

SECRETS
OF A
SUN KING

Emma Carroll

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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.