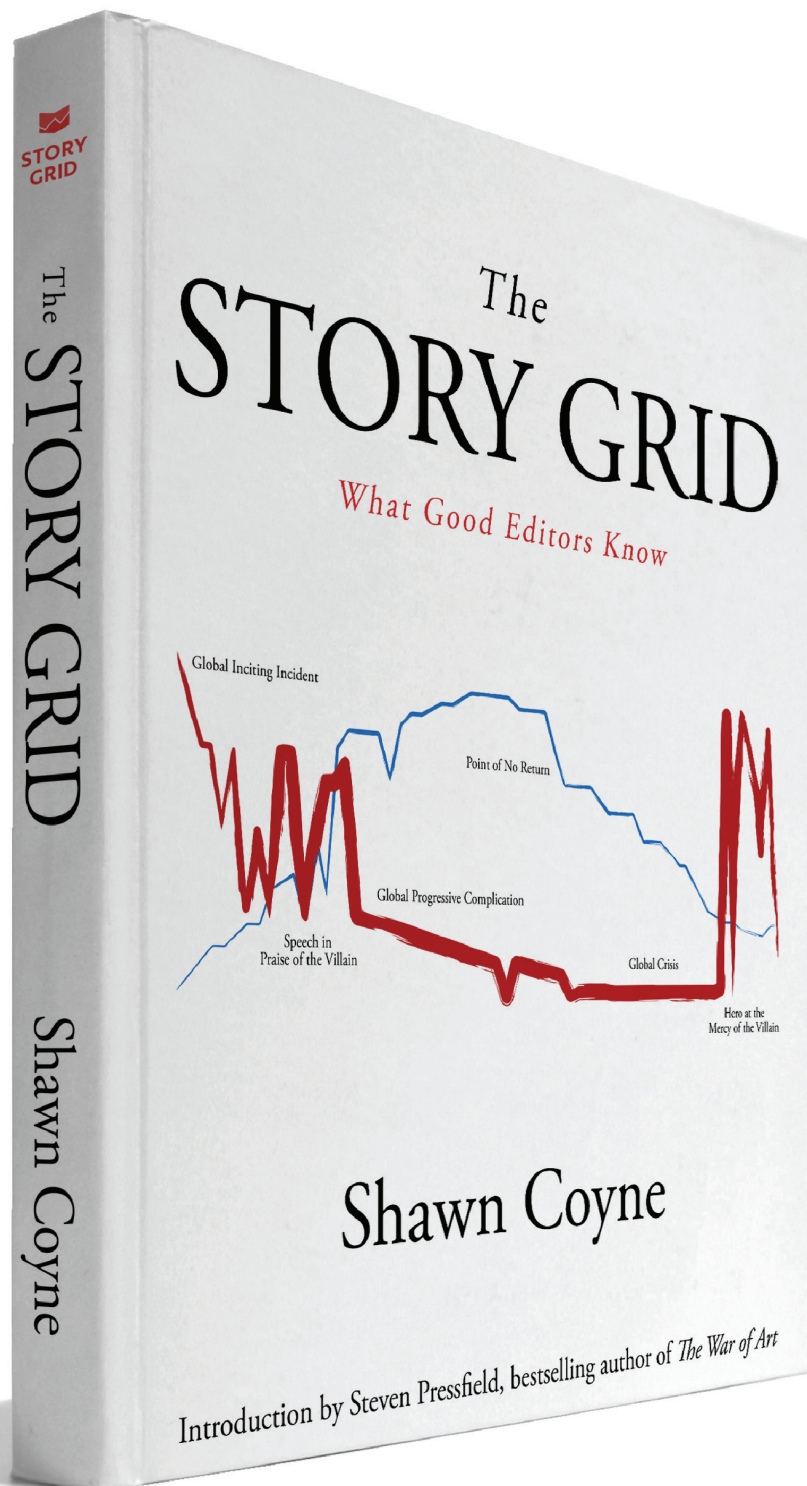
“Under the carpet,” I say.

The panel hums. Blue light floods up from the grid—blacklight. Suddenly the walls are alive with symbols that weren’t there before, glowing violet and green.

Lisa lifts the panel. Underneath, resting in velvet: a key. Gold, heavy-looking, carved with tiny hieroglyphs.

“You’re amazing.” I’m still crouched beside her, close enough to smell her shampoo—coconut, something floral.

# THE PATHWAY TO REACH FOR THE INEXHAUSTIBLE STANDARD



“It's incredibly deep. If you and I were looking at this, it's like Einstein...  
he really has a whole concept from A to Z of what a story is, what a scene is.”  
—Steven Pressfield,  
bestselling author of *The War of Art*, in an interview on *The Tim Ferriss Show*

“Yet you keep shooting me down.”

She laughs, half-turns—and the key slips. It hits the sand without a sound and vanishes.

“Shit.” We drop. My hands plunge into the sand—coarse, deeper than it looks, still warm from the lights above.

My fingers find cold metal. “Got it.”

She snatches it from my palm and bolts. The door at the far wall—the only one we haven’t cracked.

I push up from the sand, brush off my knees. “Come on. I’ve got reservations at McCalebs. Tonight.”

She tucks a strand of blonde hair behind her ear, her eyes on the lock. “You were serious about that?” The key slides in. She twists—click, click, click.

“I just ended it with Andrew.” She doesn’t turn around. “My therapist says I need to date myself for a while.”

A voice shakes the walls—deep, theatrical, dripping with fake ancient menace. “Three minutes left. Can you escape the final crypt before I rise from my grave? Muahahahaha.” The laugh that follows echoes too long, rattling in my chest.

The door shudders. Stone grinding against stone—or something made to sound like it. It swings inward, revealing darkness.

I catch the edge of the door, hold it wide. “You always have an excuse.” She’s already through the doorway. I follow. “Every time.”

That’s ridiculous.” She’s sizing up the coffin in the center of the room—black lacquer, fake jewels crusted along the edges. Her hands run across the lid, searching for a latch.

Bookshelves climb the walls on either side—leather spines, gold titles. Another door, dead ahead. Still closed.

“It’s true.” I drift toward the bookshelves, ticking fingers. “Hank in sophomore year.” I pull a book spine. Nothing. “Dan and Tom last year. And that other short guy—whatshisname.” Another spine. “The one who always smelled like garlic.”

“Ron.” She’s moved to the far door, up on tiptoe, her fingers sweeping the top of the frame. Down the sides.

“No handle. Must be a trigger somewhere. Stop talking and start looking.”

She’s beside me before I register she moved. Close enough that our elbows bump. “I can’t believe you mentioned Tom.” She yanks a book. Nothing happens. She shoves it back.

I pull another book. Hold it. I’m not even looking at it.

“Look, Lisa.” I slide the book back in. “You’ve friend-zoned me for four years.” I turn to face her. “I can’t do it anymore.”

She turns back to the shelf. Pulls a book, shoves it back. Another. “Call out the titles. Could be a clue.” Her voice is too bright. “*Death in Venice. Death on the Nile.*”

She stops. The book stays in her hand. “Why aren’t you reading out titles?”

“Because this is more important.” I haven’t moved. “I’m serious.”

She slides the book back. Slow. Careful. “We’re friends.” Barely above a whisper.

“I want more than that.”

Her shoulders rise. Fall.

“I mean, you’re my only friend.” She’s looking at the shelf, not at me. “You don’t judge. I can tell you everything.”

Something loosens in my chest. “Sounds like dating material to me.”

She laughs—short, surprised, almost against her will.

“Seriously, though.” Somewhere behind us, sand is still falling. “If all these other guys are assholes, why won’t you give me a chance?”

Her hands freeze on the bookshelf.

“That’s the thing.” Her voice is different now. Quiet. True. “You’re the only one I don’t want to risk losing.”

The voice returns, oozing through the walls. “Two minutes remaining. Before eternal servitude begins!” The laugh again—too loud, too long.

I take her hands. She lets me. When I duck my head, she finally looks up.

“Lees, I can’t keep doing this.” Her hands are cold. “Showing up for you. Following you around like a lost puppy.” I swallow. “Watching you fall for every guy who crosses your path. Every guy except me.”

“That’s not fair.” She pulls her hands back.

“I agree.” My voice doesn’t sound like mine. “This is it for me.”

Neither of us moves. The torches flicker. Somewhere, a hidden timer is counting down what we have left.

She looks away first. Steps back.

“We have to find the final code.”

She crosses to the shelf, yanking books, shoving them back. Too fast. Too hard.

I close my eyes. Tip my head back. Let the breath go out of me.

“Aren’t you going to help?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Come on. We’ll miss our first date if we’re stuck in here for eternity.”

I open my eyes. She’s stopped pulling books. She’s looking at me—and there it is. The smallest smile. A dare.

“For real?”

A quick nod. Hair falls across her face, but not before I catch the shine in her eyes.

“Now come on.” She turns back to the shelves, her voice thick. “We’ve got like thirty seconds.”

Books fly off the shelf. She’s not even looking at titles anymore.

“Lees.” She turns. I point up.

There, on the ceiling, glowing white: DEATH IS MY EXIT STRATEGY.

“The sarcophagus!” She’s already there.

I drop beside her, my hands running under the edge. There—a ridge, a button. I press it.

Something clicks. Gears grind. A bell explodes through the speakers—and then silence.

SCENE FIVE

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