

Murder of the Sphinx

Chapter Three: Desert Flower

Kitty stood facing the stainless steel doors of the hotel industrial freezer. After a night spent tossing and turning--in part from the Turkish coffee, in part from the excitement of what waited for her behind these doors--Kitty's palms itched at the thought of picking the lock, both literally and figuratively. As soon as was even remotely acceptable, she'd appeared at the front desk of the hotel, expecting to wait for the manager and Dubois to join her, only to find both of them pacing the marble floor of the Four Season lobby as the sun rose over the pyramids just a few kilometers outside the glass entrance to the hotel.

They'd moved en masse, accompanied by various assistant managers and department heads and support staff, to the lower level of the hotel. The enormous freezer was housed within the cavernous kitchen at back of the sprawling building, which occupied nearly an entire Cairo city block, and where the tiled ceilings reached a

height of almost twelve feet. The doors themselves were over eight feet high, and Kitty felt dwarfed by their size.

Because the kitchen routinely cooked massive catered meals that were served in the extensive gardens behind the main building, the side wall of the tiled room held emergency exit double doors to the outside, measuring ten feet high and at least a dozen feet wide--it was these doors that had allowed Dubois and the van escort to load the entire van into the hotel freezer, through the doors Kitty was now facing.

"As you can see, Dr. Campbell," Dubois was saying, "the entire vehicle has been moved here. It has stayed in place, locked and guarded, since we first read the CT scans."

"Yeah, so that's weird, right?" Kitty asked. Her tone was conversational, and she spoke over her shoulder, fully engrossed in examining the doors of the van and especially the padlock that sealed shut the hasp keeping the whole thing locked up tight. The two armed guards on either side of the van were making her feel a little nervous, or maybe it was just the thrill of the puzzle causing her to sweat.

"What's weird?" Dubois replied, his tone of asperity sounding strained and even more

terse than usual.

“The CT scans,” Kitty murmured, her attention fully engaged with the padlock.

“In what way?” came the waspish reply.

Kitty finally turned and looked at Dubois, her latex-gloved hands still holding the padlock, and one foot on the tailgate to support her weight, but her neck craned to glare back at her former department chair with irritation.

“Be serious, Geoffrey,” she said simply.

“Driving a, what, twenty-thousand pound van containing artifacts into a hotel freezer? Is a pretty long way from standard operating procedure. But so is driving it through a CT scanner, so something’s up here and I deserve to have all the facts.”

Dubois stared at her silently, working his jaw in visible anger.

“Or I could not help you,” Kitty told him blithely, moving as if to take off her gloves and turning away from the van slightly. “I appreciate the free airfare to Cairo, Dr Dubois, I have always wanted to visit.”

“Alright, alright, let’s don’t get nasty,” he told her, waving an irritated hand at her showboating. They both knew full well that Kitty Campbell would not walk away from a puzzle like this one.

Dubois looked around him at the Four Seasons staff members who shared the kitchen. The assistant managers, the guards, the support staff, and the hotel manager himself, a nervous man with a waxed moustache that made him appear to be straight out of a novel from the heyday of Cairo in the 1920s. He was agitated and wringing his hands, and as far as Kitty was concerned, might as well be auditioning for a silent film.

“Will you please excuse us?” Dubois said aloud, with an artificially imperious manner that Kitty interpreted as anxiety.

Her eyebrows went up as every staff member in the room gave a brief unironic bow, smiled, and walked out. Even the guards, although she noticed that they positioned themselves immediately outside the entrance to the kitchen and resumed their protective stance before the doors swung shut.

That would have NEVER happened at home.

Once they were alone, she turned her body fully toward Dubois and crossed her arms over her chest. She figured anything he needed to clear the room to tell her must be pretty juicy, and she didn’t want to miss a bit of it.

Dubois pursed his lips and clasped his hands in front of his waist. He took a deep

breath through his nose, pretentiously, and peered at Kitty over his glasses.

Then, with a sudden gust, he released the breath and began speaking, as if the words had been camped out behind his teeth and were racing to escape.

“This is an enormous find, Campbell, truly, the kind of thing we all hope we’ll discover but honestly, no one ever does except by sheer luck,” he gushed at her, his face bright pink and with a sheen of excited sweat.

Kitty leaned in to hear more.

“Anubis,” Dubois whispered to her, sotto voce, his eyes alight with the gleam of a zealot. “A gorgeous ushabti, but prone, finely carved and painted. Wood, early Eighteenth Dynasty, I’m sure of it.”

Kitty let loose a low whistle. “How sure?”

Dubois nodded, while simultaneously waving his hand in a dismissive gesture. “I know, I know, but we are very sure, very sure this is Eighteenth Dynasty, and Cambell, the condition!”

Kitty’s eyebrows rose, if possible, even higher--this time with a question behind them.

“Nearly flawless,” he breathed, sounding like a lover. He was, in a way, Kitty thought to

herself.

Ushabti was the generic name used to describe figurines placed inside burial chambers, usually in earlier periods of Egyptian history. They frequently took the form of humans who guarded the body of the dead and either protected or served in the afterlife. They were usually made of carved stone, like marble, or even ivory, and often produced by artisans making them one after another, all more or less identical, so they could be arrayed across the floor of a burial chamber like ranks of toy soldiers. Ushabti were probably the single most common item displayed in museums housing Egyptian artifacts, next to the ubiquitous scarab, and generally stood no more than a foot high.

The look on Dubois’ face, and his description of this figure as both wooden and as Anubis, made it sound unusual. So did the age.

“When the piece was excavated, of course, we immediately knew what a tremendous find it would be,” he told her, “but travel inside Egypt isn’t as safe as the government might want the public to believe.”

Kitty made a confused face. “What does that mean?”

Dubois shrugged, as if this was widely

known and therefore largely irrelevant to him. “Simply that there are still billions upon billions, and that is not an exaggeration on any level, of artifacts throughout Egypt that lay below the soil, and there are hundreds of wealthy collectors around the globe who will pay quite large sums to own them.”

“You’re saying there are still treasure hunters roaming the Egyptian sands?” Kitty said mockingly.

“That is exactly what I’m saying, Dr. Campbell,” Dubois told her in complete seriousness. “And transporting artifacts across the length of this country is no small feat. Until a year ago or so, even the most humble of tourists didn’t visit Abu Simbel except in a daily caravan, all the buses lined up along the highway like ducks to protect with the safety of numbers, for the entire four hour drive.”

“Wait, are you serious?”

“Deadly,” he told her, his face grim. “And artifacts are at even greater risk, because so few of them can be traced and so many of them are easily transported over borders. And quite frankly, there are more than enough..ahem... sketchy curators around the world to keep the treasure hunters in business for a long time.”

Kitty looked over the van behind her once

more, with fresh eyes. She was realizing this wasn’t a moving van, but an armored one, and she was beginning to understand why.

“All finds in Egypt, major or minor, are transported under armed guard, particularly if they come from the south, like from Abu Simbel along the Nubian border, or like this one, from Luxor near the Valley of the Kings.”

Kitty could tell this was getting emotional for Dubois; he always became more pedantic when his pride was under threat.

“But that still doesn’t explain why you would run the entire van, still locked, through a CT scan. I mean, I know the museum has examined mummies with technology for years, but it’s always been...you know, in a medical setting. Like, seriously, Geoffrey, they take them OUT first, they don’t leave them in the car and run them through like a car wash.”

Dubois stiffened defensively. “I assure you, Dr. Campbell, my caution was warranted.”

“By what, though?” Kitty asked in exasperation.

“There’s more,” Dubois breathed.

Kitty pulled back in surprise. What else could be unique about this find?

“There’s a cavity,” he whispered. She had to lean in close just to catch his words.

“Say what, now?” she asked.

“A cavity,” he rushed on, the words spilling out of him, his eagerness to share the secret of this find with a compatriot, a colleague, almost overwhelming her.

“But you said it’s an ushabti,” she told him, almost sounding like a teacher correcting a mistaken student. “Is it a canopic jar? Why would it have a cavity?”

Dubois didn’t even shake his head, he simply leaned in closer. “I don’t know.”

His face didn’t show confusion or concern. It showed delight.

Canopic jars were used in the funerary rites of Egypt to hold the internal organs of the deceased: lungs, somach, liver, and intestines. In practical terms, these organs contained a great deal of liquid and would cause the body to putrefy rather than mummify. In religious terms, the organs represented certain deities and their associated qualities to the ancients, and were worthy of preservation.

As containers, canopic jars resembled ushabti in some ways, carved from ivory or limestone or marble and standing approximately twelve inches high. But they had a cavity in the center to hold the contents, whereas ushabti were designed to be figurines.

Ushabti, Kitty knew, were most common

earlier in Egyptian history, although they’d been known to appear throughout time as part of funereal cults. A wooden one would be rare, and important: it begged the question whether they’d found so few over time because they didn’t survive as a result of the destructive effects of time and nature, or if they’d found so few because they simply weren’t made.

The idea that this was a sort of hybrid, part ushabti and part canopic jar? That it showed Anubis prone, lying on the ground as a dog might, but with a cavity inside to hold... something? That Anubis himself represented to the Egyptians the jackal who judged the dead? Any of those details would have made this an exceptional find. All of them together might reveal secrets that could change how Egyptology saw the world of the ancients.

A figure of Anubis would be a highly unusual canopic jar. As would a canopic jar that lay prone, like Anubis reclining in dog form, rather than standing. If Dubois was right, this was a singular find, perhaps unique in all the world, in all of history.

Dubois wasn’t over-reaching. This was a massive find.

Anubis was called Master of Secrets by the ancients. Dubois had uncovered a secret,

indeed. And it had led to a death.

What had Kitty gotten herself into?

Kitty found herself cascaded with emotions, all coming from different places. She was intrigued by what she was hearing about this figurine. As an archaeobotanist, she focused most of her archaeological work on botanical remains: seeds, primarily. There were only so many places in an excavation where seeds might be preserved, and inside a jar or container was location number one. Her professional heart skipped a beat at the idea that there might be something botanical inside this statue of Anubis Dubois was describing.

The lock-picker in her was wondering how to get AT it. And also, how whatever was hidden away might have led to murder--could it be something wildly valuable? To someone other than a scientist, anyway?

And the wounded academic in her was looking at Dubois through fresh eyes. She'd only really experienced him as an administrator, a strait-laced and rule-loving ivory tower guardian who had worked assiduously to remove Kitty from any position of importance or influence and ruin her career. She's not seen him as a researcher or a scientist, or even really an anthropologist, the field of study that

encompasses archaeology. She'd only seen him as a gatekeeper and policeman.

But the look on Dubois' face right now was one of wonder and delight, the same delight Kitty experienced every time she completed a float of soil samples and retrieved an ancient seed that had once been held in the hand of a long-dead citizen of some distant land. The sense that she was connected through time with people from far away, who had loved and lost and sung and cried just as she had, filled her with awe. That was the same awe she witnessed now in Dubois face, and it gave her a rising respect for the man that left her disoriented and more than a little bewildered.

"Between the identity of the effigy as Anubis, the fact that it's wood but Eighteenth Dynasty, and the cavity inside I was certain we'd be accused of a hoax," he told her.

His face was pained. Kitty was beginning to see.

"And you needed to document that it wasn't," she said slowly.

He nodded, biting one lip. "Hoaxes are common enough, of course, but they ruin careers. Any scientist who falls for one, makes headlines with his find, only to be disproved "

“And besides, you want it to be real?”

Her tone was kind, empathetic. She understood.

“Desperately,” he told her, the passion in his voice nearly overwhelming.

Kitty knew that feeling well. The CT made sense: if Dubois needed to prove that at no point anywhere along the way had anyone handled or touched this artifact since the instant it came out of the ground at Luxor, he would be justified in keeping it under literal lock and key with every technological device at his disposal defending his assertion that this find was, in fact, the real deal.

“We used the CT at the airport, it was installed after 9/11 for private planes,” he told her. “The plan was to drive the van through, capture images that we would later use to document the timeline, and then drive directly to the museum lab to unload, taking care to establish chain of evidence the entire route.”

“But the scan showed...” Kitty had never actually been told.

“When we arrived at the airport, we attempted to communicate with the guard inside the van,” Dubois said, his voice deflated. “He didn’t respond, either to radio or to our calls from outside. We drove through the CT any-

way, figured the radio had died, that the worst that would happen is we’d see blurs on the images.”

“But no blurs, I’m guessing,” she said.

He shook his head. “No movement, and when we did a heat scan, no variation.”

“How much could a heat scan show after hours driving through the desert?” she asked him, bewildered that they’d take this step.

Now it was Dubois’ turn to be exasperated.

“Variation, I said,” he snapped at her. “Even after the desert, a living human body would read hotter than the surrounding materials. And this didn’t.”

Kitty let out a low whistle. No communication, no movement, no body heat. And now a full day or more inside a freezer. If the man hadn’t died on the road, he’d died since, that was for sure.

“No one had the key?”

“Only the guard inside the van had the key to the interior lock,” he told her. “We considered forcing it, but he was clearly dead, and I was worried ...”

The penny dropped for Kitty. “You were worried they’d accuse you of making drama, or worse: making a switch. Placing a fake in the

van during the commotion.”

“Catherine, and I cannot stress this enough,” he said urgently, “the entire find is IN THERE, it is VERY real, it is trapped with a man who is no longer showing any signs of life, and I cannot get it out!”

How can a man be both flushed and pale at the same time, Kitty caught herself thinking. And yet, here Dubois was, sweaty and anxious but also somehow colorless and fearful. He really seemed beyond desperate to get inside the vehicle.

The van. Sheesh, Kitty had picked a few locks in her time, but this was a new challenge, for sure. On the exterior of the two seven-foot high van doors was a hasp that measured the length of her forearm, with a metal loop through it secured by a massive padlock. That, in itself, wouldn't be a huge issue--padlocks were, for the most part, time-consuming to pick but rarely very difficult.

No, Kitty was much more concerned about the lock on the INSIDE of the van doors.

At long last, after all this lead-up, she turned her attention to the van. Using her tools, and with a new seriousness, she set to work picking open the padlock.

All tumbler locks work in more or less

the same way: they have metal rods inside a housing, the tumblers, and they fall at varying heights into a prescribed position in order to open only when the right key is inserted. Kitty had taught herself to work with picks in order to lift each of the rods in sequence into the same positions the key would lift them, so that she could release the lock and open...whatever it was she wanted to open.

She'd broken into office buildings, file cabinets, federal facilities. She hardly ever got caught. More or less.

She'd gotten nailed by Dubois, of course, and he'd made her pay for it with what they both thought would be her entire career. She's struggled to find work after he rained down on her, but now here she was, right beside the man, doing the one thing he'd used against her. The same skills that had cost her the job she'd always wanted she was now using to uncover an ancient mystery.

Oh, the irony.

The hook of the padlock gave a small SNICK sound and popped open. Step one, complete.

With the help of the small man in the suit, she removed the padlock and threw back the hasp on the van doors. Both she and Du-

bois were wearing gloves and while they hadn't called back any of the hotel staff, she knew that the guards were just outside the doors; they'd peeked in now and again over the past few minutes during Kitty and Dubois' whispered conversation.

In fact, Kitty could see them peeking in now and wondered what they thought of all this. Did they have any idea what was happening in the kitchen of the Four Seasons right now?

As she thought this, she realized they were doing more than peeking. There was conversation and the voices were rising.

"I insist," a female voice was saying. "I am working here today, and I must enter the room with my employer."

It was Marjan. When Kitty had left the hotel room, the young Dutch woman had been out like a light. The excitement of the Khan el-Khalili bazaar the night before had wiped her right out, despite the negligible time difference between the Netherlands and Egypt.

But now, she was in the corridor just outside the kitchen and demanding entrance. Which gave Kitty an idea.

"Where's your camera?" she asked Dubois.

"What do you mean?"

Kitty grimaced at him. "Surely, DOCTOR

Dubois, you didn't expect to open this van without documentation? If the man inside is actually dead, we're in a boatload of trouble, and I think you know that. We need witnesses."

He blanched.

"And I have the perfect documentarian."

She walked briskly to the kitchen doors and had an urgent conversation with the guards. They shook their heads repeatedly, looking over her shoulder at Dubois as if for permission or confirmation. Finally, they relented, possibly at a gesture from Dubois behind Kitty's back, and released Marjan from the grip they'd had on her upper arms, which she massaged as she entered the room, her face angry for the first time since Kitty had met her.

"We need your help," Kitty told her without preamble. "Do you have your phone?"

Marjan glowered a moment more, glanced back at the guards with a look that was the equivalent of sticking out her tongue, and then turned back to Kitty.

The girl glanced once at Dubois, then stuck out her hand to shake his.

"I am Marjan," she said.

He shook her hand, still appearing confused, and looked at Kitty.

“Marjan is a social media expert and a talented camerawoman,” Kitty said, and Marjan lit up. She was still flushed from her encounter with the guards, but the compliment seemed to help her return to her usual self.

“And you need the video?” she asked. She was already holding her phone and thumbing through her apps.

“We need official documentation,” Kitty told her seriously.

Marjan looked up, then glanced from Dubois to Kitty and back again. Her lips compressed in a serious look, but her eyes were twinkling with delight.

“I can be very good with this,” she told them.

Dubois crossed to a black leather case on one of the prep tables arrayed throughout the kitchen space. He brought back a large professional digital camera with a zoom lens.

“Can you operate this?”

Marjan gave him a disparaging look and took the camera with disdain.

She expertly began operating the buttons and adjusting settings, periodically glancing at Dubois with a contemptuous expression which was somehow still cheerful. Kitty marveled at her.

“Marjan, we need video and stills, is that OK?” Kitty asked. The girl nodded.

Kitty reached into her pockets and pulled out a length of very thin wire.

“And do me a favor?” she said. “Make sure you get this part. Because I’m not totally sure it’s going to work.”

Dubois wiped sweat from his upper lip.

Threading the wire between the two van doors, Kitty began working it back and forth. She knew from the scans Dubois had shown her when they arrived that the interior lock was constructed differently from the exterior: instead of holding the doors closed with a padlock, the interior was a bar lock, the kind that drops into place and is locked from below. Kitty needed to both open the small locking mechanism holding it down and raise the bar to open the door.

She worked in tiny increments to move the wire into place, all by feel, until she was assured that she’d wrapped the wire around the bar from the exterior. Handing one end of the wire to Dubois, she’d pulled on the other, forcing the doors to open just a crack despite the bar still clamping them closed.

Through the crack she threaded a long, very thin piece of metal from her kit. She was

searching for the lock.

She handed the other end of the wire to Marjan and instructed both the girl and Dubois to pull hard on the ends, holding them in place. Kitty used the metal bar she was holding as leverage to keep the doors cracked, and to stabilize the locking mechanism dangling from the bar.

With one hand pressing on the metal bar and the other holding her lock picking tools, Kitty was out of hands and soon learned she could operate her lock picks with one hand and her mouth. Good note for later, she thought. After an excruciating several minutes of sweaty work, she felt the final tumbler give way. She kept pressure on her metal tool, and told Dubois and Marjan to raise the wire, working with her free hand to add pressure to the wire and finally POP the bar off its cradle inside the van.

It was open.

Inside lay what might be the find of the century, along with the guard who had traveled alongside it from the Valley of the Kings. The man lay slumped over a wooden crate, which had clearly been opened: packing material lay scattered across the floor, as if it had been placed there in a pile but then pushed here and there by accident. From the move-

ment of the van, perhaps?

But, no. As Kitty looked more closely at the body, she could see sure signs that this man had suffered intense physical distress prior to his death. Her training as an archaeobotanist led her to work with human remains quite frequently and given her precise understanding of the human skeleton--the growth and development of which was intensely directed by diet, which was largely plant-based in prehistory. Bioarchaeology, the study of prehistory human remains, was closely tied to archaeobotany, and Kitty had seen more than her share of human skeletons.

The guard's head was arched back toward his spine, exposing his throat and pushing his sternum forward toward the crate, as if he had suddenly and violently leaned as far from the statue of Anubis as physics would allow--and it was still not far enough. Both his hands were clenched into fists, one wrist bent in a twisted angle toward the forearm. He had collapsed on himself in a way that made it clear to Kitty he had been kneeling in front of the statue when the paroxysms began, and which had left his legs askew beneath him in a manner that would have been excruciating, if the man were still living.

In one of the clenched fists, he held a long, thin tool. There were bits of wood and sawdust on it, and as Kitty registered what she was seeing, she heard Dubois make a retching sound behind her, as if so horrified at the idea that this man had defiled their valuable archaeological find, it made him nauseated.

Or maybe this was his first time encountering a dead body face-to-face.

Kitty crept closer, verifying that her gloves were still in place and taking care to step only where the floor of the van was free.

Around the man's mouth and nose she'd noticed what looked like frost. That would make sense, as he'd been moved from the hot and humid Egyptian air into this freezer almost immediately after being transported across the length of the country inside a metal box.

But as she leaned in, she could see that this was not frost. This was some kind of powder, and it formed a ring around his nostrils and lips.

She noticed the same powder along the edges of the cavity inside the Anubis effigy. The lid was pushed back, and Kitty could just see the underside of the wood lining it.

On the interior of the lid was sketched the faint outline of a lotus, the flower of Egypt.