

Murder of the Sphinx

Chapter Two: Khufu

“Wait, what?” she asked, incredulous. She couldn’t possibly have heard that correctly.

“You mean, you have a mummy?”

It was Cairo, after all.

“No, Dr. Campbell,” Dubois said with a trace of his usual impatience. “A body. The dead body of a person who was alive twelve hours ago.”

“From a locked van?”

“Yes. Locked from the inside, and when we scanned the transport... ”

“Wait, locked from the INside?” Kitty asked.

“Yes, yes, Campbell, that’s what I’m telling you,” Dubois snapped at her.

“I don’t understand,” Kitty said.

“That’s patently obvious,” Dubois came back, before Kitty could hear him take a long, audible sniff as if to calm himself. There was a pause and she didn’t know what to expect next, so she said nothing.

Kitty was well-trained in waiting others out. Her father, who was granola before being granola was cool, had taught her to monitor her breathing and focus on small details when conflict arose. He’d learned and perfected the technique during many sit-ins before (and after) Kitty was born. Her mother, who had been completing law school during much of the same period, took a different, more verbally confrontational approach, but Kitty knew from hard experience that such an effort would only bring more anger from Dubois. The correct, winning tactic here was silence, allowing the little man to believe that he had the upper hand, that he was in control of the situation.

Kitty’s best guess was that a vicious lack of control was driving this phone call, but her own resentment about their relationship up to this point gave her a perspective that almost made his current outburst amusing.

Almost.

“The van,” Dubois began to explain once his voice was more moderated, “was transporting artifacts from Luxor. You’ve heard of Luxor?”

His tone, always so disparaging, was impossible to take as accidental. He was deliberately unpleasant, in a way that was calculated

but also unconscious.

“Valley of the Kings. Tut, Hatshepsut, Nefertari. Luxor. Got it,” Kitty told him tersely.

Luxor sat across the Nile from the site where Howard Carter had famously--and somewhat accidentally--discovered the tomb of boy king Tutankhamun, which changed not only the course of Egyptology but also modern culture.

It was the 1920s, and the entire world went wild for all things Ancient Egypt: fashion, interior design, art, even music were all forever changed because the water boy on Howard Carter’s excavation crew noticed a depression in the sand and discovered the top of a set of stairs that led the entire world 3000 years into the past.

When her father had presented her, at age seven, with a shoebox filled to the brim with Plaster of Paris, Kitty had been confused. When he’d handed her, with no explanation, a popsicle stick and an old spoon, she’d been delighted. Her father may have smelled a little too strongly of patchouli, but the man knew how to create an ambiance. And when school meant lessons at home with a man who loved surprises and who was both brilliant and devoted to his daughter, Kitty had learned to dive in feet first, and expect magic.

Under the Plaster of Paris, which she

carefully scraped away with her tiny tools, had lain a reproduction of Tut’s infamous sarcophagus, buried there by her father for her to uncover little by little. Never mind that Tut’s real-life sarcophagus had been hidden behind a door in a secret room in an underground tomb, and never “buried” at all--young Kitty had been elated to uncover the treasure, and passionate about Egypt and archaeology ever since. She had gently teased the discovery free from the plaster, and proceeded to learn everything she could about Tut: his boyhood, his ascent to the throne, the threats to his life, and even the question of whether he’d been murdered. She was fascinated to learn that Howard Carter had been on the verge of giving up his search for another tomb in Luxor when Tut was discovered, and that Tut had saved his career.

Howard Carter and Luxor were the reason Kitty Campbell was first interested in archaeology, and she’d noticed more than one parallel between his life and hers over the years. Visiting the sites where he had done his work had always been a dream of Kitty’s, and when she’d arrived in Amsterdam she’d thought the Egyptian collection in the museum there may be as close as she was likely

to get. She had imagined her hands touching the sands of the Valley of the Kings as she and Marjan had worked over the past week, and wondered what it would be like to go in person.

So, yes. Kitty knew Luxor.

Dubois sniffed on the other end of the line, impressed despite himself. “That’s correct. Luxor is possibly the most famous single archaeological site in the world.”

He took a deep breath and continued in the tone of one giving a rehearsed lecture. “While on site at our most recent excavation, a burial tomb was uncovered approximately seven meters below the surface, and less than a kilometer from the location at which Howard Carter discovered King Tutankhamun’s tomb, arguably the most well-documented ancient find in the entire world.”

At just nine years old, Tutankhamun, son of the heretical king Akhenaten, had ascended the throne, and three years later, he was dead. Akhenaten had shifted all of Egypt under his rule away from the worship of their multiple traditional gods and toward worship of Aten, the Sun; it was a radical move, and widely rejected, and died along with him. When Tut rose to the throne, some wondered if he would continue his father’s beliefs, and

modern scholars still wonder if Tut may have been poisoned to prevent that from happening. Kitty knew that recent studies pointed to a blood infection from a badly broken leg after falling from a racing chariot during what must have been a very exciting hunt for a young boy—but the intrigue of royal houses didn’t exactly rule out murder in that case, did it?

Kitty had been enamored with the story of Tut. She had leafed through the pages of the World Book Encyclopedia with her toy sarcophagus in hand, bits of Plaster of Paris still stuck to the outside, gazing at the entry for Tutankhamun. The encyclopedia pages included a series in transparent overleaf, so that each layer of the sarcophagus could be illustrated in fine, full-color detail, the entire thing re-assembled as the pages lay on top of one another.

Kitty flipped through them, back and forth, for hours.

Howard Carter had searched for years before finding Tut. He was financially funded by Lord Carnarvon as was the fashion in those days, wealthy Brits hiring private Egyptologists to locate discoveries that would be lauded and carried back to England; and since Carnarvon was paying, after the discovery Carter had been forced to wait for the wealthy

man's arrival before opening the tomb, and to bow to the desire to have much of the tomb's opening documented by the press. The archaeologist had been forced to give photographers and newspapermen access to the site before he'd fully catalogued the contents, and the story went that an unhappy Carter, irritated by the delays and meddling, sneaked into the tomb at night, suspecting that there was a hidden room at the back of the tomb. Why else would they have failed to find a sarcophagus and mummy? Breaking through a plaster wall at the rear of the tiny, unfinished tomb--only half the walls were painted, and some of the paint had run, as if it had been completed in a hurry--he discovered a hidden chamber, completely filled with a fantastically painted and carved housing for the body of Tut himself.

Unwilling to allow the valuable and extraordinary find to be damaged, Carter had backed slowly out and covered the hole in the wall he'd crawled through with a potted plant before the press arrived. Kitty never forgot that story, or the idea that sometimes doing the right thing for truth meant bending the rules made by people in power.

Sometimes, pursuing what's right meant picking a few locks.

"Dubois," Kitty said harshly, giving up any pretense of civility. "Get to the point."

He paused for a moment, the silence from his end sounding stung.

"Dr. Campbell, I don't really appreciate your tone of voice," he said coldly over the line.

"Dr. Dubois, I don't really appreciate you calling me out of the blue for a favor that, quite frankly, you don't deserve, and then lecturing me about basic facts as if this were an undergraduate survey course," she replied. There was a verve in her voice. She was enjoying getting back at him, just a little. OK, more than a little.

Marjan appeared suddenly over Kitty's shoulder, and Kitty jumped when she realized how unaware she'd been of the girl's continued presence in the room. As always, the Dutch social media expert's eyes were wide and her smile cheerful, her demeanor constantly reflecting curiosity and delight.

"Ah, this is the man, yes?" she asked in a whisper.

Kitty frowned slightly, confused and distracted by Dubois on the other end of the phone.

"The man, the man you told me of, the

very small man from your island?” Marjan whispered again.

Kitty actually laughed aloud at this very apt description. She nodded at Marjan who gave a knowing nod with pursed lips in return, understanding. The girl returned to her phone, which chimed an interaction from someone somewhere in the world responding to her posts about Kitty’s work.

“Dr. Campbell, are you laughing at me?” Kitty said, “What? I mean, no...”

“I don’t think you understand,” Dubois began.

“You’re right, I don’t understand,” she cut in, talking over the end of his sentence with vehemence and the force of pent-up anger and irritation, and maybe a little embarrassment at being caught talking about him behind his back.

“I don’t understand how you could have forced me out of our department on a garbage charge and then pushed me on Cumberland to solve a crime that you said ‘wasn’t even a crime,’” her voice made the air quotes very clear, “when it most certainly was, and now, now! Now you’re calling me while I’m in another country on a job assignment that rumor has it you didn’t want me to get, and you’re asking ME for a favor?”

She was breathing hard by now. Marjan was watching her, eyes wide and jaw slightly open. Her thumbs hovered over the screen of

her phone, ceasing movement for the first time all morning.

There was silence on the other end. Kitty could picture Dubois’ face, changing shades from pink to purple to puce as he held his breath and prepared to blow up.

Which made what came next even more shocking.

“I was wrong,” he told her.

Kitty cocked her head to one side, and felt like a balloon that had been popped--the disorientation of going from dukes up, ready to fight straight into confusion leaving her slightly light-headed.

“Say what, now?”

“I said,” he repeated, still in a humble, quiet tone, “I was wrong.”

“Um ”

“I would appreciate it if we could move forward, Dr. Campbell. I should not have doubted your abilities, and while I stand behind my decision to remove you from the department...”

“Ha! See?” she crowed, but he interrupted her.

“But! But, Dr. Campbell. Your...ahem... unique skill set is exactly what will be of most use to me now. And, quite frankly, so will your

animosity.”

Kitty blinked rapidly at this.

“I’m sorry, I’m just feeling like maybe there’s a gas leak in the lab, or something? I was not expecting anything that’s happening right now, and I feel dizzy.”

She shook her head as if to clear water from her ears.

“The reality is, Campbell,” Dubois said, returning to his usual brisk tone but without the edge that had accompanied it previously, “that you and I neither like one another nor care very much about the other’s opinion.”

Kitty said nothing. Three heartbeats went by.

“I assume from your silence that I am correct,” he said drily. “So you’ll understand that in the...specifically unique situation in which I find myself, I am in particular need of someone who ”

“You don’t really care about pissing off?” she asked.

“Quite,” he told her, his tone resigned.

“Well, well, well, Dr. Dubois,” she said in a sing-songy voice.

She was met with a dead silence that communicated disdain in a way that immediately brought to mind the thin-lipped,

long-suffering, superior look she’d seen on his face so many times before.

He cleared his throat. “May I continue, then? There is a good deal of urgency here, the body is on ice at the moment but I can’t guarantee how long that might last, Egypt is, you understand, still a developing nation.”

“On ice,” she repeated.

“Quite literally,” he told her. “The van itself is parked inside the hotel freezer.”

“Whoa,” Kitty breathed before she could stop herself. “The entire van? INSIDE the freezer?”

Dubois cleared his throat again, and when he spoke next, his tone was familiar, urgent and lacking any condescension.

“We have made a discovery, it might be important,” he told her urgently. “In fact, I’m sure of it. But it’s inside the van, with the guard, and the security scans we did before bringing the van into the lab show that he is dead. I don’t know how, but the project hinges on these artifacts and we cannot get to them with a corpse in the vehicle.”

“Why was there a security scan?” she asked, not fully picturing such an arrangement for an excavation.

“We have very high protocols for this

dig, the funding requires it," he explained, still hushed and urgent. "All artifacts in Egypt are transported on public roads via caravan, it's standard operating procedure, the highways are unsafe and frequently at risk of theft. We expected that we would need armed guards and a string of vans to carry back anything we found.

"But this...it's quite unique, Dr. Campbell. It's...well, I will simply say that I am amazed. I couldn't take any risks of damage--or any questions about authenticity. It is essential that this find be documented and authenticated, without any dark marks making it even slightly possible that it has been faked. So we arranged for a private guard, we used video to load the van, he went inside with the artifact, we photographed it, and he showed us the lock before closing the doors and locking himself inside. It was locked again, a second time, from the outside. We caravaned to Cairo and arrived outside the lab, where we drove the entire van through a screener to further document that nothing had been moved or altered in any way along the route.

"And that's when "

His voice stopped.

"He was dead already?"

"Yes," Dubois told her, but he was angry now. "He's dead. We scanned with x-ray, and there was no movement. We did heat recognition, and there is no living body inside that van. We called and banged on the door, we opened the lock from the outside, the man is dead and the artifact is inside with him and the curator of the museum is very anxious that we solve this problem."

"So you're saying," Kitty asked him, a little thrill in her voice, "to fly to Cairo, pick a lock, and solve a murder?"

"By the day after tomorrow," he emphasized.

"Wait, why the day after tomorrow?" she asked incredulously.

"Because, Dr. Campbell," he said with real fear in his voice, "bodies decompose very quickly in Egypt, and Cairo only has so much ice. You see, the scans show that the guard is lying on top of the artifact."

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The ride from the airport to the center of Cairo was uneventful, except for Marjan's constant chattering. The girl had tagged along, citing the grant money and how "exceptional, truly" the images on social media would be alongside the work Kitty was doing in the lab.

“It is in real life, and then in the lab, and KAPOW!” she had exclaimed.

Kitty was secretly delighted for the company, despite the fact that she had worked alone most of the last five years. Or maybe for that very reason.

And so they'd boarded the first flight out of Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport into Cairo, by way of Rome. Kitty's passport had received a gloriously large golden visa sticker welcoming her to Egypt, the loveliest entrance gift she'd ever gotten for passing through customs, and they were met at the curb by a private Mercedes minivan and a driver bearing a placard that simply said, “Campbell.”

The front entrance of the Cairo Four Seasons faced toward the Giza Plateau, where the Great Pyramid could be seen in the distance when the haze abated. The largest of the four pyramids on the Giza Plateau, the Great Pyramid was also called the Pyramid of Cheops by the Greeks, but its proper name was the Pyramid of Khufu, named for the ancient king whose funereal cult had thought it was a good idea to hide all their worldly goods in underground tombs and then build a massive monument above that acted like a beacon to thieves. The tombs at Luxor where Tut was discovered

came later, when the royals realized the tactical error of this practice.

The Pyramid of Khufu is the last standing of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, and Kitty was awed by it. She imagined how it must have appeared when it was first built, not sand-colored to match the earth surrounding it, but faced with limestone and brilliantly white in the daylight. It must have glowed like a diamond for miles, a look that was no doubt emphasized by the tip of the pyramid, which would have been covered in solid gold, a rising sun over a pristine geometric shape shooting out of the desert like an arrow to the heavens. Much of Cairo shared this paradoxical mix of glorious beauty surrounded by humble earth, like the shining white pyramids that once stood in the midst of open desert. The marble facade of the Four Seasons, for example, was elegant and old world, but marred by the presence of large, concrete barriers erected along the curb, and the metal detectors just inside the main doors where security guards monitored every individual who came or went from the hotel.

Modern Egypt was complicated, and Kitty couldn't help thinking about Dubois' description of the security caravans that rou-

tinely brought artifacts out of the desert and back to Cairo. She knew that for years, anyone wanting to see the ancient temples of Abu Simbel, far to the south, would need to take part in a caravan of buses that ran once in the morning and returned in the evening, using the safety of their numbers to keep tourists from harm. Those caravans had been discontinued in recent years, with the threat of terrorism somewhat decreased, but Kitty could understand how the enormous value of artifacts might still place them at risk of theft along the highways.

The corridor from Alexandria, at the mouth of the Nile into the Mediterranean Sea, through Cairo, past Luxor and down to Abu Simbel at Egypt's border, was generally considered safe to travel by the US State Department. Outside of that, however, Egypt was a complicated land where westerners were warned they ought to watch themselves closely. Kitty didn't like the way the security detail at the hotel reminded her of that fact.

As night fell over the city, Kitty and Marjan left the hotel and headed toward Kahn el Khalili, the oldest bazaar in Cairo, continuously operating for over a thousand years. Kitty rolled down the window of the cab, and as the warm air hit her face, she could hear the sound

of the muezzin calling out from the mosque-- the nightly call to prayer was a song broadcast over a loudspeaker, and the voice floated over the people along the street in a haunting way.

"Oh, how lovely!" Marjan exclaimed next to her. Kitty had thought the girl was delighted back in the lab in Amsterdam; here in Cairo, she was fit to burst.

Their driver let them out at the square in front of the Al-Azhar Mosque, which stood on the eastern side of the bazaar. The courtyard was crowded with people out enjoying the night air, and rows and rows of chairs were set out in front of cafes where thick, sweet Turkish coffee was being served and three-foot-tall hookahs smoked by locals winding down their day.

Kitty headed straight for one of these, Marjan lagging behind in her efforts to both video and narrate the view. The mosque was light from the foundations and glowed in the night, and children flew small, lighted mini-drones over their heads, making a scene straight from a Disney movie.

"You've chosen apple again, I see," Kitty said to the man at the edge of the cafe seating area.

He rose instantly and enthusiastically

grabbed both her shoulders, pulling her close and kissing her first on her left cheek and then on her right. Kitty laughed and returned his embrace.

Marjan arrived and had a cheerful but confused look on her face.

The man reached over and repeated the gesture and the kissing with Marjan, who nearly dropped her mobile phone in surprise.

Kitty laughed. "Marjan Lindemans, this is Sayed Bazuka, my friend from university."

The man backed up and gave a theatrical bow. He smiled and held out his hand to shake Marjan's, saying with a brisk American accent, "Nice to meet you."

"You are American!" Marjan said, surprised again but shaking his hand all the same.

"I'm from Baltimore!" he told her, his eyes twinkling. "But my mother's family is from Cairo, going back eight generations at least. I figure as long as I speak Arabic, what better place to be? Beats Baltimore!"

"Kitty and I met at Penn State in graduate school. It's so good to see you, come sit down!"

He turned and offered chairs at his table, using one hand to call over a server and order coffees for them all before taking up his hookah and raising his eyebrows to offer it to

Kitty.

She laughed. "No, thanks. I don't know how you can stand that, the flavored tobacco smells terrible!"

He gave a half shrug, saying, "When in Rome "

The server brought their coffees and the three relaxed companionably.

Sayed asked, "Have you seen him yet?"

Kitty shook her head, "No we just landed a couple hours ago."

"Jet lagged," he said, nodding.

Marjan said, "No, Amsterdam is just one hour earlier than Cairo, actually. We are up with you!"

"Amsterdam?" he asked, looking at Kitty.

"He called when I was working at the Rijks," she said, using the familiar term for the Amsterdam museum.

Sayed nodded again, understanding. "I can't believe you said yes."

"Really?" she asked him grinning.

"Whatever makes you say that?"

He laughed. "I mean, you're saving his behind, I hope he thanks you later."

Kitty cocked her head to one side. "Saving?"

Sayed looked at her with his unique mix of Egyptian and American surprise--both surprised and placid about it: "You don't know? He loses his funding if he doesn't figure out what happened."

"Wait, he does?"

Sayed nodded, almost seeming to relish sharing this news. "His funding, his job, his concession."

"Concession?" Marjan asked.

Without looking at her, because she was staring hard at Sayed, Kitty answered, "Concessions are permits to excavate, and the good ones aren't easy to come by."

Sayed barked a humorless laugh. "That's putting it mildly. And naturally, Dubois' is the best. And that'll be gone, gone, gone if he doesn't get himself out of this mess in the next couple of days. You're saving his bacon, Campbell."

Kitty swallowed hard and waved for the server. The Turkish coffee was hitting her like a ton of bricks, and she had a feeling she'd need a lot more of it tonight.