

NILE DECEPTION

Lilia Copeland ©

The sun shimmered on the deck of the Celestial Horizon, a luxury cruise ship gliding down the river Nile. Lilia stood at the railing, her dark curls pulled into a ponytail, watching the Egyptian landscape pass by. It was their third day on the cruise, her parents busy with lectures and sight seeing, her little sister constantly glued to her tablet. Lilia preferred people watching; and one man in particular had caught her attention on this trip, he wore sunglasses, even indoors and always carried a battered leather case. Lilia had seen him at the Temple of Edfu, standing far from the group, speaking into a little device. He never had meals in the main dining area, instead slipping away with a tray of food, always alone.

“Lilia? Ready for Kom Ombo?” her mum called, holding up her camera. Lilia nodded, but her eyes flicked towards the man again. He was gone.

That evening the family returned from the temple excursion just before sunset. While her parents attended a history seminar after dinner and her sister had gone to bed, Lilia wandered to the library. She passed a storage door slightly ajar and froze: voices!

“... can’t risk keeping it in my room.”

“Then where?”

“Same place as the others: behind the false panel. Nobody uses the library these days.”

Lilia’s heart thudded. She leaned closer, careful not to make a sound. When she peeked inside the mysterious man was packing something wrapped in linen into a box. He looked up. Lilia ducked back; her heart racing! She ran for her cabin.

She couldn’t sleep that night, her curiosity was stronger than her fear though and so at midnight she slipped on her shoes, grabbed a torch and tiptoed out.

The library was on deck 2, she didn’t pass anyone on her way there and was lucky to find the door unlocked. The library was very grand but smelt a bit musty. She thought briefly, people probably use their e-readers these days. She crept along the rows of books hardly daring to make a sound, suddenly her torch caught a panel that looked wrong on the wall. A hairline crack. Carefully Lilia pried it open; inside were several items wrapped in cloth: a scarab beetle amulet, a cracked statuette, and a golden ring set with turquoise. Artefacts. Ancient and real. Her breath caught in her throat “he’s smuggling relics. She snapped some photos with her phone before closing the panel. Behind her the door creaked. Lilia spun round, torch shaking, there was the man! His eyes unreadable behind the sunglasses.

“You shouldn’t be here.” He said quietly.

She backed away "I know what you're doing" she replied forcing her voice to stay calm "I'm telling the captain"

He took a step forward "You don't understand. These were pieces stolen long ago; from families, from tombs that weren't protected, I'm returning them!"

"By sneaking them out on a cruise ship?" she challenged

He hesitated. "Some people would do anything to get their hands on them. I've arranged a safe passage."

Lilia frowned. He didn't seem angry or dangerous but she wasn't about to take his word for it and darted out away from him.

By breakfast she had shown the photos to her parents. Her Dad contacted the ship's security officer. Within hours the smugglers room was searched; the leather case contained forged documents in a false bottomed compartment. Lilia led them to the panel in the library where they found the artefacts just where they had been the previous night.

That night Lilia sat in the officers lounge across from the man whose name was Julian Marrick; a former archaeologist .

"I wasn't lying." He said "The artefacts came from private hoards looted in the 90s. I tracked them, recovered them, and was trying to return them to a local heritage foundation" "not everything can survive the red tape" he muttered quietly.

Lilia looked at the Scarab beetle she'd recovered; it was beautiful. Ancient and delicate. "I believe you wanted to do good, but secrets don't make good history" she said.

Two days later the ship docked in Aswan, Egyptian authorities boarded to inspect the case. Because of Marrick's cooperation and documents, he wasn't arrested but the items were confiscated pending investigation.

As Lilia packed that night her Mum handed her a note: "Lilia for your eyes only" it said on the front. Inside it read "In case you ever want to know where the real story ends – J.M." underneath was a set of coordinates and the name "Saqqara Trust".

Once Lilia was back home she started a blog about her experience calling it the Nile Deception. It went viral amongst young archaeologists. Months later a package arrived addressed to Lilia. Inside was a replica of the Scarab she had found with a small card which read: "The real one is where it belongs. Keep sharing the truth." She smiled, the mystery hadn't ended on the ship, it had only just begun.

To be continued.....