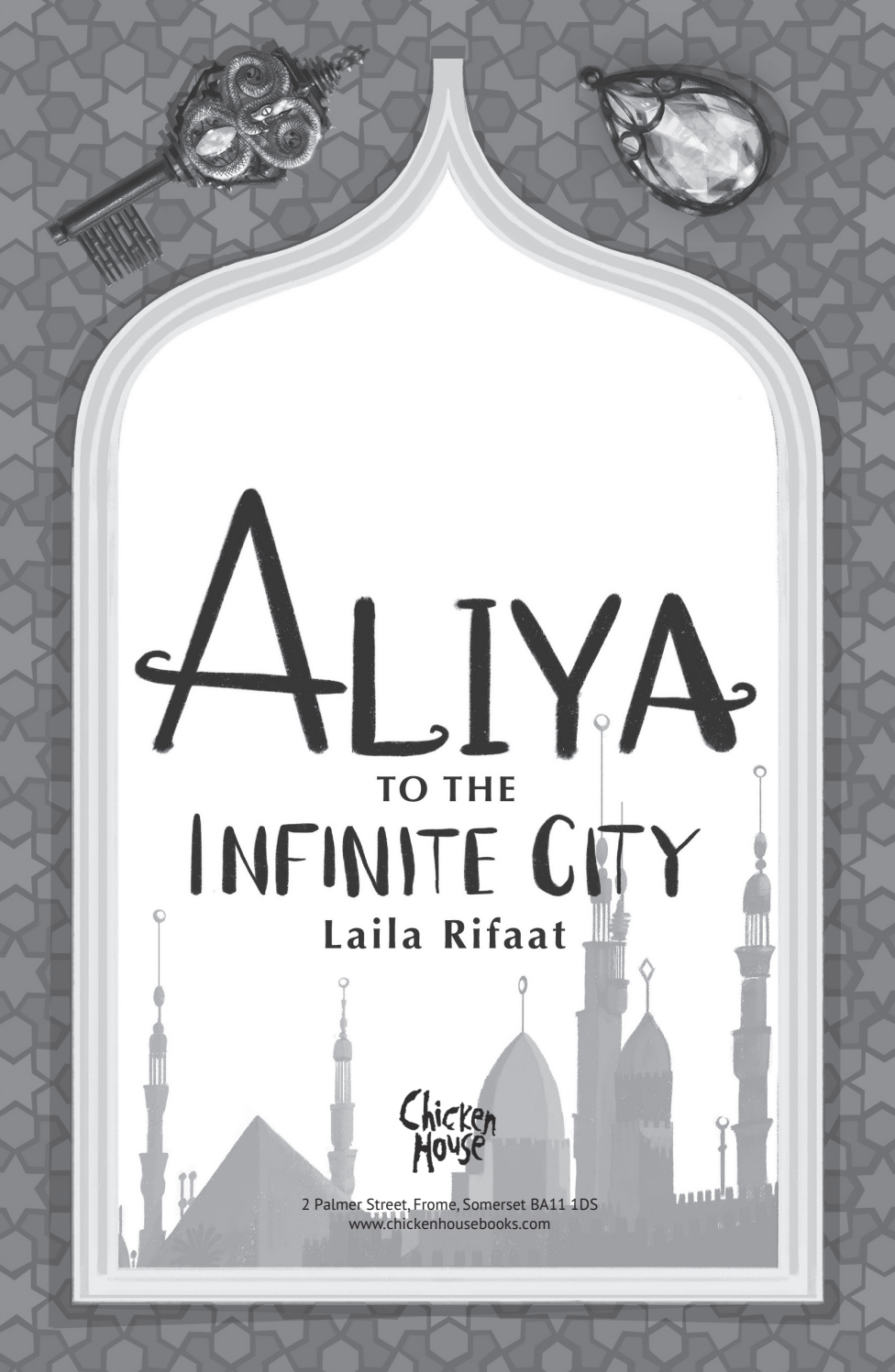

ALIYA
TO THE INFINITE CITY

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To my family

Chapter 1

THE SECRET ROOM

Aliya's grandfather had vanished again. She knew it the moment she put her ear to the keyhole of his study. Pressing it tight to the cold metal, she listened for newspaper pages rustling, tea being slurped, backgammon chips rattling or snoring, but there was only silence.

Today of all days, she had thought he might not vanish, but the silence through the keyhole offered no other explanation. Aliya gave the study door an angry shove. You only turned eleven once in your life. Yet here she was: cake- and present-less, standing like an idiot in front of a locked door.

She tried peeking through the keyhole again. It really was oddly quiet in there, as though the room

had magically whisked her grandfather away. Most days, the keyhole let through nothing but silence and darkness, like now. But at other times she could swear she'd caught a glimpse of some faraway place – a billowing desert or a street full of people. There were smells too, sometimes, of spices or petrol or camel dung. It was as though the room couldn't make up its mind as to where it was leading – or was it just her loneliness creating fancies in her mind?

Aliya had done her best to think of plausible explanations that would dispel the mystery. Was there a secret exit in the study that Geddo used to escape somewhere? To a local coffee shop, perhaps, to read his paper in peace? Or for a glass of tea with mint and a game of backgammon with a worthy opponent? Aliya stuck her nose into the keyhole and sniffed. No odd fumes floated out of it today. Still, there was something strange going on. She just knew it.

Before his disappearances began, Geddo had been a fairly normal grandfather – the kind that lost his glasses, fell asleep in the armchair, and watched

boring documentaries on the old television. They had done ordinary granddaughter–grandfather things, like take slow walks to the corner store and eat Geddo's old-man dinners, mostly spicy sausages and eggs. She had helped him hang the laundry (her socks were too fiddly for his fingers) and dry the dishes. They had fed the street cats together. Whenever a new one appeared to feast on their tuna and soaked-bread mix, they had thought of cat names. Aliya was partial to cool, American names – like the ones from the series she watched – but Geddo insisted on Arabic names that began in the back of the throat and shot over the tongue as if they were late for an appointment: *Kharboush*, *Zoronfil* and *Abu Samak*. Egyptian cats couldn't be called Phoebe or Chandler.

Then, one month ago, Geddo had gone into his study and come out . . . different. He had begun to look worried. He'd stopped talking to her. Things really got strange when he took her out of school and told her they had to move – urgently – no questions asked. But Aliya had asked a hundred questions. Where were they going? Was he feeling

well? Should she call a doctor? What about the street cats? Who would feed them when they were gone?

Next thing she knew, they had left everything behind.

First, they had stayed with an old lady in a house on the edge of a desert, then a week in a crumbling hotel – under a false name – and now they were in a rented flat in a tumbledown house by the Mediterranean.

Aliya glanced around at the shabby place, water damage spread on the walls and ceilings like a rash. Dumped in an almighty heap were all their earthly belongings, looking like they were put up for a jumble sale.

What was even stranger was how her grandfather had begun to keep one room to himself wherever they went. A room that became *secret*, that only Geddo and Mr Kamel, the new butler – yes, *butler*! – were allowed into. Aliya ran her hand over the door and knew – knew with her whole being – that the answers to Geddo's strangeness were locked away in there, within this mystery that went with them everywhere.

Turning from the door, Aliya scanned the cluttered living room. If Geddo wasn't going to get her a gift, she'd find herself some money and go get herself one. She sniffed, eyes burning with dust and oncoming tears. She might not be worth celebrating, but at least she was going to have something other than leftovers for her birthday lunch.

Getting up, she picked her way through her grandfather's things, which lay in haphazard heaps since their last move. There was some of his gilded furniture, bum-shaped dents sagging their middles. The usual Cairo mix of sand and dust had been carried with them and lay like a thin shroud over everything.

An old suitcase full of books caught Aliya's eye. One title read *Sphinx Tutmos: An Interview*. Turning the book over, she studied a photo of a sceptical-eyed sphinx in knitwear. Weird. She had never seen these old tomes before. They had to belong in Geddo's study with the rest of the secrets. With each move, things from within the closed room had begun to spill out, feeding her clues, like a treasure chest springing a leak.

She picked up another sour-smelling book called *Raw Health – A Guide to Ghoulish Healing (No Cooking Required)*. Then there was *Carpet Care for the Expert Flyer*. The photo showed a carpet poised in mid-air, its rider, by the looks of it, holding on for dear life.

Geddo had always told Aliya bedtime stories about fantastical things – they were part of their bedtime routine – but these books looked so real, as if they had some actual, practical use.

The stories, which her grandfather told as if they were bona fide truths, featured everything from sphinxes with allergies, to Egyptian ghouls who were quite sensitive once you got to know them, provided you survived long enough. One of Aliya's favourites told of a naughty girl who got swept away by a flying carpet. It flew around most of the world before the girl could think of the magic word that made it land.

'What was the word?' Aliya would ask when the carpet had sped across the Andes with no sign of slowing down.

'"Please,"' Geddo would say. 'Please is a magic word.'

Politeness was the only kind of magic Geddo approved of. Many of his stories warned of another sort, that was dark and dangerous and fed on people's souls.

That would bring Geddo to the story of the beautiful prince with hair like gold and the bluest eyes, whose ambition knew no bounds. He wanted to rule over time itself, like a god, and sought out the beings of darkness to trade pieces of his humanity in exchange for powers such as no man should have. That story always ended with the prince making an awful mess of his kingdom, so one night Aliya thought up a new ending, starring a young girl much like herself fearlessly saving the day.

Now, as she sat staring at the closed door of the study, Aliya's heart pinched as she remembered the look Geddo had given her. He clearly didn't think she would be capable of such bravado – or of any kind of adventure, not in real life or even as part of a fairy tale.

She turned from the door again, resolving to find some money for a gift and a meal amid the mess.

Then, behind her, the door to the secret room suddenly thumped open.

A tall man in a tweed suit towered in the doorway, the door quickly swinging shut behind him – too fast for her to glimpse beyond its threshold. He looked a bit like a neatly ironed Sherlock Holmes, but with glasses. It was Mr Kamel, the new butler. He had appeared out of the study one day, about a month ago, as if Geddo had conjured him out of a wardrobe.

Aliya watched as he settled himself into one of the gilded armchairs and began polishing his pipe. Weren't butlers supposed to be some sort of servant? Were they really supposed to wear that much tweed? She had seen them in movies, where they always stood around looking sombre and dutiful. They would announce visitors or bring plates of food, that kind of thing. But Mr Kamel didn't check any of those boxes. He never did anything useful, and only ever polished things that belonged to himself. Most annoyingly, he wouldn't answer any of her questions about what was going on with Geddo, although *he* got to go into the study – a total stranger. She

watched him light his pipe and send a small cloud of smoke adrift towards the ceiling, looking very much like an evil genie out of Geddo's fairy tales.

'What is it you put in that thing?' she asked, making a face. 'It smells like farts.'

Mr Kamel paused mid-puff.

'Pulverized girl bones.'

He turned to her with a frown that deepened as he noticed Aliya's dirty feet wagging in his direction. Aliya wiggled her toes challengingly at him.

'It's my birthday today,' she said. She waited for a moment, but Mr Kamel only blew another smoke ring. 'Do you know what it's like to celebrate your birthday alone?' she said. 'Your *birthday*. With nothing but old sandwiches to eat?' She gestured at the mess on the coffee table. 'And he missed my parents' memorial day. He never did that before. We always read some prayers.'

Ever since her parents passed away, she and Geddo had marked the anniversary by visiting their graves to recite some suras from the Quran. Then they had gone to the ice cream shop on the corner near the graveyard. It was *tradition*.

'Death-days and birthdays,' Mr Kamel said with a scoff. 'Your grandfather has important things to take care of. He certainly doesn't need a witless child to weigh him down.'

Aliya flinched. Her birthday wasn't important? The thought smarted, as if Mr Kamel had pinched her.

'What things?' she asked.

'If he wanted you to know, I guess he would have told you.'

Another smarting thought. Aliya pressed her lips into a line. Mr Kamel looked at her with raised eyebrows. He wore the same expression Geddo had when she proposed a new ending for the disastrous prince story. He was probably thinking about the tutor Geddo had hired to help her catch up with school – the one she'd managed to exasperate until he quit, leaving behind a letter for Geddo full of phrases like 'no aptness for academic studies', and 'fell asleep again'. Aliya had hidden the letter from Geddo, then turned it into an assortment of origami cranes that had been left behind to gather dust in their old flat. Maybe she should have studied more. Cared more. Shown him she was dependable?

Maybe then, Geddo would have confided in her? Was it too late now?

As Mr Kamel returned to his pipe, a cold feeling slithered around Aliya's heart, hissing terrible thoughts. What if Geddo was in trouble? Geddo had looked so unwell this past month, with all his pacing about and frowning, and his silence.

Fear bubbled up, fizzing in her chest.

She stood up.

'He's *my* grandfather,' she said. 'If he's in trouble I should help him!'

'You want to help?' Kamel pointed at her bedroom door with his pipe. 'Then stay out of the way. Beat it.'

Before Aliya quite knew what had happened, she had scraped up a handful of sandy dirt from under the rug and thrown it straight at Mr Kamel's chest. They both stared at his soiled shirtfront for a moment before he lunged at her, thin hands outstretched. She scuttled backwards across the floor like a panicking crab. Skidding through her bedroom door, she slammed it shut behind her. She fumbled with the latch. It slipped in her hands. Her

heart throbbed in her throat. The door shook as Mr Kamel tried to open it.

Bam. Bam. Bam.

Clack. The latch slid into place.

She was safe.

She took a deep breath to steady herself, then crouched down and peeked through the keyhole, only to jerk back in fear. An eye, yellow and unblinking, was staring back at her.

The key turned on the other side. She waited until Mr Kamel's footsteps had died away and the front door had opened and closed.

He had locked her in.

Great. Now there were two doors between her and the mystery in the study. A feeling of defeat stole over her. And there was another feeling too. Being alone had never really scared her before. But now . . . Geddo was in trouble, and she had no idea how to help him. To start, she would have to find out what was going on, and to do that she needed to get into the study.