

The next morning, bright and early, I went to the post office. Deliberately, I chose one nearer to Tulip's house than ours. I didn't want to run into anyone I knew, not when I was in Mum's black skirt and sweating rather badly.

'First nine words are tuppence,' the lady behind the counter said, looking down her nose at me. 'After that it's a penny a word.'

I prayed it wasn't obvious I'd never sent a telegram before. Without my school hat, I might pass as an office junior on an errand, albeit a very young one with clammy hands. I thought how Tulip would be confident, smiling, looking everyone in the eye, and tried my best to do the same.

'Here.' I slid across the money, all in halfpennies.

She counted it, then passed me the form to fill in. Nine words wasn't much. I settled on: 'CHANGE OF PLAN - STOP - GO TO LUXOR - STOP - TICKETS ON WAY - STOP -'

I signed it 'MR PEMBERTON'.

When I'd finished, the post office lady checked it, then sent it off. I tapped my foot nervously in time with the telegram machine.

'When will it be delivered, please?' I asked.

She glanced at her watch. 'I'd give it thirty minutes.' I couldn't believe it'd been that easy - and that fast.

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My optimism didn't last, mind you. Halfway down the street, I heard the first of the day's newsboys. It wouldn't have been such a shock had I seen the headline over breakfast, but I'd ducked out this morning, too keyed up to eat.

'Carter discovers tomb steps as hunt for King Tut closes in!'

Panic washed over me. So, he'd found the official tomb - or at least the way in. This was just the sort of development we didn't need. How much longer would it be before Mr Carter dug his way right inside? How - or who - would the curse strike then?

I couldn't shake off the feeling of danger hanging over us. If there was a downside to reading Lysandra's account, this was it: I worried now that almost

everything was a sign. I just prayed Tulip's part of our plan had gone as smoothly as mine.

By the time I reached Makepeace Avenue, it was nearly ten o'clock. I'd come to give Tulip the jar and the professor's translations. Thankfully, she answered the front door, grabbing my sleeve and practically dragging me inside.

'Have you seen the news this morning about the tomb steps?' I asked.

She nodded, a finger on her lips, and hurried me to the library. There, she shut the door behind us and leaned against it. She looked rather grim. I perched on the sofa next to Oz, who was biting the skin around his fingernails.

'What's wrong? Has the telegram arrived?' I asked.

'Yes,' Tulip confirmed. 'Though I'm afraid Mama got rather upset.'

My stomach dropped. 'Doesn't she want to go to Luxor?'

'Yes, yes, of course she does,' Tulip quickly reassured me. 'It was just a bit of a shock, seeing the telegram boy's uniform and his red bike, and all that. It reminded her – and us – of the day we got the news that Alex was missing.'

I felt dreadful for not thinking of this; clearly Tulip did too.

She hurried on. 'Anyway, I've picked up the tickets. I'll tell Mama the *Washington Post* sent them.' Fetching an envelope from the table, she waved it triumphantly in the air: 'Train to Athens, boat across to Cairo, another train down to Luxor! I've even booked us in at the Winter Palace Hotel. And return tickets for three weeks' time.'

I whistled. It was incredible what confidence, the right-sounding voice and a telephone could achieve. Tulip was amazing. I was completely in awe, and so very grateful, I felt suddenly choked up.

'It's ... what I mean is ... thank you for what you've done,' I stuttered.

'Don't simper, Lil,' she said, playfully. 'It's not your style.'

But I couldn't have done any of this on my own.

'What if your mum finds out she's paid for everything, though?' I asked, because I still couldn't believe it had all gone so smoothly. 'Won't she go bonkers?'

Tulip rolled her eyes. 'I told you before: everything's on the *Washington Post's* account, just as usually happens if I'm sorting out a train for Mama.'

I wasn't sure if it was genius or madness, but our crazy little plan was working. 'You're leaving tonight, aren't you?'

'Yes, from St Pancras,' Tulip said. 'The seven o'clock Continental Express to Athens.'

Everything was in place. Tulip, Oz and their mum were travelling on a train, on a boat, all the way across Europe and the Mediterranean to Egypt. How I wished, with every ounce of me, that I was going with them. I couldn't bear to even imagine what that would be like any more.

I took a long slow breath. All that was left to do now was hand over the jar. Opening my satchel, I passed the box to Tulip.

'I've tucked the translations inside,' I told her and Oz.

As she went to take it from me, I felt a sudden twist of fear. What if this wasn't the right thing to do? What if something happened to the jar, or worse, to Oz and Tulip? By asking them to do this for me and for Grandad, had I just passed on the curse to my friends?

'Lil,' Tulip said gently. 'You can let go of the box.'

'Sorry. Here, take it.' It was too late by now to do anything else.

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By the time I'd changed into my St Kilda's uniform and left Tulip's, it was still only ten thirty. The plan was to

slip into class between lessons, unnoticed. I'd hoped Tulip might come with me, but she refused, and quite firmly too.

'Not a chance! I've got clothes to pack!' she said.

Funny how on the subject of school she wasn't her normal confident self. I'd even go so far as to say she was blustering. The packing seemed like an excuse; I suspected there was more to her missing school than she was telling me.

At St Kilda's, I made it all the way through the quad and along the corridor to English before anyone so much as looked at me. Too bad the person who did was Millicent Thorpe, the girl who noticed everything.

'Look what the cat's dragged in,' she said to one of her many shadows – I didn't know her friends' names, just that wherever Millicent went they'd trail behind.

I did my best not to react. And for a while, I managed it. The lesson started with Miss Parker announcing another spelling test – not my favourite pastime by anyone's standards, but for once I had a go at all twenty words, and even did a few doodles in the margin for good measure. I was determined not to be glum.

A girl called Geraldine who sat on the front row was then told to collect our answers. Everyone else was allowed a brief moment to chat.

'How's your new friend, Lilian?' Millicent called out in her snidey, wheedling way.

I ignored her.

'Is she pally with that dark-skinned girl?' someone else asked. 'The one who never comes to school? I swear I saw them together on the bus on Saturday.'

I felt an angry blush creeping up my neck.

'Tulip Mendoza?' This was Millicent. 'Stupid name if you ask me. And have you seen her curly *hair*?'

I spun round in my seat. The whispering stopped. Millicent sat back, arms folded as if to say, '*What're you staring at?*'

I turned to face the front again. They could talk about me all they liked, but now they'd mentioned Tulip I started to get annoyed. I didn't notice Geraldine hovering near my desk to collect my test until she said to the teacher, 'What about Lilian Kaye's paper, miss? She's drawn all over it.'

Before I could stop her, she'd snatched my test and was holding it up for Miss Parker to see. It was only a scribble or two – of Nefertiti mostly – but the whole class went silent. Twenty pairs of eyes stared at me like I'd committed murder.

'If you've defaced your test, Lilian,' Miss Parker said, unimpressed, 'then you'll stay behind after school and redo it.'

I'd not meant to groan out loud. Everyone gasped. I knew then I'd gone too far: St Kilda's students *never* answered back.

Behind me one of Millicent's friends was whispering again: 'Going to call on *Tulip* tonight, are you?'

'Can't think what she'd see in you,' Millicent added. 'She's stinking rich. Mind you, you know what they say about foreigners, and Mendoza isn't an English—'

Something in me snapped. I got up from my seat, flinging my chair back so hard it screeched across the floor. When I stopped in front of Millicent's desk, she still had that stupid mocking look on her face. In a flash, I had hold of her hair. She screamed. Kicking. Yelling at me to let go.

'You say one more thing about Tulip,' I hissed right in her face, 'and I'll tear your stupid plaits off your head.'

'You're insane! You should be locked up!' she cried.

'And you're a nasty bully,' I spat back. 'But you don't scare me. Or Tulip. She's got more courage in her little finger than you and your drippy friends put together.'

I'd have said more too, but Miss Parker was booming my name at the top of her voice.

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That's how I came to be in the headmistress's office. Though I felt wretched, my only real regret was that I'd not stood up to Millicent Thorpe earlier. Bullies like her were probably the reason why Tulip hated coming to school.

'Who sent you?' Mrs Emerson-Jones, the headmistress, drawled from behind her great sarcophagus of a desk.

'Miss Parker,' I said.

'And your name?'

'Lilian Kaye, miss.'

'What's your misdemeanour, Lilian?' She sounded almost bored.

'Fighting, miss.'

'Fighting, eh?' She looked at me with new interest. 'You're one of our scholarship students, are you not?'

I knew what she was getting at, that my being from a poor family explained why I'd grabbed Millicent Thorpe's hair, because a proper young lady would never do such a thing.

'I didn't start it,' I said. 'They were bad-mouthing Tulip Mendoza—'

Mrs Emerson-Jones interrupted: 'Tulip? The girl who refuses to attend school?'

'Yes, miss. And I reckon I can see why. She's being bullied by that Millicent Thorpe and her pals.'

Mrs Emerson-Jones looked at me like I'd just said the sky was green. 'Bullying? Here, at St Kilda's? I hardly think so!'

'Oh it's true, miss,' I persisted. 'And Tulip's my friend, see, so I'm not going to sit back and ignore it, am I?'

'In my school that's *exactly* what I'd expect you to do,' she huffed. 'You should turn the other cheek.'

But I'd always been told – by Grandad and my parents – that you didn't think less of a person just because they weren't like you. It came from Grandad's travels to other countries, I supposed, and Dad being overseas in the war.

You certainly didn't make fun of someone because of their hair or their skin, or because they wore glasses or lived in the wrong sort of street. That was plain wrong.

'Millicent was saying nasty things about Tulip having dark skin, and it's not right, not from anyone,' I told her.

'Was there not a teacher in the room?' she snapped. 'Could you not have told her?'

I shrugged miserably. 'Maybe, and then I'd have been called a telltale.'

'Instead, you chose to behave like a thug!' Mrs Emerson-Jones exclaimed. 'It won't be tolerated in this school, do you hear?'

My heart sank to the floor. We all knew what the punishment was for fighting, and as Mrs Emerson-Jones opened her desk drawer, I squeezed my eyes shut. I didn't want to see how big the birch was.

She crossed the room to stand in front of me. My stomach now was one big knot, the smell of her flowery perfume making me feel sick.

'Left hand,' she instructed.

I held it out flat, thinking she'd go for the palm. That's what Mr Watkins at our primary school did, though his assistant Mr Crosby rapped your fingers with a metal ruler. Either way it was bad: I'd seen kids come back to class afterwards with their hands stuffed into their armpits, trying not to cry.

'Not like that.' Tutting, Mrs Emerson-Jones grabbed my hand, scrunching it into a fist.

I kept my eyes tightly shut. Halfway through a breath, the birch came down. She'd gone for the knuckles. The pain was white-hot. Like a burn. A sting. The worst of both at once. She did it again. And again. Then she stopped, and the pain got twenty times worse. She might as well have shoved my hand into a fire.

When I dared to look up, Mrs Emerson-Jones was back behind her desk again like nothing had happened.

The only sign was three white weals on the back of my hand. The pain made my eyes stream.

'Return to your lessons,' she instructed.

Yet as I turned to go there came the worst blow of all: 'Your parents will be informed of your poor conduct by afternoon post.'

The marks on my hand wouldn't be too hard to hide; a letter home was something else. Dad would have a flying fit. I'd be grounded. He'd stop my few pence pocket money. More than that, though, he'd be disappointed. The quiet girl with her nose in a book was fast becoming a bit of a rebel, and I didn't think he'd like her very much.