Murder of the Sphinx

Chapter One: Selfie

"Smiling!"

Kitty gave a wry grin and looked back over her shoulder. In her hands, she held a brass sieve the size of a small dinner plate with a metal label on the side reading "1 cm fraction." She stood in the center of a large, industrial room with cinderblock walls painted white. Overhead were very large rectangular lights that sat about three inches below the ceiling, glowing like incandescent Legos. Arranged three feet or so from each of the four walls stood large laboratory tables, some bare and others with various small labeled zip bags and stapled pages of printed spreadsheets. Here and there, an aluminum tray sat, small bits of pottery or clumps of what appeared to be dirt scattered across them.

"Yes, this is the good one," came a delighted voice from the other side of the cell phone.

Kitty Campbell, PhD and her newly-assigned sidekick, Marjan Lindemans, were working in the archaeological lab at the Rijksmuseum, the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities, just outside Amsterdam. Kitty was currently a "shovel bum," to use a common euphemism in archaeological circles for working job-to-job, and needed the work; the lab had a backlog of botanical samples that needed analysis and cataloging, and even winter in the Netherlands couldn't prevent Kitty from taking work anywhere she could.

The Netherlands was a dream. Canals, whizzing bicycles, freshly baked delights, smiling faces with cheeks reddened by the cold, they were all around her, constantly. And the smilingest face of all was the young woman taking her photo while Kitty held the most awkward, uncomfortable position physically possible.

Kitty was floating botanical remains, which sounded like a summer game played by children but was, in fact, a year-round game played by archaeologists, and they didn't even pretend it wasn't fun. It involved a large, fifty-gallon tank lined with a mesh screen, running water, and bags of dirt.

Special dirt. Archaeological dirt. "Soil samples," in scientific parlance. During various excavations sponsored by the museum, excavators had collected cores and surface sam-

ples from the sites they were examining. These samples were bagged, dated, labeled, and stored on museum lab shelves--some for decades. In all of them lay seeds, botanical fragments, spores and even pollen, all at varying levels of preservation--some of the seeds were even carbonized, burned enough to prevent their decomposition over time.

The soil itself, the dirt, wasn't of interest to the scientists or museum curators, but rather the botanical specimens hiding inside them. And long ago, an enterprising laboratory rat had figured out that the plant parts were lighter than the dirt parts, and lighter things float, and voila! Botanical flotation was born.

Kitty's arms were beginning to ache. While Marjan had been framing her shot, Kitty had been forced to freeze with her elbows in the water, hands hovering just above the surface, holding the sieve. Inside the sieve was the "fraction" she was working on, the specific portion of the soil sample from which she was separating the botanical remains. The sieves were stackable, and when a bag of soil was poured in the top-most container, with the widest spacing in the sieve mesh, the smaller portions, or fractions, naturally fell through the holes, down past gradually narrower openings, and thus the soil sample was sorted by the size of plant parts. Each sieve could then be labeled and floated independently.

Kitty was working with the 1 cm fraction, which were fairly large particles. Since she was raised attending homeschool, but was still American, Kitty had trained herself in graduate school to think in metric rather than Imperial measurements and avoid converting 1 cm to ½" in her head. Regardless of the units used, these were large particles, and it was rare to have too many in any sample once she'd weeded out--pun intended--the stems and leaves and bark bits that naturally worked their way into any bag of dirt.

"Oh, yes, that is yes for me!" squealed Marjan as Kitty unfroze from her posed position and got back to work. Kitty heard the "shutter" sound from Marjan's camera app click away as she flexed the cramps from her wrists.

She couldn't help but chuckle. Archaeologists, as a whole, are a fun group--cowboys with shovels, most of them borderline homeless but with carefree attitudes, ready to travel, happy to spend inordinate amounts of time in the outdoors, and generally fit and happy. So Marjan's good disposition, so good that it bor-

dered on giddiness, wasn't really a stretch for Kitty, who had become accustomed over the years to jokesters and pranks from her crews.

It was Marjan's childlike innocence that Kitty really appreciated. This was a girl who read cookbooks in her spare time--not looked at them, not perused them, but sat and read them, like novels. It seemed so wholesome to Kitty, so pure.

When working, Marjan was equally delightful--which made her ruthlessness on the internet more enjoyable for Kitty. The vigor and drive and almost competitive attitude Marjan had toward her Instagram and Snapchat posts was an aggressive form of communication that seemed at odds with someone who read a shakshuka recipe like a poem. That juxtaposition charmed Kitty.

Not everyone at the Rijksmuseum shared her benevolence toward the twenty-something social media expert, however.

"Marjan is very young, and very enthusiastic, and she irritates me beyond all reason," the lab director told Kitty when she first arrived in Leiden, the city just a train ride from Amsterdam and the home of the Rijksmuseum. "But there is much grant money waiting for us if we are able to implement her ideas about social media, and for this I am willing to tolerate my feelings."

Kitty had laughed inwardly while working, with moderate success, to control her face. She had been informed on more than one occasion that she should never, under any circumstances, play poker--and on most of those occasions had wished the well-intentioned individual who shared this advice had done so before she'd given her opinion away with the manner in which she pursed her lips or raised her brow or squinted her eyes.

Like when her dad mentioned it AFTER her interrogation by the federal authorities. Somehow the lab director's English-as-a-second-language delivery of his opinions regarding Marjan was formal and stilted enough that it didn't sound as though he was either insulting or dismissing the girl, and yet he managed to do both. In the same breath.

"Alright, I am posting now, and I am creating additional videos for editing later," Marjan told her. The perfect English, which Kitty had encountered in nearly every native Dutch speaker since she'd arrived in The Netherlands, often ran into the same formalized syntax as the lab director when Marjan got excited--which was to say, any time the girl

was working, Kitty noticed her English became almost cartoonish, exactly what she'd expect of a Dutch character in a movie.

It made Kitty all but want to pinch her cheeks.

"These lab samples have lain in storage for many years," the lab director had indicated when Kitty took the initial tour. She'd already been hired remotely at that stage, and was getting a wide introduction to the museum and the lab spaces on her arrival, three weeks ago.

"But there is pressure from the publications, academic and popular, to share what is seen as 'real' data," he'd told her, his face pained.

"It seems that the pendulum swings again."

"How do you mean?" Kitty had asked, although inwardly she felt she already knew and agreed with his assessment.

"Ah, Dr. Campbell, you know how it goes. First, we are scientists, in archaeology, and the museum is seen as the repository for important knowledge. Then, the television shows come and they don't want science, they don't want the bone fragments and the single carbonzed kernel of wheat," he told her, shaking his head.

"No," he continued, "they want... "

"Aliens," Kitty said, her tone one of commiseration.

"Ah, yes, aliens," he nodded.

"Your Egyptian collection is truly spectacular," she said, hoping to move into more comfortable territory.

"Do you mean, speaking of aliens?" the director said, looking at Kitty out the side of her eye and his voice offering a dose of humor.

Kitty laughed.

"Yes, we are very proud of the work we are doing," he answered in seriousness, "both in curating the collection and in working with the new Egyptian Museum to repatriate artifacts."

"They're eager to have some of the pieces here sent back to them, I assume?"

The director had nodded. "Yes, very, but they are busy constructing a new, multi-billion dollar facility and " He shrugged eloquently.

Kitty nodded knowingly. "I heard it was a little overdue."

At this, even the eminently tactful director had laughed outright. "Yes, overdue. It is at least six years over the projected completion date, and does not yet have a roof."

Kitty's eyebrows went up dramatically.

"I agree with you, Dr. Campbell," the director told her, and Kitty reminded her-

self not to play cards with this man. Tactful he may be, but he was clearly also deserving of the accolades he'd accumulated while running the behind-the-scenes at a world-class museum.

"Yes, the new museum in Cairo will be a true jewel on the Nile, if you will forgive my pop culture reference?" He smiled. "Yet the billions being spent and the time overdue is both expected and disappointing."

Kitty agreed. The old Egyptian Museum was a venerable institution, classic in its way, and the new one was all glass and visual impact. The goal of the Department of Antiquities in Cairo was to move their enormous and resplendent collection out of the shadows and to the new museum floor: nearly two-thirds of the artifacts held in Cairo were stored in the literal basement.

Many others, though, were scattered around the globe in collections like the one at the Rijksmuseum, where schoolchildren and spring breakers could walk past glass cases and experience a hint of the glamour of Ancient Egypt.

"Is the botanical study part of your work toward repatriation?" Kitty had asked.

Repatriation, the practice of returning artifacts back to their fatherland, was becoming more common as politicians and museum curators worked between nations to balance their conflicting desires regarding historical finds.

"Ah, as you are very aware, Dr. Campbell, and I do not presume to guess your political leanings, but many museums are developing greater sensitivity to the legacy of colonialism. To remove artifacts from their nation of origin and house them across the globe is often likened to hosting an endangered species in a zoo, is it not?"

Kitty said, "Sure, the argument is: on the one hand, zoos protect the endangered species and allow for education that might help preserve it from greater loss; on the other, it removes animals from their native habitat and reduces the incentive to preserve that habitat, creating the conditions that endanger the animals to start with."

The director nodded. "To call the issue of repatriation problematic is very much like the issue of zoos," he told her.

"For the home nation, those artifacts are their cultural heritage, and they should be housed in their home country. However, museums and scientists around the world argue that they would like--some would say, they must have--access to collections and artifacts in order to add to the body of scientific knowledge."

"Or even that exposure to museum col-

lections is beneficial for educational purposes?"

"Yes, exactly, that in order for us to come to appreciate and understand another culture, we must see its material world, share its artifacts," the director told her.

Kitty could see which side of the repatriation argument he was on.

"And the botanical specimens?" she asked.

"They are the literal fatherland, in this case," the director told her, shrugging. "We have been asked to return many of them to their nations of origin, but we have such a back catalog that most have never been analyzed."

"I understood when I accepted the position that I would be working with samples from many regions," she said.

He nodded. "This is correct. We want first for you to begin with the samples from Luxor, in Egypt, as it happens. These are the most urgently needing to be returned, and we have negotiated very hard with the Department of Antiquities in Cairo."

"Because of the grant," she said.

He rocked his head from side to side on his neck, a little sheepishly.

"Ah, well, perhaps we used the grant as a little leverage, yes?"

Kitty smiled in understanding. "So, because the grant has a deadline, you were able to convince the Egyptian museum to allow you to process these samples prior to sending them home?"

The director's face became very earnest. "Please be understanding, Dr. Campbell, we have agreed to share all our data with the Department of Antiquities, we are working very hard to keep things, as you say, above the table."

"I believe you, Director," she said. "I wouldn't be working with you otherwise."

He had thanked her for both her understanding and her expertise, and within twenty-four hours, Kitty had been up to her elbows in the icy water of the flotation tank.

Marjan had been delighted to fill Kitty in on the details of the grant funding when they'd been introduced.

"Dr. Campbell, it is very exciting to see the interest," Marjan had told her. Kitty wasn't required to participate in the conversation at this point, considering that Marjan's personality and enthusiasm took the space of three people already.

"The director told you, I am sure, that

there is backlash?"

"Against your project?" Kitty asked, a little surprised.

"No, no, not that, it is very well received, but against the popular programs that show only large exciting things in archaeology, Machu Picchu, or Stonehenge, you know the ones, I am sure," Marjan answered, warming even more thoroughly to her topic.

"But now, the public, they ask, what is the REAL science? And this is exciting."

Kitty nodded but didn't even have the chance to draw breath and participate.

Marjan continued rapidly, "Now with social media, we can share how every tiny seed, every small piece of the potteries, each soil stain is a part of the larger human story, we can connect all the tiny discoveries together and demonstrated that science is about incremental data but that even the small data are fascinating, yes?"

Marjan's syntax was fading into her excitement, but Kitty shared it.

"We are hosting the social media channels for the project, we are calling it Social Education for the Exploration of Diversity."

Marjan beamed at Kitty.

"SEED," Kitty said, deducing the acronym.

"Yes!" Marjan exclaimed. "That is why your work is so wonderful! It fits our goals with the video and social posts, and will get much attention, but the seed connection is something the news media will enjoy and will use as a way to introduce stories to the audience, which makes for more coverage."

Kitty had noticed that when Marjan was discussing social media--media in general--she was much more savvy and insightful than her sunny face would lead some to believe.

So over the course of the past three weeks, Kitty and Marjan had spent nearly every work day together. In the evenings, Kitty had walked along the canals, eaten at tiny cafes, and explored every corner of the Rijksmuseum on her own--but from nine in the morning until six in the evening, she and Marjan had been constant companions. Kitty had fractioned samples, bagged each fraction and carefully labeled each with the provenance, so that the exact GPS coordinates remained associated with each scoop of earth from the time it left the ground until well after it was analyzed. She had assembled the floatation tank in the center of the lab, hooking a garden hose to the sink faucet and running it to the top of

the fifty-gallon drum so that as she gently shook each soil fraction into the water, it was constantly moving with the easy flow coming from the hose. The heavier portion of the soil would sink to the wire mesh lining the tank, and the lighter portion would float on top of the moving water; Kitty tenderly scooped the floating bits away and laid them on trays to dry so they could be analyzed and identified.

When each fraction was complete, Kitty removed the soil from the wire mesh lining. Had she been floating soil samples in the field, on site at an excavation, she would simply have dumped the wet dirt back on the ground. Since these samples were destined to be repatriated--after they starred in their own social media blitz--the plan was a little different. In the corner of the lab, there was an excavation screen lined with parchment paper. Kitty was placing portions of soil in thin layers of the parchment as she worked, allowing it to dry, then bagging it back up and labeling it again so it could be returned to the exact location from which it had come.

"Do you feel that your work is noble?" Marjan was asking her from behind the lens.

"Noble?" Kitty replied.

"Do you feel you are going the good work, by sending the soil back where it comes from?" the girl clarified.

Kitty weighed her answer, aware that she was on camera.

"Can dirt really be noble?" she quipped, making a joke as a non-committal answer.

Marjan gave her a stern look with wide eyes that shot toward the phone in her hand, which Kitty took to mean that this particular video was live and Kitty should step up her game.

"I am deeply empathetic that any people group would want their homeland to be honored," she said, trying to answer seriously. "It's understandable that any nation would want the earth, the literal fatherland, returned to them and not left in a storage room on another continent."

"And you are doing this work, yes?"

"I am working to understand the relationship between ancient people and the land on which they lived," Kitty said, speaking passionately. "I am fascinated by the ways that all humans, in all places, across huge stretches of time, have experienced plant life in such similar ways. I feel honored that I am able to learn that from these samples, and then send the soil home to where it came from, with more knowl-

edge than I had when it arrived here, knowledge that can be shared with the people who call this dirt their patrimony."

Marjan beamed at her and gave a thumbs up from behind the lens.

"Now we will share this on all the channels," she said, delightedly. "You do the very nice work, Dr. Campbell! I know the director wishes the grant money was for any other project, but he will see, he will understand that this is taking science to the people."

She nodded emphatically.

Kitty's hands were still in the water, holding the sieve, and the water was very cold.

As Marjan worked her social media magic, Kitty heard a buzzing that sounded as if it were coming from under a pile of blankets. Her hands were full, and she was obligated to frantically search for a place to put down all the wet equipment, dry her hands, and then search under piles of manuscripts, boxes of permanent black marker and bagged artifacts to locate her own cell phone.

It was a number she didn't recognize, and Kitty's first instinct was to feel extreme irritation that she'd gone to that much effort for a sales call or a wrong number. She could have kept her hands in the flotation sample she'd been working on, rather than becoming a servant to the cell phone, a sensation she abhorred.

But she was already there. Holding it in her hand. And it felt like a puzzle needing an answer. A lock that needed unpicking.

Kitty could never resist a puzzle. Or a lock.

"Hello?"

"Dr. Campbell," came the deep, male voice at the other end.

Kitty's insides turned to ice. If she had laid money on the very last human on earth she would have expected a call from, it would absolutely have been this one.

"This is Dr. Campbell," she replied, in the most professional tone she could muster considering she'd one hundred percent lost her cool at this point. She was also at this moment suddenly once again the subject of Marjan's live video feed, with the younger woman's rapid Dutch monologue, in a low voice from behind the camera, acting as counterpoint to this very serious voice in Kitty's ear. She must have been broadcasting locally.

But the call Kitty was taking was from very far away.

"You're speaking with Dr. Geoffrey

Dubois. From Georgia."

As if he needed to clarify how she knew the former department chair who had made sure she lost her job. In Georgia.

Good gravy, thought Kitty. Pretentious, much?

"Hello, Geoffrey?" Kitty managed to say, her voice rising into a question with surprise and dislike. Her last encounter with Dubois had ended in her favor, but by a narrow margin.

Three years prior, Kitty accepted the invitation of a friend to teach at his field school on Cumberland Island, off the coast of Georgia. The island had long been the summer haven for the super-super-wealthy, specifically for the Carnegie family, who built a private train--tracks included--to carry them from the frigid northern winters down to the protected barrier island off the southern coast to spend their winters isolated and indulged.

It was a job Kitty hadn't sought out, but for which she was understandably grateful. Her arrest record was unique amongst university professors, even amongst archaeologists, who on occasion had been known to trespass here and there. Not only did Kitty have a history of civil disobedience, thanks to her granola-loving father's homeschooling from a young age, but she also had a weakness for lock-picking--preferably picking the locks of doors where she absolutely should not have been poking around.

That lock-picking had landed Kitty Campbell in some very hot water more than once. Once, thanks to the federal authorities, hot enough water that she was forcibly ousted from her office as an associate professor of archaeology--by the man on the other end of the line she was holding.

Encountering Geoffrey Dubois again on Cumberland Island had been an unpleasant but unavoidable experience. Her friend, Pierce Nagy, had independent funding for his project excavating suspected foundations of Carnegie ruins. He was working with a team of student archaeologists to determine the extent of the Carnegie presence on Cumberland Island, which had been sold to the National Park Service and established as protected lands. Nagy invited Kitty, despite her disgraced status, to excavate the gardens behind the ruined mansion and analyze the diet of the Carnegies compared to their staff while living at Cumberland. It was an exciting project, one that offered the opportunity not only to explore botanical

remains in an archaeological setting--Kitty's focus as an archaeobotanist, an archaeologist who specializes in human/plant interactions through time--but also because the written records of the Carnegie time on the island meant, for once, Kitty would be able to dig something out of the ground, identify it, and then actually look at the records a living human had kept of planting it, harvesting, fertilizing and even the recipes used for cooking it--and to whom it was served, at the fancy dinner parties the Carnegies hosted in their home.

Pierce, because his money came from a grant, didn't care if Kitty was disgraced. He wanted her expertise. This project was her Olympics, the chance for her to put all her skills on display. But Dubois strenuously objected to Kitty's presence on the project--even on Cumberland Island at all.

Strenuously--right up until Pierce Nagy was found murdered and Kitty seemed to be the only person on site who had a clue how to find the killer.

"Dr. Campbell, I... "

Kitty waited. She sincerely had zero clue why this man would be calling her. He had, very, very reluctantly, thanked her for solving the murder on Cumberland Island, but there was no love lost between them. She had assumed, with good reason, that she would never speak to him directly again, and that her best case scenario was that he'd leave her alone rather than work to destroy her career and reputation more than he already had.

"I need your help," came the quiet, pleading voice from the other end.

"I'm sorry, what now?"

He cleared his throat. "I need your help, Catherine."

"That's Dr. Campbell," she said reflexively, and without apology.

"Dr. Campbell," he was pleading now, "I have a...situation here."

"Ok," Kitty said, her voice the equivalent of a shrug. This man was desperate, she could hear that in his voice. And the slight sensation that perhaps, for once, he was at her mercy was too juicy for Kitty to resist.

She was only human.

"I am asking for your help," he said, making an effort at his usual firm tone.

Kitty felt no warmth or even much compassion for the man, but she was a scientist: curious.

"With what, exactly? Wait, start with 'here,' where are you?"

"Cairo."

The coincidence seemed unlikely.

"And I know you're working with the Egyptian samples at the Rijksmuseum, I've seen the video feeds in your stream," he told her.

Ah, she thought. Social media at its finest.

"And you have some samples you'd like me to analyze?"

There was a pause.

He cleared his throat again.

"Dr. Dubois?" she asked.

"No, I... "

She let the silence grow between them. The tension was like the tumblers of a lock that are just about to give way, and Kitty adored that sensation.

"I have a body I need you to get out of a locked van."