

# Murder of the Sphinx

Chapter Five: Shoot the Gap

Kitty was exhilarated. She's spent the entire morning with Dubois in the walk-in freezer at the Four Seasons, and now it was well past lunchtime, but she hardly felt hungry. There was too much adrenaline in her veins.

Shed left Dubois to deal with the Four Seasons manager, who was understandably nervous about how much longer an armored vehicle would be parked next to his frozen chickens. She didn't have any interest in bureaucracy, and was grateful that she wouldn't get sucked into negotiating more time at sub-zero temperatures. Instead, she'd taken advantage of the private van Dubois offered and headed to the Cairo Museum.

Venerable and historic, the Cairo Museum was going to close soon, after more than one hundred years at the forefront of returning Egypt's treasures, scattered across the globe, back to their homeland. The work Kitty had been doing in Amsterdam was part of this en-

deavor, repatriating artifacts that had either been discovered or looted, depending on whom you asked, and that the Egyptian government felt very strongly about bringing home. The new Grand Egyptian Museum would replace the classic Egyptian Museum of Antiquities any day now...or in ten years--again, depending on whom you asked.

Cairo moved both much faster and much more slowly than any place Kitty had ever been.

The traffic on the streets was insanity, and she'd lived in plenty of large cities, so it meant something for Kitty to feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of cars on the road. As she'd traveled from the Four Seasons to the current Egyptian Museum, her van driver had turned into a narrow alley lined with shops. Kitty had thought they were parking, shocked that this could even be a street when the lane was so narrow. She could have easily reached through her window and brushed her hand against the brightly-colored fabrics hanging from the shop entrances that filled both sides of the road along the lower level. There were pedestrians everywhere, coming and going from merchants, guiding small children along the cobblestones, carrying plastic bags

stuffed with fruits and bread.

The driver honked at a gaggle of people walking toward them along the street. Kitty looked through the front windshield from where she sat in the back, she sucked her breath in from horror so hard that she choked, and had to cough repeatedly to get the air back in her lungs. The bodies were so close to the van that Kitty could see the threads in a woman's head scarf, and the two of the locked eyes for an instant before the woman on the street opened her mouth in a shout and crumpled to the ground. She was just on the other side of the glass, and Kitty reached toward her out of instinct, smacking her knuckles on the window.

She pressed herself against the barrier, trying to see what had happened. The woman on the outside of the van was clutching her foot, keening in pain, while four or five men around her reached to help her. It was clear that the tire of the van had rolled over the woman's foot, the street was so narrow. She'd stepped in front of her, caught Kitty's eye, and the van had driven over her toes, leaving her in agony.

"That woman! We should stop!" Kitty said to the driver.

He shook his head, firmly but seemingly unconcerned, and continued driving.

"Wait, she's hurt, we ran over her foot!"

Kitty exclaimed. "We should stop and help!"

"She's fine," the driver told her, not cruelly, but unperturbed. "She is not hurt."

He drove on, and Kitty sat back in her seat, shocked.

Soon, they broke out of the narrow, crowded alley and onto the main highway along the banks of the Nile, a modern thoroughfare that was in such alarming contrast to the dim small side street they'd just exited that Kitty could almost forget it, as if it had been a hallucination.

Something about Cairo made her feel that she was living in two worlds at once.

Kitty was greeted by the curator of the Egyptian Museum when she arrived, a friend of her employer back in Amsterdam.

"We are delighted to meet you, Dr. Campbell," she had told Kitty, "we are very interested in the work you are doing with the Rijksmuseum."

Surprised but pleased, Kitty shook the woman's hand. "I appreciate you making the time to see me on short notice," she said.

The curator nodded. "I understand you are leaving soon?"

Kitty told her, "I'm headed to Luxor this

afternoon.”

“Then let us proceed,” the curator replied and moved away in a brisk fashion. The woman had a classic Cairo accent, Egyptian with a hint of British, and was dressed in business attire. Kitty felt she was in good hands.

They arrived in short order in a small room with very high ceilings, after passing through what seemed like countless security checks, which the curator navigated almost off-handedly with the badge she wore on a lanyard around her neck.

“You wanted to see the scrolls, I believe?” she asked Kitty.

Kitty nodded again, noticing that they’d arrived in what must have been an exhibit room when the building was originally constructed in the 19th century, but was now clearly storage. The single table in the corner that was clear of papers and debris made her think that researchers were sent to this cubby when the museum had nowhere else for them to go.

Built into the walls were truly lovely cabinets, stained wood with glass fronts. Behind the glass were carefully organized archival storage boxes, each one presumably acid-free, and carefully labeled on the front with

a small card. The cards all displayed typewritten information, and Kitty was charmed. This museum wasn’t modern, like the Grand Egyptian Museum would be, if it ever opened. This museum was a treasure.

The curator brought out a set of keys from her pocket and led Kitty to a shelf in the corner, unlocking the swinging glass-front door and reaching in to retrieve one of the boxes. The label didn’t mean much to Kitty; it included letters and numbers that she was sure, based on her own experience tagging and accessioning artifacts, would relate back to where and when and by whom the items were collected.

“These are the papyrus scrolls Dr. Du-bois mentioned,” the curator told her, slipping on a pair of light, white cotton gloves before taking off the lid. “They date back to the 19th dynasty, and I hope will be of use to you.”

Her voice was hushed, as if she were in a library. Which, Kitty realized, was exactly what this room reminded her of.

Kitty expected her to leave then, but the curator simply stepped back, gloves still on her hands, and stood calm and expectant.

Okay, then, Kitty thought. An audience. Reaching into the box after donning

her own pair of protective gloves, Kitty brought out the scroll. Papyrus, the earliest form of paper known--and the source of the word "paper," drawn from the name of the papyrus reed, *Cyperus papyrus*--was exceedingly durable, akin to the linen-blend of paper used for modern currency. It weathered arid air and long years well enough that the colors of ancient ink easily stood out for present-day scholars to discover the source of the pigment.

This particular papyrus was thought to have been made around the time of the Anubis figurine that Dubois was so carefully guarding back at the hotel. Kitty imagined him, right this second, arguing with the hotel manager about how much longer a corpse ought to stay inside a major appliance in the basement and caught herself smiling.

"They are quite beautiful," the curator spoke up from where she stood supervising, and her voice held a quiet admiration for the work of art in Kitty's hands.

She placed it on the padded table and began to unroll it, realizing that art was precisely the correct word. The rows of characters across the page were painted delicately, with such fine brush strokes and attention to detail that Kitty was astonished. Flecks of gold paint highlighted

particular figures, and the individual flowers and the cartouches that indicated names of royalty were each flawlessly rendered.

But Kitty was looking for only one flower in particular: the lotus.

She found it, next to the symbol for the papyrus itself, unsurprisingly. Egypt had historically been divided into Upper and Lower Egypt. Upper Egypt, at the southern part of the modern nation, was represented by the lotus blossom; it was "upper" because the Nile ran south-to-north, and so Upper Egypt sat at the headwaters of the life-giving river. Lower Egypt, which bordered the Mediterranean Sea, was represented by the ancients as the papyrus, the rush that grows along the banks of the river. The two together represented the united lands, an Egypt brought together under the rule of the pharaohs.

Kitty knew all this. What she didn't know was why the man who was jimmying open the lid of the Anubis statue had a tattoo of a hand-drawn lotus on the interior of his arm. Dubois struggled to put his finger on where he'd seen the symbol before, and thought it might be at the excavation site, but Kitty was an irrepressible researcher. She had three hours left before her overnight train de-

parted for Luxor, and she was going to use it to review the source material.

Light streamed through the tall windows that lined one wall of the room. Kitty could see dust motes floating through the air as she moved her hand just over the surface of the ancient document.

There it was: the same design she'd seen on the man's arm. Not the same style, though, which is what drew Kitty's eye. Here, on this ancient document, Kitty saw the more hand-drawn quality of the drawing, how the shape of the line seemed to move on its own, how it stood apart from the remainder of the art.

The lotus was unique on the papyrus, but that wasn't the only thing: it appeared to be crushing the papyrus.

As Kitty was gazing at the work and trying to pick apart what she was seeing, a shadow fell across the table. Irritated, she instinctively moved the padded rest on which the papyrus was unscrolled, wanting to get as much light on the drawings as she could. The writing itself wasn't of much interest to her, but she was intensely curious about the ink: made of plants and minerals, most of the pigments used by the ancients were fairly consistent, since having discovered what worked, they saw little need to reinvent the wheel, so to speak. If Kitty was able

to determine, even from the way the light interacted with the ink itself, that this particular drawing was different from the others on the page, it might indicate a fake.

The shadow moved again, and irritated, Kitty looked up. Her annoyance fled as she realized that the shadow was cast by a human form, and that it was frozen at the sight of her upturned face.

Seeing the look of surprise Kitty was making, the curator looked behind her and at the window, and the figure vanished.

"Oh, my!" she exclaimed.

"Is that something that happens often?" Kitty asked her.

The curator shook her head. "No, that area is blocked off from the public, we keep the perimeter of the museum very well policed. Please excuse me."

Brisk as before, she walked past Kitty and leaned out the door, calling something in Arabic to a guard Kitty could see through the crack. The two had a hurried conversation and the curator returned.

"Dr. Campbell, I'm afraid I must attend to this, and cut your visit short," she said, her face grave and her expression distracted. "Did you perhaps find what you were looking for?"

“May I take some photos?” Kitty asked her, already reaching for her phone.

The curator glanced once at the window, then back at the papyrus before saying, “Yes, quickly. No flash.”

Kitty snapped some images before the curator could change her mind, then rolled the papyrus carefully back up for the other woman to store back on the shelf, locking it as she ushered Kitty out of the room.

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An hour later, Kitty was in front of the Great Pyramid at Giza.

There was no chance she was leaving Cairo without seeing this, the last of the Ancient Wonders, the one she’d dreamed of since grade school. And with her shortened visit to the museum, she discovered she had an extra two hours on her hands. She could have gone back to the Four Seasons, but that meant two extra hours with a very tense Dubois, and that didn’t sound like much fun at all.

Instead, a quick phone call and Marjan had joined her via taxi cab on the Giza Plateau, where sat the Great Pyramid of Khufu, the infamous Sphinx of Egypt, and about four dozen camel drivers all anxious to entice Kitty to ride their charges in a long, slow circle around the

necropolis.

There was a ticket booth near the parking lot, which was mostly empty of cars. The majority of tourists came early in the day to see the pyramids, which were excruciatingly hot by mid-afternoon. Which was right when Kitty and Marjan arrived.

Purchasing their tickets and proceeding toward the entrance, Kitty was charmed by how old world it seemed here. She may as well have been in a novel, with the sand streets and the hawkers selling their wares. Except that most of those wares were stamped “Made in China” on the bottom these days.

“I have heard that the fakers, the ones who sell to tourists, they would carve the false scarab beetles of stone and feed them to turkeys so they would be convincing,” Marjan was telling her. Kitty had heard the same, and marveled at the constancy of the human instinct to make a buck.

The climb to the tomb entrance on the Great Pyramid wasn’t exactly designed for safety: up a short ramp, then over and around the rubble of fallen blocks of granite, each weighing around a ton. They sat where they’d been for centuries, this refuse of a

fallen regime, this tomb of kings who were no more.

They ducked inside the tomb entrance, and the sudden shift from blistering heat to icy shade was intense. There was a man there wearing a galabeeyah, the traditional dress of men in Egypt, much like a long, homespun robe that fell to the ankles. His head was covered by a soft cap, and he held out his hand for bakshesh, the pocket change that was offered for services throughout Egypt. Tip money, Kitty thought. Also traditional.

The entrance led them to a corridor, which ramped steadily up and up and up. Along the walls were hung electric lights, the cable that brought power stapled into the ancient stones. The floor was rough but wooden slats had been nailed along it creating a walkway of sorts, with just enough of a ridge to create traction should a tourist slip.

There was literal light at the end of the tunnel, Kitty could see, where larger illumination had been set up in the main burial chamber. It was so bright that the rest of the tunnel was darkened by comparison, and Kitty found that when she looked ahead too long, she struggled to adjust her eyes in time when she looked away.

Marjan led the way. They climbed up the tunnel, ascending slowly. It was shady here and cooler, but not cool, Kitty noted. Despite her linen shirt and pants, she was sweating profusely. When she reached for the handrail along the wall, her palm slipped.

There was a set of stairs ahead, with a metal railing sauntered to the side. Under the stairs, Kitty could see why they'd been installed: the ceiling had long ago caved in, and rather than force tourists to scramble over it, a staircase had been built. Marjan climbed first, but it was so narrow and rickety that Kitty waited until the younger girl was up and well ahead before attempting it herself.

She could hear Marjan narrating video on her phone, and Kitty smiled to herself.

The smile vanished when she sensed someone behind her. She'd felt a presence with her in the tunnel, but in the darkness, she assumed it was another tourist coming up behind. Instead, this was a hand in the small of her back, pushing her aggressively into the railing, where her cheek hit the metal and the sweat of her own exertion caused her face to slip across and smack the top-most step.

In her hear, she heard a harsh voice, "Leave it alone."

Another shove in her back, and the presence was gone.

Kitty lay there for a moment, stunned and uncertain, but mostly just very, very angry.

Her heart was thundering, and she wrestled herself to a standing position again, then raced headlong after the figure who was disappearing ahead of her back toward the tomb entrance. With the bright light of the outside coming through the entrance opening like a cannonball, she could only see a shadow, and the outline of a galabeeyah and cap, nothing else.

A man, then.

She picked up speed, and chased him down. She wasn't thinking thoughts, exactly. She was feeling thoughts, more like. She had dreamed of this moment since she was six years old, and the idea that someone would imprint a violent memory over what was supposed to be a pinnacle emotional experience really ticked her off.

She was within two yards of the figure, who had picked up speed without ever glancing over his shoulder. Just as she was about to launch herself at him, the tomb attendant stepped out in front of her, his hand

outstretched again for more bakshesh. Kitty batted him away, falling over his foot as she struggled to get to the man who had attacked her.

He was gone.

Kitty panted, out of breath, soaked with sweat, angry and confused. This had something to do with the shadow at the museum, and with the lotus. She stood at the entrance to the pyramid, high above the Giza Plateau, and looked over the monuments beneath her. Between their sandy hues she could see modern Cairo, and the gap seemed wider now that she also felt both the magic and the menace of this place.

Kitty had a train to catch. It was time she went to Luxor.