

# Murder of the Sphinx

Chapter Four: Endless Sky

Kitty stood frozen, deciding what to do next. Her heart was pounding, with both horror and excitement. Every nerve tingled and she realized that her lizard brain was deciding whether to flee or fight. Kitty Campbell, however, had always been heavily weighted toward fight.

“Dubois,” she said, noticing how calm and authoritative her voice sounded, even in her own ears.

He looked up at her, alert and with a grateful expression in his face that revealed his own terror even more clearly than words would have done.

“We’re going to need a doctor,” she told him, keeping an even gaze into Dubois’ eyes. She could tell the man’s own fight-or-flight instinct had been triggered, and her guess was he was far more inclined to flee than she was.

“Doctor?” he repeated, confused. “Campbell, he’s dead!”

Dubois’ voice cracked at the last word,

and he was frantic in his anxiety.

“He’s dead,” she said, soothingly, “but he didn’t die of natural causes.”

Dubois stared at her.

“His face, do you see this powder?” She indicated the man’s lips, which were blue and rigid in the icy interior of the van. Kitty was crouched near the body, her feet touching only the steel floor of the armored vehicle. Dubois was standing as close to the double doors that swung outward and away from the body as he could be, the heels of his shoes hanging over the tailgate as if he wanted the smallest possible portion of his person inside the van.

At the same time, his upper body leaned toward Kitty--or rather, toward the wooden effigy of Anubis that the dead man had ostensibly been guarding. It was inside a wooden crate, not the kind Kitty would expect to see in a hokey old movie, but rather a sophisticated and well-made crate, assembled of what appeared to be thin wood slats but reinforced on the interior with a metal frame, which was also lined with wood slats, almost a sandwich where the metal frame was the filling. This was a wooden crate such as had been used by Egyptologists for generations to transport their finds, but it was a modern, crush-proof

version.

As Dubois worked actively to avoid looking directly at the body, Kitty followed his eyes inside the crate, where Anubis sat regally: squatting on his haunches like a jackal, with front paw outstretched and head held high. The paint covering the wood was still intact, and the upper portion of the body was pushed to one side, revealing the wood interior--and the lotus carving Kitty had noticed earlier. Everything about this artifact seemed legit, and the rarity of the find would be enough to explain why a man had been killed. To discover a wooden artifact over 3000 years old and in such flawless condition that the strokes of the paintbrush could still be discerned on the surface?

This was surely a piece of priceless art and history worth killing for.

Was that what Dubois was seeing when he looked at it? Kitty wondered. Or did he see his own advancement and career?

“Here,” she indicated the corpse’s nostrils, forcibly calling Dubois to pay closer attention to the immediate and urgent need in front of them. “And here.”

With an effort that caused sweat to break over the small man’s face, even in the freezing cold of the van interior, Dubois looked where

Kitty was pointing.

Kitty could hear the clicking shutters of Marjan’s multiple cameras in the background, and knew that the Dutch girl was also making note of where Kitty was focusing her attention.

“I thought this was frost, at first,” she told him. “That would make sense, if he was over heated and then the van was brought into the freezer. The rapid cooling of the air could easily create condensation, which would turn to frost when he exhaled.”

“But, that would mean he was alive when we brought the van into the freezer!” Dubois looked appalled. Marjan stopped her work to stare, first at Dubois, then at Kitty, and then at the body of the man by her feet. Kitty saw her, even from a crouching position, back away from the dead man just slightly before visibly shaking herself and getting back to work.

In the same tone of voice Kitty had heard at a mortuary but also at the Apple Store genius bar when a twenty-something kid had to break the news that a piece of tech couldn’t be repaired, she told Dubois, “It’s important that we confirm when he died, and it’s possible that happened after you drove the van into the freezer.”

She watched Dubois' face go from white to green, then flush and grow pink with sweat before urgently telling him, "If you're gonna puke, do it outside the van!"

She perhaps emphasized this a little more harshly than absolutely necessary, but the scientist in Kitty was constantly on alert to preserve the context of any find, and ensure that there was no data that could refute her conclusions.

Context was everything in archaeology. Where an object was discovered and what other objects were near it answered a lot of questions and proved a lot of hypotheses--any small thing that confused the facts could be a distraction at least, or could ruin an entire body of research at worst. Kitty, like most scientists, worked diligently to maintain the integrity of her excavations and lab work specifically so none of her findings could be questioned, in the same way that a forensic policeman would maintain a crime scene to avoid contaminating evidence. Vomit was an unacceptable contaminant.

Dubois stood very rigid for a moment, and Kitty was sure he was about to bolt. Then he took a long, slow breath through his nostrils, looked hard at the statue of Anubis as if

drawing strength from it, and turned his eyes back to Kitty.

With a firm, sharp nod, he encouraged her to continue.

She gazed at him for one further heartbeat to be certain, then went on.

"Look at the way his body is lying here," she told him, and gestured for Marjan to take photos and video of the places she pointed.

"He looks as if he has pain," Marjan murmured, swapping her cellphone for the expensive camera Dubois had provided and disappearing behind the eyepiece.

"I've seen bodies like this in excavations before," Kitty told them grimly. "The arched back? And see how the head is pulled back toward the spine, leaving his neck exposed?"

Dubois nodded and looked sick again.

"Are you gonna make it?" she asked him pointedly.

"Yes, Campbell, I'm going to make it," he told her waspishly, a little verve returning to his tone. The flush of irritation took the green out of his skin--just as Kitty had hoped.

"These signs of rictus, of the body pulled into unfamiliar positions, turn up all over the archaeological record," she continued, directing her comments primarily at Marjan.

The girl stared back at Kitty, transfixed, but her thumb never left the shutter on her camera phone.

“We have evidence of children of the Incas, freezing to death in the Andes, and of sacrifices in peat bogs in Denmark, all with human remains that show clear signs not only of rictus but of poisoning.”

“Poisoning?” Dubois said, incredulous. “You think this man was poisoned?”

Kitty nodded. “You know that archaeobotany and bioarchaeology go hand in hand, I’ve spent more than my share of time working with human remains. His spine, his neck, see the clenched fists? And look at the way his teeth are clenched and his lips pulled back.”

Dubois blanched again.

“Bioarchaeology?” Marjan asked.

Kitty turned her comments back to the girl, who had far less background information than Dubois.

“You know how there are pathologists whose job is to determine cause of death when someone gets killed?”

Marjan nodded. “As on television. Crime shows.”

“Exactly,” Kitty nodded. “In archaeology, we do the same thing, but we called specialists

who handle prehistoric human remains bioarchaeologists. Because bioarchaeologists don’t just study crime, they study why prehistoric or ancient people died for lots of reasons, like poor diet or warfare, that means someone like me, who studies food and crops and seeds often works together with bioarchaeologists to determine diet or malnutrition from a combination of botanical data and skeletal evidence.

“I’ve spent more than my share of time at graves,” Kitty said grimly, “and I wish I’d never seen a human body after it’s been poisoned. But I have. And he has.”

She nodded her head toward the man on the floor.

Dubois swallowed hard.

“And we need a doctor?” he said weakly.

Kitty nodded again. “We need to analyze the powder around his nostrils and mouth, and find out what it is. It’s obviously not frost, so we should be able to take and preserve a sample and send it to a lab? Do you know anyone like that?”

He nodded, slowly. “Yes, I think so. Here in Cairo, the hospital. I have a contact.”

“Good, we’re going to need it.”

Kitty looked around again. Her brain was working rapidly now that she felt like Du-

bois was under control. She knew that the man was locked inside the van, and that he had been poisoned.

“I don’t know what the poison was, or how it entered his body,” Kitty told Dubois, “but let’s assume for now that it was inhaled or worked through his skin.”

“Why do we assume that?” Marjan asked her, focusing the lens of the larger camera and aiming it at the man’s nose again.

“Based simply on the fact that death seems to have occurred very soon after exposure,” Kitty told her.

Marjan looked amazed. She pulled out her cell-phone and aimed the video at Kitty, “How can you be sure?”

The Dutch girl was in full social media mode, but Kitty hardly noticed. She was picking new lock.

“Because otherwise, he would have wiped it off his face, right?” she said quietly.

Marjan smiled in pleased surprise at this logical deduction, but Dubois was becoming more agitated by the moment.

“Why, though, Campbell?” he asked her, almost in a whine. “Why kill him?”

She looked back at Dubois, processing his question.

“For the artifact?” She had thought that would

be obvious.

“But it’s still here!” he exclaimed.

Now it was Kitty’s turn to look back at the body in agitation. If the artifact was still here, then WAS this man killed in order to get to it? And if so, was the artifact safe?

Were they?

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An hour later, Kitty and Dubois were walking across the Plain at Giza. It was the one place where the open sand would guarantee they weren’t overheard, by anyone.

The van was locked again, this time from the outside only but with a double-padlock that required both a key and a digital code to open it. Marjan had been asked to remain in the hotel with an eye on a motion-activated camera aimed at the van doors, and report back if there were any activity at all--including anything from the two security guards who remained on duty.

The van would remain in the freezer until Kitty had an answer or until the Egyptian Minister of Antiquities arrived to strip Dubois of his concession and grant funding.

“How long?” she asked him as they walked along the gravelly road.

“The Minister is expected in approxi-

mately thirty-six hours,” he told her.

“And this was a scheduled visit?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yes, he knows of the find, but not the specifics, only that we were very excited and needed time to get the piece from Luxor to Cairo. I didn’t want him to see it until I could verify the authenticity, obviously.”

“Obviously,” she repeated. If it were a fake, there would be no worse circumstance for Dubois than to have it revealed in front of the supreme authority on Egyptian artifacts, and so delaying sharing the find with the Minister of Antiquities seemed a logical step.

Kitty looked around her. The three main pyramids at Giza loomed on the horizon, seeming both massive and distant. Which they were.

The earth and the sky were divided along the horizon in a way that felt like magic, the dusty haze of the desert creating a fuzzy boundary between the air and the land that felt amorphous, ephemeral, insubstantial. The weight and grandeur of the pyramids was in direct contrast to that, with their enormity filling the atmosphere along the plain and dominating everything else, even Kitty’s thoughts.

“There was a lotus,” she said, then

stopped. She wanted to hear what Dubois would tell her.

He shrugged, helplessly. “I don’t know, Campbell. I truly don’t.”

“Was it there when the piece was excavated?”

He shook his head. “If it was, I never saw it. We were meticulous in our work, as always.”

Kitty looked at him out of the side of her eye. She believed him, but it was almost nice to hear the sound of pedantic self-confidence returning to his voice after the last few hours of stress.

On the interior of the lid that formed the upper portion of the Anubis statue was the outline of a lotus blossom, the symbol of Egypt. It was scratched there into the wood, and because the preservation was so supreme, Kitty couldn’t be sure without further examination if it was ancient or fresh, if the man in the van had discovered it--or put it there.

“What was the context of the find?” she asked.

“You want to know what else was near the Anubis statue when it was uncovered, if perhaps there were other lotus carvings,” Du-

bois said, discerning where she was directing the conversation.

Kitty nodded.

“Yes, of course, but not like that one,” he told her, hesitantly.

“What do you mean?”

“There are always lotus blossoms depicted, they’re one of the most common themes in tomb decor, they’re a hieroglyph, for crying out loud,” he said.

“This one was different?” she asked.

Dubois shook his head. “Yes, but...in a way I don’t really understand. It was shaped strangely, but not...poorly.”

He frowned and drew his brows together, a look of concentration and problem-solving on his face, the same look Kitty knew she gave when picking a lock.

“You didn’t recognize it?”

“I...felt I did, but I can’t place it,” he told her. “But.... ”

Kitty raised her own eyebrows. And waited.

Dubois glanced at her, then took a breath as though steeling himself.

“I’m sure you saw it, too,” he said at last.

Kitty waited some more.

“Honestly, Campbell,” he told her, exas-

perated. “His arm, I know you saw it.”

She looked at him steadily, weighing information. Finally, she nodded.

“I thought it best not to mention it to Marjan, but I know she got photos,” Kitty told him.

“It’s unusual,” he told her.

“And forbidden by Muslim law,” she replied.

They looked at one another.

There was a silence that seemed to stretch to the base of the pyramids, across the desert landscape and under a sky that went on for miles and miles and miles.

“Have you seen one before?” she asked him.

“A lotus tattoo? Yes. I think I’ve seen THAT lotus tattoo before, I just...I can’t place it, I wish I could.”

“Inside the arm, at the elbow,” she murmured quietly, thinking aloud. “A lotus tattoo, but not stylized, more hand drawn. An amateur tattoo?”

Shaking his head and shrugging again, Dubois said, “Or a secret symbol of some kind?”

Kitty laughed slightly. “Are we making too much of this?”

Dubois said in seriousness, "A man is dead, Campbell. I wouldn't have asked for your help if I thought I was making too much of this."

"When you say you've seen it before, do you mean at the site? Where the statue of Anubis was found?"

"Yes....yes, perhaps," he told her, uncertain. "I'd have to look at the excavation photos to be sure."

Kitty shook her head firmly. "No."

Dubois looked up in surprise.

Standing staring across the sands toward the pyramids, Kitty felt she could see as far as the source of the Nile, which flowed from Nubia at the south northward to Alexandria, past the Valley of the Kings, and through Cairo where she now stood.

With firm conviction, she told him, "I need to go to Luxor."