

Chapter One

IN DE NILE

“What’s she doing now?” Jagger moaned as his little sister spun and zoomed back into the house.

“Don’t leave without me,” Aria yelled. She whizzed through the front door held open by Grams, who lived in the other side of their red brick, two-flat with Gramps.

“Grabbing Jerry?” Mom guessed.

“Is Jerry the stuffed yellow pig or the orange zebra?” Jagger leaned back against the yellow cab that was waiting to take him, Mom and Aria to the airport. Again.

“Jerry is the pink mouse.”

He almost asked why the pink mouse wasn’t a girl, but he’d heard Mom’s lectures on gender constructs enough times to give them himself. Besides, Jagger would be perfectly happy to miss their plane. Crisscrossing the planet was Mom’s thing ... and Aria’s. Jagger just wanted to stay home and enroll in Chicago’s most selective middle school with his best friend, Andrew. But because of Mom’s travel-writer job, he and Aria were homeschooled from around the globe: Singapore, Sydney, Samoa. He once wrote a history paper from a lodge in Senegal.

“Let’s go,” Aria howled as she ran out of the house, kissed Grams’ wrinkled cheek, then hiked her enormous, purple bag over her shoulder and rushed to the cab. Her dark, blond curls bounced, framing her face like a mane.

She didn't have Jerry, just her over-sized, sparkly purse. On the bright side, if Jagger needed a snack, or a charger, or, possibly, a pet zebra on their zillion-hour flight, there was a good chance Aria could mine it from the depths of her bag.

"She's trading toys for fashion," Mom joked, waving goodbye to Grams one last time. "Our baby is growing up."

Jagger flinched. He hated it when Mom referred to Aria as *their* baby. His sister was eleven years old, just two years younger than him. But Mom acted like Jagger was her co-parent. Her mantra was: *it's your job to take care of your sister*. So Jagger watched after Aria, and his aging grandparents, alone, while Mom travelled the world.

The only thing worse than being forced to play grown-up was being dragged from one exotic locale to another.

Stifling an eye roll, Jagger slid in next to Aria, who was perched in the middle of the cab's back seat, arms wrapped around her precious purple cargo.

"You must be excited, Brainy." Aria always called him Brainy. Jagger took it as a compliment: he *was* smarter than her, after all.

"About what? Spending the next twenty-four hours in planes and airports and cabs? Or teaching you math at forty thousand feet?"

Mom gave the cabbie instructions as Aria flashed the silver-haired stranger her you'd-love-me-if-you-knew-me grin. She turned to Jagger. "We're going to your favorite place, right?"

"And not just to Egypt," Mom chimed in before Jagger could respond. "We're going to Amarna, Egypt, where the fanatic pharaoh you're so interested in once ruled."

"It's not like he's going to be there," Jagger sighed.

“Yeah, but I thought you said the Amar-uh Time was the greatest period in history.”

“The Uh-mar-na Period,” Jagger corrected his sister, articulating each syllable slowly so she could wrap her little brain around the word.

Aria didn’t stifle *her* eye roll—she just let it fly.

“And it *was* the coolest period ever,” he added. “I’d just rather read about it, in my room, with a big bag of chips, than stare at old rocks left behind by people who died thousands of years ago.”

“Maybe you can read *next* to the rocks.” Mom smoothed a stray black curl back into the ponytail at the nape of her neck. “We’ll call it Adventure Reading.”

Aria laughed. “It’s like Adventure Eating, but for nerds!”

Jagger ignored them, staring out the window as Mom and Aria made more ‘adventure’ jokes. The two of them shared the irrational belief that adding the word ‘adventure’ before a thing magically rendered it more interesting. Aria loved things like Adventure Eating—eating food no one you knew had ever eaten before. Jagger, on the other hand, spent their days abroad longing for hamburgers and deep-dish pizza.

The cab turned onto Lake Shore Drive from their South Side neighborhood, which was stuffed with small bungalows and two-flats and mom-and-pop shops. The city stretched tall in the distance. Lake Michigan looked extra blue in the morning light. It changed colors depending on algae and nutrients. And mussels, which made the lake prettier, but also led to less phytoplankton, which meant fewer fish. That was bad for fishermen like Gramps, a retired military vet who spent his free hours with a pole in his hand.

Jagger watched the lake fly past in a blur of blue and green until the cab rolled to a stop at a red light. He flinched, startled by a huge, black cat that jumped onto the railing separating the street from the park, running miles along the lake, teeming with bikers and dog walkers. The cat stared at Jagger with shrewd green eyes, like it was judging him. It was so close Jagger could pet it if he rolled down the window.

Jagger kept his eyes on the uncanny cat until the cab rushed forward, then he shook himself: *cats don't size up thirteen-year-old boys.*

“Traffic is light today,” the cabbie said in an accent Jagger recognized as East End London ... because of course they'd spent a week in London last year. “We should be at O'Hare in less than an hour.”

Jagger's eyes snapped open. He sat up and sucked in a ragged breath. Sweat trickled down his back as he searched the one-room rental house for the voice that had called his name.

“A dream,” he muttered, laying back down and rolling onto his side to stare at his mom and little sister, asleep in the other bed. He yanked the sheet over his head, trying to ignore the familiar anger bubbling up, lodging in his throat like a wad of three-day-old gum—anger over their chaotic life of travel and instability. Sure they were in the one

place on Earth Jagger would want to see *if* he were the type of historian who wanted to *see* the places he read about. But he wasn't!

Meow.

The black cat Aria had caught moments after their tiny plane landed in Amarna pawed at him. Jagger lowered the sheet and watched it flick its tail back and forth, then jump to the other bed and snuggle next to Aria. His sister had a knack for adopting strays and for acting hysterical when Mom made her leave them all behind.

It blinked its eerily familiar green eyes, then licked its paws and ignored him.

Jagger Jones!

“Ah!” Jagger shot out of bed. He grabbed his phone from the nightstand and shined its LED light around the room, heart hammering in his chest. “Who’s there?”

Come, Jagger Jones!

Okay. Not a dream. The voice came from outside. It sounded like a girl. But he didn't know any Egyptian girls. He didn't know anyone in Amarna. This could *not* be real.

Jagger Jones!

Slipping on his high tops, Jagger tiptoed across the room. He glanced over at Mom. She breathed heavily through parted lips, but she didn't budge. He paused at the door, his sweaty hand on the knob. Maybe he was still asleep. Or maybe the heat was getting to him. Or perhaps his topsy-turvy family life had finally pushed him over the edge.

Jagger Jones!

Or, maybe, some girl really was outside, calling his name.

With a backward glance, Jagger unbolted the door and peeked out. No girl, just archeological ruins, ringed by limestone cliffs. The Nile River flowed serenely past, creating a natural border on one side. The Egyptian, night sky was brilliant, with stars so big and heavy he felt like he could reach out and touch them.

Come, Jagger Jones!

“Hello?” Jagger whispered as he stepped out, shutting the door gently behind him. Pink gravel crunched under his favorite shoes as he threaded his way through the small, scattered, mud-brick houses that belonged to locals who farmed the nearby fields and rented their homes to scholars and archeologists and stalwart adventurers like his mom.

He rubbed his arms—the wind was chilly—and cursed himself silently. He knew better than to venture off alone into a foreign desert as surely as he knew the square root of pi, the circumference of the sun, and the inauguration date of every American president. But his big brain couldn’t stop his dumb body from moving forward—he *had* to find this girl.

Jagger Jones!

She must be just ahead, close to the cliff face. Was she be pranking him? Who was she? How was she throwing her voice like that? An app, maybe? Some kind of AI? A new spin on voice verification? And how did she know his name?

BBBBZZZZZZZZZ.

Jagger jumped. Heart racing, he glanced at his buzzing phone’s screen. Five old texts from Andrew and a new one from Dad showed on the screen. At least it wasn’t Mom, busting him. His best friend had texted him hours earlier. Dad, on the other hand, was texting in the middle of the night, Amarna time. Because of course he was. Dad

never thought of anyone but himself—it wouldn't dawn on him that the timing was inconvenient for Jagger. Worse, Dad would be mad if Jagger didn't respond immediately, as if a guy who refused to spend time with Jagger and Aria, or help pay for them, deserved a midnight reply!

Jagger Jones!

The voice reclaimed his attention. It sounded muffled now, like it was coming from under his feet. She couldn't be underground. Could she? Jagger shoved his phone in his pocket and dropped to his knees, pressing his ear against the desert floor.

Jagger Jones! Come!

Yep. She was down there. But how?

He blew a puff of air, staring at his hands, resting on the red-tinted dirt. When the voice called out to him again, Jagger did the only thing he could think to do: he dug. The sand was hard. It squirmed underneath his nails, piercing him.

“Jagger! What are you doing?”

He scabbled backward, startled by the familiar voice, mimicking his thoughts in that uncanny way of hers.

“Aria!” His voice was shrill.

His little sister hiked her purse onto her shoulder and stomped toward him, dust swirling at her feet. She was wheezing. Her asthma must be kicking in.

“You need—”

Aria held up one hand, as she pulled an inhaler—bejeweled, of course—from her purse with the other hand. After a few quick puffs, she asked again. “Seriously. What are you doing?”

“You need to go back,” Jagger said.

Actually, they *both* needed to go back. Mom would ground him for life if something happened to Aria because she followed him on a midnight stroll through an Egyptian desert.

“Stop parenting me! I’m not a baby.”

Jagger Jones!

“Did you hear that?” Jagger leaned forward, pressing his hands against the shifted dirt.

“Hear what? What are you talking about? Mom is going to—”

“Shhhh.” His finger flew to his lips. “Listen.”

Come, Jagger Jones!

Jagger studied his sister. Aria stood, hands on her hips, tapping one foot as she glared at him. She didn’t react to the voice. She couldn’t hear it.

Part relieved and part disappointed, Jagger snapped at her, “This is none of your business, lil’ sis. Go back before Mom wakes up and freaks out.”

“And what am I supposed to say when she asks where you are? I mean, I know you have some crazy connection to this place, but really, I don’t understand what’s happening right now. You’re usually so ... so ... boring!”

Jagger rolled his eyes. He knew she was right. He also knew from years of trying to ditch her that Aria wasn’t going anywhere until she wanted to. “I’m ...” He paused, feeling stupid. “I’m digging. Okay?”

Aria cocked her head to the side, then shrugged. Unlike Jagger, who liked things neat and tidy and sensical, Aria embraced a carefree worldview: anything was game as long as it seemed fun. “Okay. But, uh, shouldn’t you use a shovel for that?”

“You think?” He rubbed his brow. “Do *you* have one handy?”

She tapped a finger against her cheek, then dropped to the ground and dug through her purse. She pulled out a small, orange bag with a ballerina bulldog on it. Unzipping it, she handed Jagger a pair of nail trimming scissors. A second later, she banged the ground where Jagger had been digging with an oversized, rainbow colored pen.

“Really? You’re just going to help me dig? This doesn’t seem, you know, odd to you?”

Aria flashed him a bright smile. “Brainy, I’m happy you’re finally doing something interesting ... as long as Mom doesn’t find out!”

Come, Jagger Jones! Come!

The voice pulled Jagger’s attention back to the desert floor. With Aria and her supplies, the digging went faster. Five minutes later, they broke the hard, top surface, and sand tumbled away, cascading down as if the Earth was inhaling, sucking it in.

Jagger’s heart banged against his chest as he struggled to process what he saw.

“No. Way!” He breathed. “This *cannot* be happening!”