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'You can't come in. It's rest time,' said the nurse at Brompton Hospital the next morning. 'Visiting hours start at two.'

I looked at my watch: four hours to go. It'd taken a fair bit of daring to get here, when I should've been in class at St Kilda's doing a spelling test: Dad had wished me luck for it as he was leaving for work. I wasn't looking forward to lying to him later, when he'd ask me how it went.

'I have to speak to Mr Ezra Wilkinson.' I said again. 'He's my grandad.'

The nurse folded her arms. 'He didn't teach you any manners, did he?'

People from round our way weren't full of airs and graces, it was true. But I could see I was going to have to try harder. 'Please, it's very urgent.'

'So urgent it can't wait till this afternoon?' she asked. To be truthful, I didn't want to come back here

again. The hospital smelled horrible, of carbolic mixed with old vegetables. It made me feel ill, which was odd for a place meant to make people better.

'Please,' I begged. 'I'll be quick.'

Over her shoulder I glimpsed rows of snowy-white beds; knowing Grandad was in one of them, just feet away, was infuriating. It crossed my mind to dodge past the nurse.

Then I caught her taking in my St Kilda's blazer – horrid bright red – that showed at the wrists of my coat. And the ugly felt hat on my head and my satchel, strapped across me, all of which bore the school crest. I might as well have worn a sign around my neck.

'Shouldn't you be in school?' the nurse asked. 'Perhaps I should give them a telephone call.'

'I'm going, don't worry,' I muttered, and hurried back down the stairs.

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Out in the street, I kicked myself. I should've known there'd be visiting hours at the hospital. Not only that, skipping school was risky: there was always someone, somewhere, waiting to peach on you. In adventure stories the heroes have a bunch of like-minded pals

on hand to help. It was different trying to be brave by yourself.

Most of my old friends had been boys – Neddy, Joe, Brian and Bobby Fitzpatrick. When we weren't at school, we'd play Crab Apple Cricket or Bulldog out in the street.

Then I'd got the scholarship to St Kilda's.

'Can you smell brains?' Bobby asked the others, on the first day of term, when they'd gone down the street to their new school and I'd gone up it to mine. They didn't speak to me after that.

The girls at St Kilda's were even harder to be pally with. Some days, when no one was looking, I'd get a bit upset. And I felt bad for that too, because it wasn't like I had something proper to be sad about, like a dad or a brother dead in the war.

At some point, I realised I was lost. This was a part of South London I'd never been to before. The road was busy with shoppers and nannies pushing babies in prams. Weaving in amongst traffic, the newspaper boys shouted the day's headlines – about King George, our new prime minister Mr Bonar Law, and Ireland now a country of its own. And – my ears pricked – Egypt:

'Courageous Howard Carter just days from finding

missing boy king! Experts convinced he'll discover a tomb full of gold!

I hugged the satchel tight against my hip. Inside it, in a box, was another piece of gold, a jar so unsettling that last night I'd had to hide it. Even in broad daylight, I'd not completely shaken off that feeling of dread. It didn't help that I knew next to nothing about this extraordinary find.

Enough misery-mongering.

It was hours till visiting hours started, and I was on the wrong side of London to go to school. With time to kill, I decided to do some digging of my own.

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The bus ride to the British Museum cost me my last thruppence. On arrival, I went straight upstairs. The Egyptian exhibits weren't in one big room, but a series of little ones that ran into each other. To my mind, it was the best bit of the whole museum. I loved the old dark wood cabinets and the way the floor dipped and creaked when you walked. The blinds, always down at the windows, made a sort of all-day twilight. There were vases, statues called *shabtis* for guarding dead bodies, swords, beads, even mummified pets.

Everywhere you looked something fascinating glinted back at you – like in Grandad's shop, only older and more beautiful.

The Egyptian rooms were usually very quiet. So I'd not expected to find anyone else up there, let alone two children sitting cross-legged on the floor of the very first room.

It pulled me up short. 'Oh!'

The girl, who was drawing, glanced up from her notepad. Sat beside her was a boy, also drawing, who carried on doing so until she nudged him.

'Hey!' he yelped, as his pencil jerked across the paper. 'I thought you said no one came here,' the girl complained.

I was thinking the same, embarrassed and a bit annoyed. It was then I noticed the girl's pinafore – red, like mine, with the yellow school badge on the bib. She wasn't hiding hers under a coat, either, but wearing it for all to see.

'You at St Kilda's, then?' I asked. It came out a bit abruptly, though I hadn't meant it to. My run-in with the nurse had left me still feeling a bit spiky.

The girl tugged at her dress. 'I'd hardly wear *this* out of choice. And as for that *poisonous* school hat!'

She then saw mine, still rammed on to my head.

I snatched it off quick: how I hated the stupid thing. The girl thought this funny and laughed. I wasn't sure if I was meant to join in, but she had such a cheeky lopsided grin that I found myself grinning back. No one I knew smiled like that, or if they did I'd not seen them do it for a very long time.

'You hate St Kilda's too?' she asked.

'The students are a bit snooty,' I admitted.

The girl pulled a face. 'Millicent Thorpe and pals, d'you mean?'

I nodded. They were the snobbiest of the lot.

I'd never seen this girl at St Kilda's, though, and she had the sort of face you'd remember – brown-skinned, green-eyed, freckled. Her hair was jet black and sprang out in perfect corkscrew curls. Instead of rushing off, I set down my satchel next to their bags, coats, mittens, hats and scarves, which they'd dumped in a heap inside the door.

'I'm Tulip.' The girl was still smiling.

Tulip: it sounded *daring*, like a dancer or a flapper girl's name. She had that look to her too – tall and slender.

'I'm Lil, short for Lilian,' I replied, thinking how dull my name was in comparison.

'That's Oz, my brother.' Tulip meant the boy. 'He

doesn't say much, so don't think him rude. He loves this museum. We come here all the time.'

The boy was about ten, I'd say, and looked just like her. He wasn't wearing a uniform at all, which made me think he didn't go to school, the lucky so and so. I felt a pang of envy for him and his sister, who seemed quite happy in each other's company. Times like these I wished I had a bigger family of my own.

'He's good at drawing,' I remarked.

He'd almost filled a fresh page with hieroglyphics that he was copying from a coffin in the centre of the room. Some of the images – the snake, falcon and ankh – were also on Grandad's jar, which got me interested.

'Does he know what they mean?' I asked Tulip.

'He's learning,' she replied. 'Why, do you understand them?'

'Only a bit.' I pointed to some of the rougher sketches on Oz's paper. 'That dog creature? It's Anubis, god of the underworld. And this one, with the open wings – it's Isis, goddess of protection.'

Both were on the jar.

Thinking I might be on to something, I moved closer to the coffin for a better look. I'd been in this room loads of times before, but I'd never noticed the

name on the display card inside the cabinet. Yet there it was, in black and white:

Item 475: Coffin of unknown nobleman, decorated in relief-work typical of the Upper Nile. Thought to date back to 1350 BC.

Professor Selim Hanawati, Luxor, Egypt. May 1900.

I whistled under my breath, not quite believing my luck. The first place I'd looked and here it was, a whopping great clue! The coffin, with its connection to Professor Hanawati, might well have come from the same part of Egypt as the jar. Perhaps he'd found it on the same trip.

But I reminded myself that Anubis and Isis were often found on goods buried in ancient Egyptian graves, and I should probably calm down. Yes, it was likely the jar *was* something to do with death, but that didn't mean this coffin here belonged to the same dead person.

'It's only a nobleman's coffin,' Oz spoke behind me, making me jump. 'If he'd been a pharaoh, the whole lot would've been gold.'

'I suppose so,' I agreed.

'Most of the tombs they've found so far have been "robbed in antiquity",' Oz went on. 'So even if Howard Carter does find Tutankhamun, chances are a thief will have got there first.'

I looked at him sideways: for someone who didn't talk much, he had a fair bit to say about Egyptian burials.

'My brother Alex taught me about Egypt. He was an expert,' Oz explained proudly.

Tulip rolled her eyes: 'Oh, Oz, don't go on about Alex. I'm sure Lil doesn't want to hear our whole family history.'

Actually, I was wondering what Oz, or this brother of his, would make of Grandad's jar, when a woman rushed into the room. 'I should have realised you'd both be up here!'

Tulip looked so horrified that for a moment I panicked: was the woman one of those school attendance officers who made trouble if they caught you skiving?

Then Tulip said, 'Oh lordy, Mama! I'm sorry! I forgot the time!'

This was her *mother*?

She didn't look like Oz or Tulip – she was white, and yet her children both had brown skin. Her clothes

were the sort *my* mother wouldn't be seen dead in – an orange dress, purple stockings and the brightest red lipstick. Now, I wasn't one to get excited about dresses and stuff, but even I could see that this woman was terrifically glamorous. And how amazing that she didn't bat an eyelash at the fact Tulip wasn't in school!

'Hurry up, darlings,' the woman drawled in an accent that wasn't English. 'Mr Pemberton's joining us for lunch.'

'Clever you!' Tulip started rooting through the pile by the door, grabbing her scarf and bag. Oz packed away his sketchbook. A flurry of putting on coats and hats followed.

'Goodbye, Lil!' Tulip waved. Then all three of them were gone. The room was suddenly quiet and rather empty. It was odd to miss people I'd only just met, but that's how it felt.

It was early still – by my watch, just past midday – but with no more money for a bus fare, I decided to start the long walk back to Brompton Hospital. I went to pick up my satchel from where I'd left it by the door, but it wasn't there. Someone must've moved it.

Panicky minutes followed as I searched the room. Then, thank crikey, I found it, wedged between the open door and the wall. Except, when I pulled it free

and lifted the flap to check everything was still inside, I realised *this* satchel wasn't mine. Yes, it was conker-brown leather, with two front buckles and the St Kilda's crest on the front. But inside was a sketchbook and pencils, and the name 'Tulip Mendoza' with an address in Highgate written underneath.

The daft girl had taken the wrong bag. With the jar still inside.

By the time I'd raced outside, the Mendozas had well and truly gone. I couldn't believe I'd been so careless. There was nothing I could do about it, though, apart from not tell Grandad I'd lost it. At least I knew where Tulip lived. And I had to admit I rather liked having an excuse to see her and her brother again.