

THE GIRL IN THE GLYPHS BY DAVID AND MARIA EDMONDS

CHAPTER 1

Granada, Nicaragua

1994

The streetlights were coming on when I stepped out of a taxi and stared up at the dreaded Alhambra, the place that had haunted my dreams from the day I found Father Antonio's letter. He had written it here, in his prison cell behind one of those balconies on the second floor. In the time of the Inquisition. Now I was here, with a copy of the same letter in my shoulder bag.

"They say it's haunted," the driver said.

"What's haunted?"

"Your hotel."

I put on my glasses. Even in the poor light, I saw bullet-pocked walls, a railing that hung down at an angle, and missing chunks in the columns. "What happened?"

"The war, señorita."

"I thought the war was over."

"Tell that to the Contras. They're still in the jungle."

"Why do you say it's haunted?"

"All I know is what they say." He stepped to the rear of the taxi, opened the trunk and began taking out luggage. I put on my leather jacket and was reaching for my shoulder bag when something moved back in the shadows—a soldier, standing beneath a broken streetlight, staring.

A chill came over me, like a cold whisper in the wind, and for a terrible moment, I imagined

Father Antonio gazing down at me from his balcony, saying, "It is you he is spying on, *mija*. Be careful. What happened to Catherine Cohen could also happen to you."

No, that was silly. Why would a soldier be spying on me? He wouldn't know the purpose of my visit. For all I knew, he could be waiting for his girlfriend.

The soldier moved deeper into the shadows. At almost the same moment, a bellhop in a white jacket emerged from the darkness, a skinny little fellow with shaggy hair.

"Señorita McMullen?"

"How do you know my name?"

"We've been expecting you," he said in campesino Spanish. "People have been calling for you. Also a gringo stopped by, asking about you."

"Gringo?"

"A North American, an official of some sort."

The knot in my stomach twisted tighter. This trip was supposed to be confidential. Now the hotel was haunted and someone was asking for me. By name. "Is he still here?"

"Who knows, señorita? You can ask them at the desk."

I settled with the driver, shouldered my bag, and followed my luggage up the steps and into a lobby that must have once been elegant. The marble floors and crystal chandeliers probably went back to colonial days, but the wobbly ceiling fans, evil-smelling cigar smoke, and guests in guayabera shirts gave it the feeling of an old Bogey and Bacall movie. No television either, but somewhere a salsa was playing, heavy on the maracas and cowbells.

An American-looking man in a wicker chair glanced up from his newspaper and stared as if wondering why I was traveling alone. So did everyone else. I brushed back my hair and stepped to the counter. The clerk behind the desk was having a spirited conversation on the phone, but he

hung up when he saw me. "Señorita?"

"I'm Jennifer McMullen-Cruz," I said in Spanish, and showed him my passport.

"Of course, the archaeologist. Welcome to Granada."

I rolled my eyes. Damn my office. They were supposed to register me as a photographer. Archaeologists attracted attention. "I'm told a man was asking for me. Is he still here?"

"I don't see him, but you've got faxes."

He took two envelopes from a pigeonhole and handed them to me along with a room key. I opened the first envelope and saw the letterhead of Victoria, my director at the Smithsonian. The message was brief. *Hope you took an evening gown.*

Well, yes, Victoria, I had brought a gown, just as you suggested. It was in my luggage along with khakis, boots, insect repellent and sunscreen, but I still didn't understand why. It wasn't as if I needed an evening gown to search for Father Antonio's cave.

The other message was from Stan. Cheating, lying Stan, who'd promised to come with me on this trip. *I made a terrible mistake, Jen. Let's don't throw away three years of marriage.*

"Two," I mumbled.

I read it again. Could this be the same Stan who dumped me for a doctor's wife? The same Stan who said we were finished? And now he wanted me back? Was he crazy?

I crumpled up the fax, scooped up the key, and was halfway across the lobby before I realized I hadn't signed in, didn't know where I was going, and everyone in the place was still staring.

Easy, Jen. Get yourself together.

The bellhop trotted over with my bags. His nametag identified him as Sabio. "*Por ahí,*" he said, nodding to the stairway door. "Let's get you upstairs before the lights go out."

"Why would the lights go out?"

"The war, señorita. They destroyed the power plants. We get electricity only half a day. Water goes out too."

I grabbed my bag and had scarcely turned around when the entrance door burst open. A woman gasped, and as if I wasn't stressed enough, soldiers came tramping into the lobby—dark-faced teenagers in combat fatigues and black berets, pants tucked into muddy boots, assault rifles at the ready, looking as if they'd just stepped from the jungle.

Female soldiers were also in the mix: wiry-haired, rumped, and wild-eyed.

A seed of panic sprouted in my stomach. When I was a child in the Yucatan, daughter of a missionary father and Mayan mother, soldiers had come to our house and accused my dad of supporting the Zapatistas. I didn't know what that meant, but I remembered the curses and the way they roughed up my dad and dragged my mom into a back room for "interrogation."

Now they were here again. Different country. Different uniforms. Same odors.

The officer in charge, a squat man with a pocked face, rapped his swagger stick on the counter. "Turn off that damn radio!"

The salsa went dead. It grew quiet enough to hear the squeak of overhead fans. The officer marched to the middle of the lobby and glanced around, slapping his swagger stick into an open palm. "Listen up," he barked. "We've been told contras are using this hotel. We need to see picture identification—drivers' license, passport, whatever."

Run, said a voice in my head. *It's you they want.*

But it was too late. Soldiers had positioned themselves near the exits, looking like bronze statues amid the potted palms. Sabio leaned toward me and lowered his voice. "When you show your passport, be sure to include a gratuity. They prefer dollars."

"Are you serious? Is that all this is, a shakedown?"

"Shh, not so loud. Happens all the time. Just don't argue with them."

I pulled out a ten and slipped it into my passport. Other guests were also taking out money and handing it over like parishioners in a church. The American-looking man in the wicker chair caught my eye and shrugged. Texas, I figured, noting his jeans, boots, and silver-studded belt.

"That's him," Sabio whispered, "the gringo."

The officer glared at us. He narrowed his eyes and took a long gaze around the lobby. At the man in the wicker chair. At a woman with a baby.

At me.

"*Vos*," he snapped. "Get over here."

"Me?"

"You, *señorita*. In the leather jacket. Move it."