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PART ONE

LONDON, NOVEMBER 1922

With intense excitement, I drew back the bolts.

HOWARD CARTER, ARCHAEOLOGIST

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One filthy wet Wednesday morning, the world stopped making sense. I wish I could say I'd been expecting it, like those clever people who smell thunderstorms or feel tidal waves before they hit, but that wasn't quite how it happened.

We'd been eating breakfast, Mum and me, bumping knees under our tiny kitchen table as we polished off the last of the bread and dripping. I'd be hungry again within the hour: I always was. I was also dreading school. So you could say the day had started as grim as any other. Until, that was, I saw the headline in the morning paper:

'HUMAN FEET FOUND IN BLOOMSBURY TOWN HOUSE.'

'Is it *true*?' I asked, baffled.

Mum was scanning the inside pages for the death notices and horoscopes, which were the bits she always read first. 'Is what true, pet?'

I pointed to the article: 'Can I see?' because it was

just the sort of queer story that'd stick in my head all day if I didn't read it.

Mum turned to the front page with a frown.

'Your dad wouldn't think much of you filling your brain with this, Lil,' she said, once she'd read it herself.

No, he probably wouldn't.

Dad wanted his daughter to be quiet, hard-working, with her nose always in a textbook. And I *was* like this, but I could be fierce if I had to be and wasn't good at niceties or looking neat for school. Which was why when Mum cut my hair off with the dressmaking scissors, Dad didn't object. Better a daughter with boy-short hair than one whose plaits were always unravelling.

Meanwhile, across the kitchen table, Mum was still holding the newspaper.

'Oh come on, let me. Dad's not even here,' I pointed out.

He'd gone to work early, as usual, selling carpets door to door. Mum said he was lucky to have a job when, since the war, times were hard for everyone. She worked in Woolworths, and no amount of lipstick could hide how tired she always looked. But at least we had a roof over our heads – a sloping attic one, because our rooms were on the very top floor, which was all

right until you needed the privy. Then you'd have to go down four flights of stairs to the back yard, where you'd pray you'd remembered to bring lav paper, and that there weren't any rats waiting to nip you.

'Imagine being in the trenches, then,' Bobby Fitzpatrick, who lived in the ground-floor flat, used to say. 'The Frenchie rats were bigger than baby pigs, so Father told me.'

My dad never spoke about the war. Yet four years later, you still felt it everywhere, every day, like a gritty layer of dust. You'd notice men who'd once been soldiers now begging on street corners, unable to work because of blindness, or burns, or missing arms or legs – and those were the injuries you *could* see. I'd overheard enough adults whispering to know that the war did funny things to people. We were lucky that all Dad had to show for it was a tremble in his hands. On the outside at least, he was all in one piece.

Gulping down the last of my breakfast, I wiped my fingers on my school skirt, then asked Mum again for the newspaper. I still wanted to read about the human feet.

Mum passed it to me. 'Quickly, then, or you'll be late.'

It didn't take long to read the story. As I'd suspected, it was a very odd turn of events.

The police, the report said, had been called to a central London address, where they found a man's feet on his hearth rug. The rest of him had vanished. His coat and hat were still hanging in their usual place in the hallway. Police named the man as Professor Selim Hanawati, a scholar of Middle Eastern art.

'Where's Professor Hanawati now?' I asked Mum. I didn't suppose he could've got far without his feet.

She gave me a narrow look. 'The poor man burned to death, Lilian. Every bit of him – apart from what they found. It's called *spontaneous human* … something or other.'

Even with half a name, it didn't make much sense to me. People's bodies didn't burn by themselves.

Mum took the paper from me gently. 'You've frightened yourself now, haven't you?'

'No.' But it *had* stirred me up rather, and Mum, noticing this – as she always did – quickly homed in on another news story. 'Look, Lil! That archaeologist Howard Carter's gone back to Egypt to start digging again for Tutankhamun's tomb. One last go, apparently. Your grandad'll be interested, won't he?'

He wouldn't: Grandad had no time for Mr Carter. '*That* glory boy?' he'd called him. 'Without Lord

Carnarvon's money, he couldn't even afford the train ride to London!'

'Only because it's Egypt,' I said to Mum.

To say my grandad adored Egypt was an understatement. He'd named his Siamese cat Nefertiti after the queen. He'd travelled there, years ago, and been in love with the place ever since. It'd rubbed off on me, this fascination of his. Not that I'd a flying pig's chance of ever going there, but still.

As for the feet story, I couldn't shake it off. It stayed with me all day, through Latin, French, triple maths, and a science lesson about flammable liquids – bizarrely. To be blunt, school was a drag. I hated the place – or more precisely, St Kilda's College for Girls. Everyone was so proper, and so snooty with it. Yet listening to Mum and Dad you'd have thought our ship had well and truly come in when the scholarship offer arrived – '*Such an opportunity, Lilian!*' '*It's your chance for a brighter future!*' But believe me, life was much simpler when I went to the same school as the other kids on our street.

When I got home that night, the lights were off in our flat. The stove was cold. Dad was normally back before me, so it was a bit unusual. On the table, propped up against the salt pot, was a note from Mum.

We weren't a note-leaving type of family, so I knew straight away something had happened. And the jolt in my stomach told me the news was bad.

Skimming the message, I saw the words 'hospital' and 'Grandad', which troubled me even more. Only very sick people went to hospital. You had to pay for your treatment, and Grandad always said plenty of folks who went in never came out again.

Guessing poor Nefertiti would be worried too, I took the spare key to Grandad's from its hook. I didn't want to stay here on my own, imagining awful things. I'd go and feed his beloved cat, instead.

*

Grandad lived a few streets away above a shop that, according to the tatty sign over the door, sold 'Rarities and Antiquities' though I'd never seen him sell a single thing. Inside was a treasure trove of maps, vases, unpacked boxes and mouldy Turkish carpets stacked against the walls. He'd collected it all from his travels, though Mum reckoned it was mostly rubbish and he needed to get a cleaner in.

I covered the short distance to Grandad's at record pace. It was getting dark, the street lamps already lit,

and the rain that'd dampened me on the way back from school had turned to sleet. For November, it was unusually cold.

Grandad's shop was shut up and dark. His rooms above it had their own entrance round the back, through a gate and down a side alley. As I lifted the gate latch, something warm rubbed against my legs, making me jump.

'Oh, cat!' I gasped out loud.

Nefertiti bounded ahead of me down the alley to wait on the back doorstep. It wasn't pitch dark here by any means: the streets all around were well lit. Yet a strange, shivery feeling came over me. I didn't want to go any further. And I certainly didn't want to go inside Grandad's flat.

Don't be stupid, I told myself. I'd only been here a few days ago for our usual Saturday afternoon tea. Yet even that, usually my favourite part of the week, had been a little bit odd.

We'd been drinking what Grandad called *chai* – dark, sugary tea in little glasses, Egyptian-style. It was a habit he'd picked up from his travels. Nefertiti, as usual, was draped like a fur stole around his shoulders. I'd never seen her sit like that on anyone else.

'Well, Lily,' Grandad announced, being the only person

not to call me plain old Lil. 'I've been thinking: I need to put my things in order, and I could do with your help.'

Now Grandad was often saying random things, which was one reason why I thought him so splendid. His cleverness didn't come from books or colleges but from going out into the world and getting grubby with it. You never knew quite what he'd come up with next.

On Saturday, though, he'd been coughing, enough for me to wonder if he wasn't well.

'What *things*?' I asked, though from the look on his face, it was obvious he wasn't talking about housework: he meant to write a will, and this alarmed me. 'You're not ill, are you?'

'Ill? Nah, tough as an old saddlebag, me.' Yet he quickly fell serious. 'It's a friend of mine from years back who's poorly. He wrote to me this week for the first time in years – troubled, he was, about something that happened between us a long time ago. We made a mistake, you see, and he's asking me to put it right.'

'So it's like his dying wish?' I said, because it sounded very mysterious.

'I sincerely hope not!' Grandad glared at me. 'He's sent me something to read – the writing's tiny and I can't find my blasted spectacles anywhere.'

Which wasn't surprising, given how untidy Grandad

was. But by now it was already five o'clock: time for me to go. We agreed I'd pop by another time to help him read it.

'Promise me you won't mention any of this to your mother,' Grandad said. 'You know how she's inclined to—'

'Fuss?' We both knew what Mum was like. I felt pleased to be trusted with something decent like a secret, when at home all I got to be responsible for were things like washing the supper dishes or making the beds. This was far more exciting. 'I'll not say a word to her, promise.'

'Or your father,' Grandad added.

I nodded. Not that I ever spoke to Dad about Grandad – the two of them hadn't shared a civil word in years. It was one of those family oddities you just knew, without being told exactly why.

Grandad tapped the side of his nose. 'Good girl, Lily. The nut doesn't reveal the tree it contains: it's an old Egyptian proverb, worth remembering.'

It was this I was thinking of now, as I stood at Grandad's door, telling myself not to be stupid. The only difference with his flat tonight was Grandad himself wasn't here. Yet the odd, chilly feeling wouldn't go away. It wasn't just me, either. The cat sensed it too. In one swift leap, Nefertiti was up on the neighbour's wall, fur on end.

'What's the matter, crosspatch?' I asked her.

She made a yowling noise that Grandad said was her way of talking. She wouldn't be coaxed down, not even with a square of chocolate I'd found in my coat pocket. So much for feeding her, when she wouldn't even come near me.

Even more bizarre was the key in the door. However much I twisted and jiggled it, the lock wouldn't open. I was in a right old fluster, and ready to give up and go home, when I saw a parcel. The postman had left it on the doorstep, behind the empty milk bottles. I bent down to pick it up. It was quite heavy, about the size of a shoebox, and wrapped in brown paper that was already wrinkled with damp. The name on the front was Grandad's: *Mr Ezra Wilkinson*. Ezra: a funny, old-fashioned name that Mum said was always given to the men in our family. My middle name – Ella – was as close to it as a girl's name could be.

Turning the parcel over to read the sender's name, I was in for a whopping great surprise.

Professor Selim Hanawati.

It was the man who'd died, who'd left behind his feet. And now it seemed he'd left something else, this time specifically for Grandad.