



PRÓLOGO

Never say you know the last word about any human heart.

—HENRY JAMES

AUGUST 1884

A letter changed my life.

I'd waited for it all day hidden in the old potter's shed, away from Tía Lorena and her two daughters, one I loved and the other who didn't love me. My hideout barely stood up straight, being old and rickety; one strong wind might blow the whole thing over. Golden afternoon light forced itself in through the smudged window. I furrowed my brow, tapping my pencil against my bottom lip, and tried not to think about my parents.

Their letter wouldn't arrive for another hour yet.

If it was coming at all.

I glanced at the sketch pad propped against my knees and made myself more comfortable in the ancient porcelain bathtub. The remnants of old magic shrouded my frame, but barely. The spell had been cast long ago, and too many hands had handled the tub for me to be completely hidden. That was the trouble with most magic-touched things. Any traces of the original spell cast were faint, fading slowly anytime it passed hands. But that didn't stop my father from collecting as many magically tainted objects as he could. The manor was filled with worn shoes that grew flowers from the soles, and mirrors that sang as you walked by them, and chests that spewed bubbles whenever opened.

Outside, my younger cousin, Elvira, hollered my name. The unlady-like shrill would almost certainly displease Tía Lorena. She encouraged moderate tones, unless, of course, *she* was the one talking. Her voice could reach astonishing decibels.

Often aimed in my direction.

“*Inez!*” Elvira cried.

I was too much in a wretched mood for conversation.

I sank lower in the tub, the sound of my prima rustling outside the wooden building, yelling my name again as she searched the lush garden, under a bushy fern and behind the trunk of a lemon tree. But I kept quiet in case Elvira was with her older sister, Amaranta. My least favorite cousin who never had a stain on her gown or a curl out of place. Who never screeched or said anything in a shrill tone.

Through the slits of the wooden panels, I caught sight of Elvira trampling on innocent flowerbeds. I smothered a laugh when she stepped into a pot of lilies, yelling a curse I knew her mother also wouldn’t appreciate.

Moderate tones *and* no cursing.

I really ought to reveal myself before she sullied yet another pair of her delicate leather shoes. But until the mailman arrived, I wouldn’t be fit company for anyone.

Any minute he’d arrive with the post.

Today might *finally* be the day I’d have an answer from Mamá and Papá. Tía Lorena had wanted to take me into town, but I’d declined and stayed hidden all afternoon in case she forced me out of the house. My parents chose her and my two cousins to keep me company during their monthslong travels, and my aunt meant well, but sometimes her iron ways grated.

“*Inez! ¿Dónde estás?*” Elvira disappeared deeper into the garden, the sound of her voice getting lost between the palms.

I ignored her, my corset a lock around my rib cage, and clutched my pencil tighter. I squinted down at the illustration I’d finished. Mamá’s and Papá’s sketched faces stared up at me. I was a perfect blend of the two. I

had my mother's hazel eyes and freckles, her full lips and pointed chin. My father gave me his wild and curly black hair—now gone over to complete gray—and his tanned complexion, straight nose, and brows. He was older than Mamá, but he was the one who understood me the most.

Mamá was much harder to impress.

I hadn't meant to draw them, hadn't wanted to think of them at all. Because if I thought of them, I'd count the miles between us. If I thought of them, I'd remember they were a world away from where I sat hidden in a small corner of the manor grounds.

I'd remember they were in Egypt.

A country they adored, a place they called home for half the year. For as long as I could remember, their bags were always packed, their goodbyes as constant as the rising and setting of the sun. For seventeen years, I sent them off with a brave smile, but when their exploring eventually stretched into months, my smiles had turned brittle.

The trip was too dangerous for me, they said. The voyage long and arduous. For someone who had stayed in one place for most of her life, their yearly adventure sounded divine. Despite the troubles they'd faced, it never stopped them from buying another ticket on a steamship sailing from the port of Buenos Aires all the way to Alexandria. Mamá and Papá never invited me along.

Actually, they *forbade* me from going.

I flipped the sheet with a scowl and stared down at a blank page. My fingers clutched the pencil as I drew familiar lines and shapes of Egyptian hieroglyphs. I practiced the glyphs whenever I could, forcing myself to remember as many as I could and their closest phonetic values to the Roman alphabet. Papá knew hundreds and I wanted to keep up. He always asked me if I'd learned any new ones and I hated disappointing him. I devoured the various volumes from *Description de L'Égypte* and Florence Nightingale's journals while traveling through Egypt, to Samuel Birch's *History of Egypt*. I knew the names of the pharaohs from the New Kingdom by heart and could identify numerous Egyptian gods and goddesses.

EGYPTIAN hieroglyphs					
	vulture	a		sieve	Kh
	reed	i/y		animal belly	Kh
	arm	a		door bolt	s/z
	chick	u/w		folded cloth	s
	leg	b		pool	sh
	stool	p		hill	k/q
	viper	f		basket	k
	owl	m		jar stand	g
	water	n		bread loaf	t
	mouth	r		rope	ch
	shelter	h		hand	d
	wick	h		cobra	j

I dropped the pencil in my lap when I finished, and idly twisted the golden ring around my littlest finger. Papá had sent it in his last package back in July with no note, only his name and return address in Cairo labeled on the box. That was so like him to forget. The ring glinted in the soft light, and I remembered the first time I'd slipped it on. The moment I touched it, my fingers had tingled, a burning current had raced up my arm, and my mouth had filled with the taste of roses.

An image of a woman walked across my vision, disappearing when I blinked. In that breathless moment, I'd felt a keen sense of longing, the emotion acute, as if it were *me* experiencing it.

Papá had sent me a magic-touched object.

It was baffling.

I never told a soul what he did or what had happened. Old world magic

had *transferred* onto me. It was rare, but possible as long as the object hadn't been handled too many times by different people.

Papá once explained it to me like this: long ago, before people built their cities, before they decided to root themselves to one area, past generations of Spellcasters from all around the world created magic with rare plants and hard-to-find ingredients. With every spell performed, the magic gave up a spark, an otherworldly energy that was quite literally *heavy*. As a result, it would latch on to surrounding objects, leaving behind an imprint of the spell.

A natural byproduct of performing magic.

But no one performed it anymore. The people with the knowledge to create spells were long gone. Everyone knew it was dangerous to write magic down, and so their methods were taught orally. But even this tradition became a dead art, and so civilizations had to embrace man-made things.

Ancient practices were forgotten.

But all that created magic, that intangible *something*, had already gone somewhere. That magical energy had been sinking deep into the ground, or drowning itself in deep lakes and oceans. It clung to objects, the ordinary and obscure, and sometimes transferred whenever it first came into contact with something, or *someone*, else. Magic had a mind of its own, and no one knew why it leapfrogged, or clung to one object or person, but not the other. Regardless, every time a transfer happened, the spell weakened in minuscule degrees until it finally disappeared. Understandably, people hated picking up or buying random things that might hold old magic. Imagine getting ahold of a teapot that brewed envy or conjured up a prickly ghost.

Countless artifacts were destroyed or hidden by organizations specializing in magic tracing, and large quantities were buried and lost and mostly forgotten.

Much like the names of generations long past, or of the original creators of magic themselves. Who they were, how they lived, and what they did. They left all this magic behind—not unlike hidden treasures—most of which hadn't been handled all that often.

Mamá was the daughter of a rancher from Bolivia, and in her small pueblo, she once told me, the magia was closer to the surface, easier to find. Trapped in plaster or worn leather sandals, an old sombrero. It had thrilled her, the remnants of a powerful spell now caught up in the ordinary. She loved the idea of her town descending from generations of talented Spell-casters.

I flipped the page of my sketchbook and started again, trying not to think about The Last Letter I'd sent to them. I'd written the greeting in shaky hieratic—cursive hieroglyphic writing—and then asked them again to *please* let me come to Egypt. I had asked this same question in countless different ways, but the answer was always the same.

No, no, no.

But maybe this time, the answer would be different. Their letter might arrive soon, *that day*, and maybe, just maybe, it would have the one word I was looking for.

Yes, Inez, you may finally come to the country where we live half our lives away from you. Yes, Inez, you can finally see what we do in the desert, and why we love it so much—more than spending time with you. Yes, Inez, you'll finally understand why we leave you, again and again, and why the answer has always been no.

Yes, yes, yes.

"Inez," cousin Elvira yelled again, and I startled. I hadn't realized she'd drawn closer to my hiding place. The magic clinging to the old tub might obscure my frame from afar but if she got close enough, she'd see me easily. This time her voice rose and I noted the hint of panic. "You've a *letter!*"

I snapped my face away from my sketch pad and sat up with a jerk.

Finalmente.

I tucked the pencil behind my ear, and climbed out of the tub. Swinging the heavy wooden door open a crack, I peered through, a sheepish smile on my face. Elvira stood not ten paces from me. Thankfully, Amaranta was nowhere in sight. She'd cringe at the state of my wrinkled skirt and report my heinous crime to her mother.

"Hola, prima!" I screamed.

Elvira shrieked, jumping a foot. She rolled her eyes. “You’re incorrigible.”

“Only in front of you.” I glanced down at her empty hands, looking for the missive. “Where is it?”

“My mother bid me to come fetch you. That’s all I know.”

We set off the cobbled path leading up to the main house, our arms linked. I walked briskly as was my norm. I never understood my cousin’s slow amble. What was the point in not reaching where you wanted to go quickly? Elvira hastened her step, following at my heels. It was an accurate picture of our relationship. She was forever trying to tag along. If I liked the color yellow, then she declared it the prettiest shade on earth. If I wanted carne asada for dinner, then she was already sharpening the knives.

“The letter won’t suddenly disappear,” Elvira said with a laugh, tossing her dark brown hair. Her eyes were warm, her full mouth stretched into a wide grin. We favored each other in appearances, except for our eyes. Hers were greener than my ever-changing hazel ones. “My mother said it was postmarked from Cairo.”

My heart stuttered.

I hadn’t told my cousin about The Last Letter. She wouldn’t be happy about my wanting to join Mamá and Papá. Neither of my cousins nor my aunt understood my parents’ decision to disappear for half the year to Egypt. My aunt and cousins *loved* Buenos Aires, a glamorous city with its European-style architecture and wide avenues and cafés. My father’s side of the family hailed from Spain originally, and they came to Argentina nearly a hundred years ago, surviving a harrowing journey but ultimately making a success in the railroad industry.

Their marriage was a match built on combining Mamá’s good name and Papá’s great wealth, but it bloomed into mutual admiration and respect over the years, and by the time of my birth, into deep love. Papá never got the large family he wanted, but my parents often liked to say that they had their hands full with me anyway.

Though I’m not precisely sure *how* they did when they were gone so much.

The house came into view, beautiful and expansive with white stones

and large windows, the style ornate and elegant, reminiscent of a Parisian manor. A gilded iron fence caged us in, obscuring views of the neighborhood. When I was little, I used to hoist myself up to the top bar of the gate, hoping for a glimpse of the ocean. It remained forever out of sight, and I had to content myself with exploring the gardens.

But the letter might change everything.

Yes or no. Was I staying or leaving? Every step I took toward the house might be one step closer to a different country. Another world.

A seat at the table with my parents.

“There you are,” Tía Lorena said from the patio door. Amaranta stood next to her, a thick, leather-bound tome in one hand. *The Odyssey*. An intriguing choice. If I recalled correctly, the last classic she tried to read had bitten her finger. Blood had stained the pages and the magic-touched book escaped out the window, never to be seen again. Though sometimes I still heard yips and growls coming from the sunflower beds.

My cousin’s mint-green gown ruffled in the warm breeze, but even so, not a single hair dared to escape her pulled-back hairstyle. She was everything my mother wanted me to be. Her dark eyes stole over mine, and her lips twitched in disapproval when she took in my stained fingers. Charcoal pencils always left their mark, like soot.

“Reading again?” Elvira asked her sister.

Amaranta’s attention flickered to Elvira, and her expression softened. She reached forward and linked arms with her. “It’s a fascinating tale; I wish you would have stayed with me. I would have read my favorite parts to you.”

She never used that sweet tone with me.

“Where have you been? Never mind,” Tía Lorena said as I began to answer. “Your dress is dirty, did you know?”

The yellow linen bore wrinkles and frightful stains, but it was one of my favorites. The design allowed me to dress without the help of a maid. I’d secretly ordered several garments with buttons easy to access, which Tía Lorena detested. She thought it made the gowns scandalous. My poor aunt tried her hardest to keep me looking presentable but unfortunately for her, I had a singular ability to ruin hemlines and crush ruffles. I did love my dresses, but did they have to be so delicate?

I noticed her empty hands and smothered a flare of impatience. "I was in the garden."

Elvira tightened her hold on my arm with her free one, and rushed to my defense. "She was practicing her art, Mamá, that's all."

My aunt and Elvira loved my illustrations (Amaranta said they were too juvenile), and always made sure I had enough supplies to paint and sketch. Tía Lorena thought I was talented enough to sell my work in the many galleries popping up in the city. She and my mother had quite the life planned out for me. Along with the lessons from countless tutors in the artistic sphere, I had been schooled in French and English, the general sciences, and histories, with a particular emphasis, of course, on Egypt.

Papá made sure I read the same books on that subject as he did, and also that I read his favorite plays. Shakespeare was a particular favorite of his, and we quoted the lines to each other back and forth, a game only we knew how to win. Sometimes we put on performances for the staff, using the ballroom as our own home theater. Since he was a patron of the opera house, he constantly received a steady supply of costumes and wigs and theater makeup, and some of my favorite memories were of us trying on new ensembles, planning for our next show.

My aunt's face cleared. "Well, come along, Inez. You have a visitor."

I shot a questioning look at Elvira. "I thought you said I had a letter?"

"Your visitor has brought a letter from your parents," Tía Lorena clarified. "He must have run into them during his travels. I can't think of who else might be writing to you. Unless there's a secret caballero I don't know about . . ." She raised her brows expectantly.

"You ran off the last two."

"Miscreants, the both of them. Neither could identify a salad fork."

"I don't know why you bother rounding them up," I said. "Mamá has her mind made up. She thinks Ernesto would make me a suitable husband."

Tía Lorena's lips turned downward. "There's nothing wrong with having options."

I stared at her in amusement. My aunt would oppose a prince if my mother suggested it. They'd never gotten along. Both were too headstrong, too opinionated. Sometimes I thought my aunt was the reason my mother

chose to leave me behind. She couldn't stand sharing space with my father's sister.

"I'm sure his family's wealth is a point in his favor," Amaranta said in her dry voice. I recognized that tone. She resented being married off, more than I did. "That's the most important thing, correct?"

Her mother glared at her eldest daughter. "It is not, just because . . ."

I tuned out the rest of the conversation, closed my eyes, my breath lodged at the back of my throat. My parents' letter was here, and I'd finally have an answer. Tonight I could be planning my wardrobe, packing my trunks, maybe even convincing Elvira to accompany me on the long journey. I opened my eyes in time to catch the little line appear between my cousin's eyebrows.

"I've been waiting to hear from them," I explained.

She frowned. "Aren't you *always* waiting to hear from them?"

A fantastic point. "I asked them if I could join them in Egypt," I admitted, darting a nervous glance toward my aunt.

"But . . . but, *why?*" Tía Lorena sputtered.

I linked my arms through Elvira's and propelled us into the house. We were charmingly grouped, traversing the long stretch of the tiled hall, the three of us arm in arm, my aunt leading us like a tour guide.

The house boasted nine bedrooms, a breakfast parlor, two living rooms, and a kitchen rivaling that of the most elegant hotel in the city. We even had a smoking room but ever since Papá had purchased a pair of armchairs that could fly, no one had been inside. They caused terrible damage, crashing into the walls, smashing the mirrors, poking holes into the paintings. To this day, my father still lamented the loss of his two-hundred-year-old whiskey trapped in the bar cabinet.

"Because she's *Inez*," Amaranta said. "Too good for indoor activities like sewing or knitting, or any other task for respectable ladies." She slanted a glare in my direction. "Your curiosity will get you in trouble one day."

I dropped my chin, stung. I wasn't *above* sewing or knitting. I disliked doing either because I was so terribly wretched at them.

"This is about your cumpleaños," Elvira said. "It must be. You're hurt

that they won't be here, and I understand. I *do*, Inez. But they'll come back, and we'll have a grand dinner to celebrate and invite all the handsome boys living in the barrio, including Ernesto."

She was partly right. My parents were going to miss my nineteenth. Another year without them as I blew out the candles.

"Your uncle is a terrible influence on Cayo," Tía Lorena said with a sniff. "I cannot comprehend why my brother funds so many of Ricardo's outlandish schemes. Cleopatra's tomb, for heaven's sake."

"¿Qué?" I asked.

Even Amaranta appeared startled. Her lips parted in surprise. We were both avid readers, but I was unaware that she had read any of my books on ancient Egypt.

Tía Lorena's face colored slightly, and she nervously tucked an errant strand of brown hair shot with silver behind her ear. "Ricardo's latest pursuit. Something silly I overheard Cayo discussing with his lawyer, that's all."

"About Cleopatra's tomb?" I pressed. "And what do you mean by *fund*, exactly?"

"Who on earth is Cleopatra?" Elvira said. "And why couldn't you have named me something like that, Mamá? Much more romantic. Instead, I got *Elvira*."

"For the last time, Elvira is stately. Elegant and appropriate. Just like Amaranta."

"Cleopatra was the last pharaoh of Egypt," I explained. "Papá talked of nothing else when they were here last."

Elvira furrowed her brow. "Pharaohs could be . . . women?"

I nodded. "Egyptians were quite progressive. Though, technically, Cleopatra wasn't actually Egyptian. She was Greek. Still, they were ahead of *our* time, if you ask me."

Amaranta shot me a disapproving look. "No one did."

But I ignored her and glanced pointedly at my aunt, raising my brow. Curiosity burned up my throat. "What else do you know?"

"I don't have any more details," Tía Lorena said.

“It sounds like you do,” I said.

Elvira leaned forward and swung her head around so that she could look at her mother across from me. “I want to know this, too, actually—”

“Well, of course you do. You’ll do whatever Inez says or wants,” my aunt muttered, exasperated. “What did I say about nosy ladies who can’t mind their own business? Amaranta never gives me this much trouble.”

“You were the one eavesdropping,” Elvira said. Then she turned to me, an eager smile on her lips. “Do you think your parents sent a package with the letter?”

My heart quickened as my sandals slapped against the tile floor. Their last letter came with a box filled with beautiful things, and in the minutes that it took to unpack everything, some of my resentment had drifted away as I stared at the bounty. Gorgeous yellow slippers with golden tassels, a rose-colored silk dress with delicate embroidery, and a whimsical outer robe in a riot of colors: mulberry, olive, peach, and a pale sea green. And that wasn’t all; at the bottom of the box I had found copper drinking cups and a trinket dish made of ebony inlaid with pearl.

I cherished every gift, every letter they mailed to me, even though it was half of what I sent to them. It didn’t matter. A part of me understood that it was as much as I’d ever get from them. They’d chosen Egypt, had given themselves heart, body, and soul. I had learned to live with whatever was left over, even if it felt like heavy rocks in my stomach.

I was about to answer Elvira’s question, but we rounded the corner and I stopped abruptly, my reply forgotten.

An older gentleman with graying hair and deep lines carved across the brow of his brown face waited by the front door. He was a stranger to me. My entire focus narrowed down to the letter clamped in the visitor’s wrinkled hands.

I broke free from my aunt and cousins and walked quickly toward him, my heart fluttering wildly in my ribs, as if it were a bird yearning for freedom. This was it. The reply I’d been waiting for.

“Señorita Olivera,” the man said in a deep baritone. “I’m Rudolpho Sanchez, your parents’ solicitor.”

The words didn’t register. My hands had already snatched the envelope.

With trembling fingers, I flipped it over, bracing myself for their answer. I didn't recognize the handwriting on the opposite side. I flipped the note again, studying the strawberry-colored wax sealing the flap. It had the tiniest beetle—no, *scarab*—in the middle, along with words too distorted to be called legible.

“What are you waiting for? Do you need me to read it for you?” Elvira asked, looking over my shoulder.

I ignored her and hastily opened the envelope, my eyes darting to the smeared lettering. Someone must have gotten the paper wet, but I barely noticed because I finally realized what I was reading. The words swam across the paper as my vision blurred. Suddenly, it was hard to breathe, and the room had turned frigid.

Elvira let out a sharp gasp near my ear. A cold shiver skipped down my spine, an icy finger of dread.

“Well?” Tía Lorena prodded with an uneasy glance at the solicitor.

My tongue swelled in my mouth. I wasn't sure I'd be able to speak, but when I did, my voice was hoarse, as if I'd been screaming for hours.

“My parents are dead.”