
Chapter Two
The Fire Sale

Okay, you've waited long enough. Let me put you out of your misery right now.

I will reveal the Secret – a secret that people have sought for centuries, for millennia even – on the very next page…

Well, maybe the next page…

The next . . . ?

No, no, I can't. It's much too soon.

If I tell you the Secret now, you won't want to read any further, will you?

I'll do it before the end of this book.

I promise.

Maybe.

It depends on a few things.

For instance – how you look at it.

Are you really sure you want to know the Secret, anyway?

Revealing a secret is a bit like releasing air from a balloon: the secret spirals around and makes a fun noise – and if you aim right, it might even hit somebody in the nose – but afterwards it always falls to the ground, and everyone is left with that sad, after-the-balloon feeling of loss and abandonment.

That doesn't sound very satisfying, does it?

Then again, when have you known me to satisfy anything but my own cravings for chocolate?

Honestly, I don't know why you bother to read a word I write. If you want to give up on me now, I understand completely. Never mind all the time you've already put in; sometimes it's better to cut and run (see Chapter One).

Now's your chance to escape. Don't worry – I won't look. I'll just close my eyes and have a nibble of this delicious bar of dark, dark—

Hmmgh...well, maybe just one more...*hmmgh*...

—No? You're staying put? Stubborn, aren't you? Or just morbidly curious?

I know, this book is like a car accident. You don't *want* to stare – you just can't help it.

If it's any comfort, your old friend Cass is anything but satisfied at the time this story begins. She, too, is desperate to learn the Secret.

Recently, remember, she came torturously close to learning the Secret. Among the things she inherited from her ancestor, the Jester, was a fragment of papyrus with the Secret written on it in hieroglyphs. Alas, the papyrus disintegrated in front of her eyes.

Now Cass is headed for her grandfathers' place. She has just heard that her grandfathers are selling their old firehouse, and she wants to make sure the Jester's trunk doesn't get lost in the move. She hopes that another clue about the Secret may lie inside the—

Oh! There she is, walking down the road to the firehouse with Max-Ernest. I didn't realize I'd been

going on for so long.

If I'm not mistaken, they are discussing the assignment they just handed in for their class's Egypt unit: *make a list of the ten things you would take with you into the afterlife.* As I'm sure you know, the ancient Egyptians were very keen on keeping as many of their possessions as possible – for as long as possible.

Here, let's listen:

"...and a giant bar of chocolate, of course, in case I get hungry in the afterlife, and a pair of underwear, because, you know," Max-Ernest was saying. "Oh, and a deck of cards. Or do you think that's cheating? Since there are fifty-two cards in a deck, and we're only supposed to take ten things?"

"No, I think you can count a deck as one thing," said Cass, walking a little way ahead. Max-Ernest struggled to keep up.

The view couldn't have been more familiar. The backpack. The braids. The big pointy ears. Always, always from behind. Which was very unfair, when you thought about it. He, Max-Ernest, was shorter than Cass. Rightfully, he should go first; he wouldn't block her line of vision.

"Did the Egyptians have cards?" Cass asked casually. "It seems like hieroglyphs would make a cool deck of cards."

Max-Ernest lit up. "That's a great idea! I don't think the Egyptians had them, but we could make our own cards and—"

"There are just twenty-four hieroglyphs in the Egyptian alphabet, right?" asked Cass, cutting him off. "Or are there more? I feel like I heard both things."

Cass stopped at a junction. Cars passed at a snail's pace, honking their horns impatiently. It was unexpectedly busy for their quiet neighbourhood.

"Well, there are twenty-four main ones. They stand in for sounds, like our letters do," Max-Ernest explained, happy to discuss a topic that was of such passionate interest to him. "But there are thousands and thousands of others that are more like picture-words. I don't think anybody knows how many—"

Cass's face fell. "They don't?"

"Yeah, think about it – your card deck could be as big as you want," said Max-Ernest enthusiastically.

"Oh no. That's just what I was afraid of…"

Max-Ernest looked at Cass, confused by her sudden change of mood. "What do you mean? Why is that a bad thing?"

Cass bit her lip. She was the Secret Keeper; the Secret was supposed to be hers alone. Not to mention, it was common knowledge that Max-Ernest couldn't keep a secret. And yet, despite his faults, he was her

best friend and unflagging investigative companion. She'd been resisting for weeks, but she couldn't help wanting to confide in him.

She looked at her friend and took the plunge. "What if I told you I got the Jester's trunk open?"

Max-Ernest's eyes widened. "You figured out the combination?"

Cass nodded. "And what if I told you there was a piece of papyrus inside, with writing on it?"

"With hieroglyphs, you mean? That's why you're asking about them?"

Cass didn't say anything.

Max-Ernest stared at her. "Wait – this doesn't have anything to do with the Secret, does it?"

"Shh!! What are you thinking—?!"

They both looked around. Nobody was within earshot. (You and me they couldn't see, of course.)

"Sorry," said Max-Ernest, red-faced.

Not mentioning the Secret aloud was one of the most important rules – almost the only rule – for members of their secret organization, the Terces Society. Normally, even the compulsively talkative Max-Ernest abided by it.

"Anyway, it doesn't matter what it was. It was so old that it turned to dust as soon as I saw it," said Cass glumly.

"So what you're saying is, you had the you-know-what in your hands, and then it just disappeared?" The full weight of it was sinking into Max-Ernest's head. "That's . . . that's horrible!"

Cass sighed and started walking across the street. "I promised myself I wouldn't tell you—"

"Don't worry. You didn't tell me – I guessed," said Max-Ernest, following her. "Anyway, how could you *not* tell me? I'm the one who knows hieroglyphs. Can you remember any? I could translate them—"

"I know, it's driving me crazy. It's the one time I need your help, and I can't ask—"

"The one time—?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't. You've needed my help exactly six hundred and thirty-two times."

Cass shook her head in amazement. "You've been counting?"

Max-Ernest shrugged off the question. "So what else was in the trunk the Jester sent you, besides the papyrus?"

"Nothing important. Just treasure."

"You mean like *treasure* treasure? Gold coins and stuff?"

"Yeah, a lot, actually," said Cass, as if it were no big deal. "I want to look again in case there are any

other clues in there about . . . *it*."

"I can't believe you waited so long to tell me all this," said Max-Ernest. "No wonder you've been acting so weird lately. You're . . . rich."

But Cass wasn't listening; she was staring down the street, where there was a terrible traffic jam. Cars were stalled. People were shouting. Babies were crying.

"What's going on?" she asked, her pointy ears tingling in alarm.

As they got closer to the old firehouse where Cass's grandfathers lived, men and women and children walked by, holding boxes and bags with odd old objects peeking out: a broken banjo, a Hula Hoop, a fireplace poker, a fishing rod, several ancient computers, even a cash register.

"Maybe there's going to be a hurricane or a flood?" suggested Max-Ernest. "Or a big fire?"

Cass, who was normally the one to predict disasters of that sort, shook her head. "Uh, I don't think so. It's . . . something worse."

"What – nuclear war?"

"No, a garage sale," said Cass grimly.

She was right.

Their progress slowed to a near halt as they came

within view of the firehouse. The entire street was crowded with cardboard boxes and people combing through them. Tables were piled high with dusty glassware and broken ceramics and hard-to-identify appliances. Mismatched shoes and neckties of all sizes and colours flew into the air as people discarded them. Old books and magazines covered the ground like fallen leaves.

"Are your grandfathers really selling all their stuff? I can't believe it," said Max-Ernest.

"I know – it's weird," said Cass, slightly nauseated.

She stopped in front of the firehouse, where a new yellow sign had been planted. Instead of a sign for her grandfathers' antiques store, the Fire Sale, there was now one that said

GLORIA FORTUNE
Estate Agent

Cass stared at the sign as if it were an alien spacecraft that had landed on her grandfathers' front steps. "My mom said they were moving, but I guess I didn't really think about what that meant. It's like they're selling my childhood—"

"So where did you leave the trunk?" asked Max-Ernest, who was understandably eager to get his first

view of real treasure.

He glanced around. A few trunks lay on the street, but none that looked like the ancient trunk that Cass's ancestor had sent her so many centuries ago – and that had circled the globe so many times before reaching her.

"Huh? Oh, I hid it way in the back." Cass started up the front steps of the firehouse. "Come on, let's go inside before my grandfathers see us."

But when they looked inside, the firehouse was completely empty – that is, aside from the cobwebs and dust that had accumulated behind all the boxes and shelves and tables that had, until very recently, cluttered the space.

The one familiar thing that remained: the brass fire pole, as shiny as ever. Cass swallowed, remembering all the times she had slid down it.

"Um, Cass, shouldn't we go look outside before somebody—?"

"Don't even think it!" said Cass, running out the door.

If they didn't find the trunk before some lucky garage-sale customer snatched it away, Cass's glittering inheritance – not to mention any clue it might contain about the Secret – would be lost for ever.