



*The Buried
Gold of
Shechem*

A Kent family adventure

Jennifer L. Armstrong

**THE BURIED GOLD OF
SHECHEM
(A Kent family adventure)**

By
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CHAPTER ONE

My parents don't normally fight.

But today, they are having a very animated discussion. Julia and I are exchanging worried glances. The contention is taking place in the kitchen while we're in the living room with our baby brother, David. He's adorable just starting to get wide-eyed and curious about everything. But he's also the reason for the arguing in the kitchen.

“Now Helena, I don't expect you to take a three-month-old baby to an archaeological conference . . .”

“That's not the point, Anderson.”

Julia and I look at each other, wide-eyed. We have never heard Mom use dad's first name like that. He's always Andy to her. Anderson was his mother's maiden name. He's Dr. Anderson Kent, a well-known Biblical archaeologist and from what I can tell, he's been invited to speak at an upcoming conference.

“If it were any other place . . .” continues Mom. “Jerusalem, maybe . . .”

“But Helena, the whole point of having it in Nablus is to protest the damage that Israelis do to Palestinian heritage sites.

There will even be some Israeli speakers there.”

“That doesn't comfort me. It sounds too . . . volatile.”

“That's why I don't expect you to bring David. I'll bring the girls, if they want.”

Julia and I give each other a thumbs up. She's fourteen and I'm sixteen. We went to Israel last summer, but we stayed close to Jerusalem. I would love to get to see Nablus and more of the whole area.

“Anderson,” says my mother, again. “Just because they're older doesn't mean it's safer.”

I groan quietly.

“Helena, I think it's important that they see the whole picture. They had a chance to see Israel. Now I want them to experience Palestine.”

“When you say experience, do you mean, get caught in Hamas crossfire? Or maybe just join in throwing rocks at Israeli tanks?”

I've never heard sarcasm like that come from my mother.

But instead of sounding angry, I hear my dad laugh.

“Helena, that's exactly why they need to go! Palestine is not all intifada. Most people there just want peace. That's why it's so important to have the conference there. The Israelis have to know that they have no right to destroy a heritage. Security-issues have to be handled differently.”

“It sounds fine when you're over here discussing it,” grumbles my mother. “But what are you all going to do over there? Lie down in front of bulldozers?”

“Helena, you know perfectly well we'll sit around in a large room and bore each other to death with presentations. At night we'll eat shawarma and falafel in the Old City and practise our halting Arabic to demonstrate our solidarity with the Arab people.”

“But the girls . . .”

Julia and I exchange anguished looks. Will Mom persuade Dad that we need to stay home?

“Ginny speaks better Arabic than I do,” says Dad. “I'll definitely need to have her along.”

It's true. Ever since we came back from Palmyra in Syria, I've been going through a conversational Arabic book I bought

online.

“Then Julia can stay with me,” says Mom, obviously deciding that losing one daughter is better than losing two daughters.

Julia's groan is loud. There is a moment of silence in the kitchen.

“Fine,” sighs Mom, sounding thoroughly defeated. “I can't fight you all.”

Mom returns to the living room to retrieve David.

“Well girls,” she says, with a forced smile, “I guess you're off to Nablus.”

“Woow-hoo!” says Julia, who probably can't find Nablus on a map.

“Thank you, Mom,” I say, solemnly, kissing her on the cheek.

This time her smile is more normal.

“It's hard not to worry, but I'm going to just have to let it go . . . and pray a lot.”

I hand David to Mom and he looks up at her with a big sleepy grin. Mom holds him close. It can't be easy being a mother.

Last time we went to Israel, it was easy. We flew to Tel Aviv. We drove to the dig-site.

We've done the part where we flew to Tel Aviv. But driving to Nablus is a little more complicated. The conference organizers had a van waiting at the airport for all the attendees arriving on the same day, but now we're all stuck at a checkpoint.

The irony is that the checkpoint is no longer being patrolled. According to Dad's guidebook on the Palestinian Territories, it's the former Huwarra checkpoint, which used to be a bottleneck for the people of Nablus wanting to leave the city. A year ago, it was operational but then due to the vicissitudes of politics in this area, Israel closed it.

Now we're stuck here because we have a flat tire.

While the tire is changed, we get out and stroll around. The road is lined with concrete barriers topped with wire fencing. The concrete hut for the Israeli soldiers is now empty but one

can easily imagine it being reoccupied. Arabic graffiti is here and there, but my Arabic is too limited to understand it. About all I recognize is the word *qif* on a stop sign, but since the sign is the familiar red octagon, that's really no accomplishment on my part.

“This used to be a tiny taste of hell,” says one of the archaeologists, a middle-aged man who introduced himself as Yunus at the airport. He is an archaeologist living in Syria, but was born in Palestine. He and Dad have been talking a lot once Yunus found out that dad was one of the archaeologists who discovered the treasure of Tadmor. “The crowds. You would wait for hours in the heat. At some point, it would turn violent. Then the soldiers would react. The number of times you would hear about a 19-year-old Arab being shot here, I cannot even tell you.” Yunus shakes his head at the memory.

Another scholar, Bernt from Sweden, nods in agreement. He is tall, blue-eyed and his blond hair is turning grey. He has brought his son, Göran, who looks like a younger version of him. Göran is about seventeen and the way Julia is eying him, I can tell she thinks he's cute. Wait till we get to Nablus and she sees all the dark-eyed, dark-haired Arab guys. She won't know what to do.

“Yes,” says Bernt. “And there was always a few of the young man, blind-folded and hands bound behind their backs over there.” He points to a spot near the concrete hut.

“Why?” asks Julia. I think she's hoping Göran will answer, but it is Yunus who says they were detained for smuggling pipe bombs and other such weapons into Israel, but he is quick to point out that stray Israeli bullets were the number one cause of injuries at this checkpoint.

If Dad wants us to get an education, we are definitely getting both sides of the story. When we were in Israel last year, we never heard anything about pipe bombs and blind-folded men.

The tire is replaced and we're back on the road.

Nablus is the largest Arab city in Palestine. There is the Old City, but like Jerusalem, a whole modern city has been built up around it. It is a hilly country so the roads go up and down as we pass by the Middle Eastern mix of old and new. I can see

about thirty minarets along the skyline. Some of them must belong to historical buildings.

The green hills are covered with high-rises and low-rises, usually a white or a sandy-coloured stone. Colour is provided by Palestinian flags with their black, white and green stripes and red chevron.

Yunus starts pointing out damage that has occurred since his last visit. Bernt is nodding vigorously as he mentions a story he read recently about Jewish settlers burning down a mosque in one of the small towns in the outlying area. Total devastation and the villagers could do very little to prevent it.

“Why Dad?” I ask, whispering. “Why would they do that?”

“It’s their worldview,” says Dad, quietly. “They believe God gave them the land as a perpetual inheritance so they are justified in driving out everyone else.”

“That sounds like the Old Testament!” I say.

Despite that we are speaking softly, Yunus hears.

“Yes,” he says. “History plays out over and over again here. And Anderson is right, it is all about worldviews. At this conference, we will address that. There will be no peace unless viewpoints change.”

“It is an endless list of injustice,” murmurs Bernt, not sounding too optimistic.

The conference is being held at Al-Qasr Hotel. It is a large modern hotel, eight-stories high. Yunus points out the nearby An-Najah National University and then waves in the opposite directions to tell us that it is a fifteen-minute walk to the Old City.

Al-Qasr has all the facilities for a conference. Dad says there are 200 people expected to be attending the conference, but many are students and faculty members from the nearby An-Najah National University. We have to share a room with Dad since every room is taken by the out-of-town attendees.

The conference doesn’t start until tomorrow, so after we check in and our luggage has been taken up to our room, Dad suggests a walk around the Old City. Julia is looking longingly at Bernt, and more specifically, Göran, but Bernt says he is going to go visit some old friends at the university. Göran, who is extremely quiet, passively follows his father out the glass

doors.

I'm not worried about Julia. She'll cheer up when the next good-looking man wanders across our path.

It turns out to be Yitzak. He's an attractive Israeli archeologist and an old friend. We met him when we were in Israel last summer. He was the dig director.

Just as we're heading out of the hotel, he's coming in. He and Dad greet each other with big smiles and slaps on the back. He gives me and Julia a grin.

"Hold on," he says to Dad. "Just let me check in and toss my bag somewhere." He's traveling light, just a knapsack. But then, he only had to come from Jerusalem.

Within five minutes, Yitzak has joined us and we're setting out.

Just outside of the hotel, Yitzak shepherds us into a taxi and says something in Arabic to the driver.

It's great to have Yitzak along, certainly from the perspective of acquiring knowledge. He's Jewish, but is passionate about preserving all the diversity of antiquity in Israel and Palestine. As we head down the road, he is already telling us the history of the area.

The Romans conquered the area in 63 BC and created Neapolis, which is the origin of the name Nablus. We drive a few kilometres west of the city and arrive at some ruins. Yitzak says they are what's left of the Roman city and he and Dad have much to discuss while they wander around the columns and the theatre. The taxi driver has a cigarette while he waits. He gives me and Julia a smile.

"Alo," he says. Hello.

"Marhaba," I reply. This is my first time actually speaking Arabic to a real Arab!

"B'tahki Arabi?" he says, his smile wider.

"Na'am," I nod. "Keef halak?"

I hope I'm saying that right. How are you?

"Bhayr, Alhamdulillah." I'm fine, thanks be to Allah.

"Ismee Muhsin," he continues. My name is Muhsin.

"Tasharrafnaa," I say. Pleased to meet you. "Ismee Ginny."

I can feel Julia's jealousy. She has not bothered to learn any Arabic and our driver is pretty good-looking.

Dad and Yitzak return and at that point, Yitzak tells us that the roots of the city go back even further. The modern city is built near Biblical Shechem. Initially, it was a Canaanite city. It's location made it an ideal trading centre.

Yitzak talks all the way back to the hotel.

Abraham first built an altar in Shechem. It was also here that Dinah, daughter of Jacob, was violated by the local ruler's son who then wanted to marry her. Instead of allowing their sister to marry the man, Jacob's sons tricked them all into getting circumcised and then slaughtered the whole male population of Shechem.

The list of significant Biblical events that took place at Shechem is long – Jacob's sons pastured their sheep at Shechem; Joseph's bones were buried here; Gideon's son, Abimelech, was crowned king here; Jeroboam was also crowned king here when the northern tribes broke away from Solomon's son, Rehoboam; the town was the capital of Northern Israel for a while; after the exile, the Samaritans built a holy temple on nearby Mount Gerizem; Jacob's well is here and so this is the place where Jesus talked to the Samaritan woman and told her he was the Messiah. Yitzak relates this last event to us with a rueful grin. He doesn't, of course, believe Jesus was the Messiah.

We are back at the hotel now, but Yitzak tells Muhsin to keep going and drop us off near the Old City.

We take a road that goes straight to the heart of Nablus.

The traffic and the crowds increase as we leave behind the university and residential neighbourhood and get closer to the city centre.

We're down in a valley now with all of hills around us covered in the white and sandstone buildings.

The sidewalks are crowded with shoppers. My head swivels to take it all in. Some things are similar to home, others are different. One shop window has rows of mannequin heads wearing hijabs. Arabic writing is everywhere and I wish I had taken the time to learn the alphabet too. Some of the stores have English in smaller lettering, but I'd like to be able to read it all, including the banners that cross the streets.

Fruit sellers are on the sidewalks, their carts piled high. An

outdoor café with multicoloured umbrellas to shade patrons from the sun is doing a brisk business. Most people are wearing Western clothing although many of the women have hijabs. A lot of the young men wear a black-and-white keffiyah around their necks as a scarf.

People cross the street with no regard for traffic. Yellow taxis are everywhere. Police in dark uniforms occasionally pass by in jeeps.

Despite that some buildings look like they've taken direct hits, the green trees and the bustle of people make up for the piles of rubble.

Dad comments on the number of people out today and Muhsin calls back something about, "No curfew!" Yitzak nods.

"The streets are silent when they have curfews here," says Yitzak.

I don't want to ask, but I gather that when there's violence, the army shuts the city down.

"Ma' a-salaamah," says Muhsin, as we get out of his taxi. With peace. His smile is directed at me.

"Fursa sa'aida," I say. Pleased to have met you.

Yitzak now leads us in the direction of the Old City. This time, there is no history lecture, only a chance to take in the atmosphere. Unlike Jerusalem, it's an unwalled city, but it has similar narrow streets and greyish white stones. Young children trail along behind their mothers who wear abayas, hijabs and carry shopping bags. Flights of stone stairs go up and disappear around corners.

But Nablus is more run down than Jerusalem. Yitzak explains that the dilapidated buildings aren't neglected, they were destroyed in Israeli raids. The graffiti and posters on some of the walls look angry, as if the city is on the edge of revolt. But in the meantime, life goes on.

A quiet little lane suddenly opens into a bustling souk.

We wander through the fruit and vegetable market. One seller has a counter with tall plastic glasses filled with fruit, juice, nuts and topped with chocolate sauce. Julia announces that she's hungry.

Yitzak laughs and says the tour will include a stop for a late lunch.

Meanwhile, we pass by stalls selling spices, nuts, raisins, dates, sweets, olives, feta cheese. The smell of fresh bread comes from the open-air bakeries. Down another street, there are household items, such as bedding, brassware, all sorts of clothing, Western and traditional. I stop to look at some leather sandals while Dad selects a beautiful scarf for Mom. He and the Arab merchant negotiate in English over the price. I can't help much there. I learned the numbers up to ten, but that's about it.

Once Dad is finished and the scarf is put in a small bag for him, Julia decides she has to have one too. She selects one and the merchant tells her a price. Julia wrinkles her nose, not because she disapproves, but because she's not really good at negotiating. The merchant lowers the price. Julia looks puzzled. He lowers it even more. She gets out her wallet and gives him some of her shekels.

Yitzak is chuckling as we walk away.

“What?” says Dad.

“She got a much better price than you, Anderson,” says Yitzak, grinning.

We pass by a young boy selling large posters. They are portraits of men with lots of Arabic writing and scenes of Nablus in the background.

“Are they political leaders?” I ask Yitzak.

He glances at the display.

“Martyrs,” he says. “Who died defending Nablus.”

I look at the young boy with his large brown eyes. He's watching me. He's only about ten.

“As-salaamu alaykum,” he says solemnly. Peace be on you.

I'm glad I learned the reply.

“Wa alaykum as-salaam,” I say. And on you be peace.

But Dad and Yitzak are getting ahead so I have to hurry on.

I can't help but look back.

The young boy is still watching me. I smile. He hesitates, but then gives me a big grin and holds his fingers up in a V. Victory.

The Buried Gold of Shechem

CHAPTER TWO

Julia has Göran to look at during breakfast.

The conference started today and the first event is pastries and coffee in one of the hotel's meeting rooms.

About 60 people are present. Dad says the numbers will vary depending on the events and the presentations. The people here at the welcome breakfast are mostly the foreign guests. Apart from me, Julia and Göran, everybody is a distinguished archaeologist or scholar. The purpose of the conference is to demonstrate a worldwide solidarity for protecting the archaeological sites located in the Palestinian territories. Each speaker will be contributing an article to a book that will subsequently be published. The proceeds of the book will be used to raise an awareness of the damage that is being done to the Palestinian culture by the continual clashes with Israel.

The scholars who live in the area will be doing presentations regarding specific sites that have been affected by the ongoing conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Dad might want us to experience Palestine, but he doesn't want us to do it on our own, so we'll be attending all the presentations with him.

The first speaker is a Palestinian archaeologist. About a

hundred people sit in a room adjoining the one where we had our morning coffee. The middle-aged man, wearing glasses and dressed casually in a white shirt and beige slacks, gives a talk on how Israel is systematically claiming Arab heritage sites. Those who live in Shechem are familiar with the conflict over Joseph's tomb. He gives a brief talk on skirmishes that have taken place around the tomb.

But primarily, he discusses the recent Israeli appropriation of Abraham's tomb in Hebron, a site important not just to Jews, but to Muslims and Christians as well. Hebron is indisputably part of the Palestinian Territories so confiscating the tomb is a militarily aggressive act and the outraged citizens have responded with anger. It is political in that it shows complete contempt for the Palestinians and their right to be a nation. It is an insult to the Muslim faith to suggest that the Jewish veneration of Abraham is more important than the Muslim one.

He points out that the common heritage should suggest to any clear-thinking person that Israelis and Palestinians should work together to preserve their shared inheritance, not fight over it. (There is a lot of applause.) Nothing will be accomplished by Israel appropriating the sites that fall on Arab lands. (More applause.)

I'm enjoying this. But Julia beside me is restless. Göran, three rows ahead of us, has an iPad and is reading something probably completely unrelated.

Göran's father is the next to speak.

He starts off his talk with an observation that both the Palestinians and the Israelis are living in a state of ambiguity. While the majority of the citizens wants peace, both cultures tolerate their extreme factions.

“Should the Palestinians fight harder?” Bernt shrugs. “Should the Israelis lower their standards of security? It is not for me to say. Does the answer lie with diplomacy?”

Bernt then discusses the history of the Swedish people in the Holy Land. While the Turks still ruled Palestine, a group of American Christians came out to live in Jerusalem. They had suffered great personal losses and wanted a more spiritual experience. One of them was Horatio Spafford, known for writing the hymn, *It Is Well with My Soul*. They were later

joined by a large community of Swedish Christians. Despite this addition, they were known as the American Colony.

Today there is a hotel in Jerusalem called the American Colony. It was begun by these Christians who, in time, started providing sleeping accommodations for people who had come to visit the Holy Land.

Bernt holds the audience's attention with the activities of the American Colony, all humanitarian. Though they were mocked at times for their beliefs, no one could question the good deeds that they did.

"I believe Jesus would have approved," says Bernt. "For their time here was spent practising his parable of the Good Samaritan."

Arab Christians in the audience nod their agreement.

"I would like to finish off with a story that is both sobering and inspiring. Another Swede came to this land in 1948, Count Folke Bernadotte. He was sent by the United Nations to negotiate a peace between the Arab people and the fragile new State of Israel. His story, I am sure, is not unfamiliar to you. Had his proposals been accepted, I believe we would already have peace in this region. Bernadotte did not believe in a culture of ambiguity, but a culture of peace with clear boundaries. Sacred spaces would not have become battlegrounds, but places of worship."

There is applause.

"But because even at that time, extremists were determining policy, Count Folke Bernadotte was assassinated by the Jewish terrorist group, Lehi, and his proposals slipped into history."

There is a lot of nodding.

"And so the strife continues to this day," concludes Bernt. "We all love this land and we have all inherited its problems. If we do not bring peace to it, it will fall to our children to do so." He glances at Göran and then at me and Julia.

Amid applause, he sits down.

I'm thinking about that little boy in the souk, selling the posters of the martyrs.

There is a break and we all move back into the room that had the coffee and pastries. There are fresh snacks now – tea, dried fruits and nuts.

“I enjoyed your father's talk,” says Dad to Göran, who happens to be in the line with us. Bernt is surrounded by fellow academics.

“Dad is always talking about Count Folke Bernadotte,” says Göran. “He was his great-uncle, or something.”

“I didn't know that,” says Dad, taking a handful of dried apricots, while I pour myself some tea. Julia is so enthralled at being in the presence of Göran that she has forgotten to get anything to eat as we pass by the table. “Something to be proud of.”

Göran nods.

“I've read a lot about the American Colony,” continues Dad. “So I enjoyed hearing more about that too.”

Göran nods again.

“Are you interested in Palestine, Göran?” Julia asks.

Another nod.

Yitzak joins us and much to Julia's dismay, rather than Göran turning his attention to her, he listens to the archaeologists talking. Maybe I read him wrong. The iPad could be a research tool or a way to take notes during the lectures.

There will be two more talks and then we will be free for the rest of the day.

Yitzak suggests that we join him after the talks for a walk over to the university. Dad says, sure. Julia looks hopefully at Göran, but he's already drifting back to his father. So, instead, she asks Yitzak if there will be a place to have lunch at the university.

“But, of course,” he says, grinning. “There is an excellent falafel stand on the way.”

After the break, we hear a talk from one of the female professors at the university. She tells the story of the rape of Dinah by the prince of Shechem. The prince then fell desperately in love with Dinah. He would pay any price to have her as his wife. But her brothers considered it such an act of dishonour that their only choice was to fight the townsmen and retrieve their sister from the house of the prince.

The professor ties this story in with the Palestinians' current situation. They have been shamed by Israel to the point that

even if they are courted by the Israelis, for their own honour, the Palestinians continue to fight.

She also points out that in the conflicts over the years that have taken place in Nablus, women have died as well as men and thus, women have earned the right to have a say in the future of their nation. There is some applause.

Yitzak is the final speaker for the day. He gives a summary of the history of Nablus and Shechem, not unlike the one he gave to us.

Then we're off to the university. It's only April, but it's hot outside.

We get our promised lunch at the falafel stand, sitting on some stone benches while we eat.

The An-Najah National University is a campus of white-stone buildings with matching walkways and spacious green lawns. Two enormous Palestinian flags hang down on one of the main buildings.

This isn't a tour of the campus, but an opportunity for Dad to meet some of the professors. Yitzak leads us into a spacious building with white walls and a black-and-white checkerboard floor. Students mill around, some reading bulletin boards, others just chatting in groups.

We go down a hallway and come to some offices. Yitzak takes Dad into one of them to meet an older Arab man. There are some benches in the hallway for me and Julia.

"I'm in love with Göran," says Julia to me, while we're waiting.

"No you're not," I say. "You don't even know him."

"You have to help me meet him," she says.

"You've already met him," I point out.

"We're the only people under thirty at this thing," says Julia. "Maybe we could organize some kind of a youth event . . ."

I sigh at my sister's lunacy.

"Do you really want to live in Sweden?" I ask.

That makes her think for a moment.

"It's a long way from home," I add.

But Julia persists. I guess she's decided Sweden would be fine.

“C'mon Ginny. You're smart. I think he might be smart too.”

“Then maybe I should get together with him.”

She punches my arm.

But even Julia can see how pointless this discussion is and we just people-watch in silence. Students pass by, young men and women, many of the women wearing abayas and hijabs.

From the office, we can hear talking and laughter.

“We're going to be here awhile,” Julia groans.

“I don't mind,” I say. “It's a different country. I'd rather be here than at home.”

“I should have brought a novel,” says Julia, sighing. “I don't know how I'm going to survive the next two weeks. I should have brought a lot of novels.”

“Dad wouldn't let you read novels throughout the conference,” I point out. “And that's another reason why you and Göran are a bad idea. He actually likes archaeology.”

“Ginny,” Julia says. “Aren't you ever going to fall in love?”

“I hope not,” I say.

There is one more professor to visit in this building. Again, we're outside in the hallway. From inside, we can hear talk about archaeology in Syria, archaeology in Israel, archaeology in Jordan and archaeology in Iraq. The discussion isn't just about present-day activities, but a history of archaeology that goes back to the 1800's.

Julia complains to me that her bum has pins-and-needles.

Dad apologizes when they come out but I say, “We don't mind.” Julia gives me a nudge that says, speak for yourself.

I guess she's spent a lot of time thinking about Göran because she asks Yitzak, “Is Bernt an archaeologist?”

Yitzak thinks for a moment.

“Well, he is many things, I think. More of a historian, really. Very knowledgable about the Mandate period in Palestine.”

“When the British were in Palestine, Jul,” says Dad, to clarify.

“I believe he is a very devoted Christian, like yourselves,” continues Yitzak.

I get another nudge from Julia who obviously considers this point significant.

“Do he and Göran live in Sweden all year round?” asks

Julia, no doubt wanting to plan her future life. We are now exiting the building, back out into the bright sunlight.

Yitzak laughs.

“Yes, I believe so. Although they visit here a lot too. Was his talk that engaging?”

Julia blushes but continues.

“Now, does Göran help his dad?”

“Very interesting question,” says Yitzak. He and dad are exchanging amused smiles. “From what little I know, Göran’s mother died a few years ago, and yes, Göran travels with his father wherever they go. They have been with us a few times in Jerusalem. Not surprisingly, they stay at the American Colony Hotel. Bernt does a lot of research when he is here.”

Yitzak looks at Dad with a mischievous grin.

“We must organize a get-together, you and your family and Bernt and Göran. We will go to Mount Gerizim. The ruins of the temple there are very impressive.”

“But what if Bernt doesn’t want to go?” asks Dad, solemnly. Only the sparkle in his eyes gives it away that he’s joking.

“Oh, but we must make him go!” says Yitzak. “The American Colony took many, many photos of Palestine, including a whole series of photos of a Samaritan Passover on Mount Gerizim. He will most certainly want to visit this important historical site.”

Julia is beaming. If she realizes they’re making fun of her, she doesn’t care.

All the way back to the hotel, she discusses with me what she will wear on our picnic to Mount Gerizim. She’s turned the whole thing into a picnic now, not a walk through ruins. She really only has one dressy outfit – a floral dress. She’ll wear her new scarf, of course. Maybe before we go to Mount Gerizim, Dad will take her back to the souk so she can buy some bangles . . .

But when we get back to Al-Qasr Hotel, all of Julia’s plans are demolished by some startling news.

Bernt is pacing the lobby, agitated.

As we come through the glass doors, he practically falls on us.

“Is Göran with you?” he demands.

The Buried Gold of Shechem

CHAPTER THREE

Dad and Yitzak are startled.

“No,” says Dad looking at us, as if maybe we have Göran hidden in our purses. “I haven't seen him.”

Bernt collapses onto a lobby couch.

“It was my last hope,” he says, running a slim hand through his greying hair. “I thought maybe, he went off with the young people . . .”

Yitzak sits down beside him, concerned.

“When did you last see him?”

“After your talk. I told Göran I wanted to go upstairs and rest. He said he would grab lunch and join me later. I have not seen him since.”

“Should we call the police?” asks Dad.

“Oh, they have their hands full,” says Bernt, groaning.

“They do not need this. I do not want to be an international concern.”

“We will call them anyhow,” says Yitzak. “Göran's safety is a number one concern.”

“It is not that simple,” murmurs Bernt.

“What do you mean?” asks Dad, sitting on the other side of Yitzak.

“I think he might have gone off on his own,” says Bernt. He exhales heavily.

“Come,” says Yitzak, standing and taking Bernt's arm. “You look like you could use a coffee.”

Bernt nods wearily.

We follow Yitzak to one of the hotel's restaurants, a carpeted lounge with small round tables. The adults take one table and me and Julia another. Coffees are ordered and brought over to the tables.

“Now,” says Yitzak. “Why would Göran go off and not tell you where he was going?”

Bernt takes a sip of his coffee.

“It is just something between us lately,” he says, slowly and quietly. Julia is visibly straining to hear. “He is restless now. He wants to have his own interests.”

“I gather he likes archaeology,” says Dad.

Bernt nods.

“Yes, he is very interested in archeology. More than he is in going through archives and reading old letters.” Bernt smiles. I gather that's what he does.

“Is it possible he simply went off on his own, to look around Nablus?” asks Yitzak.

“Very possible,” nods Bernt. “But you see, he has never done that before. Why didn't tell me? Oh you must forgive me. I am just an over-worried father.”

“There's nothing to forgive,” says Dad, firmly. “I'm a father and I know exactly what you're going through.” He glances at us.

He should. Julia once took off without telling us and scared my parents silly.

“I just wish I knew where he was,” says Bernt, sounding so sad.

An idea occurs to me.

“His iPad,” I say. “Maybe he left you a note on that!”

The adults look at me.

“Yes, it is possible,” says Bernt, nodding. “He has never done anything like that before. But the iPad is new.”

Bernt leaves his coffee to go upstairs and get his son's mobile reader.

He returns within minutes, chagrined.

“I do not know how to turn this thing on.”

Yitzak grins and takes it from him. He presses a button on top and then slides a finger at the bottom to unlock the icons.

“Here,” he says, handing it back to Bernt. “Just tap on the notepad icon.”

Hesitantly, Bernt presses a finger on the small picture of a notepad.

There is text in the notepad. But from what I can see, it is too lengthy to be a quick note. Bernt is reading it. We see his eyebrows go up.

“Is it a personal message?” Dad asks.

“Oh dear God, no,” he says, shaking his head. “Oh my boy!”

Julia is practically falling off her chair, trying to get closer to the adults.

“What is it, Bernt?” says Yitzak.

Bernt groans.

“I am afraid he is off on a treasure hunt!”

“A treasure hunt!” we all say at once. It's a good thing we're the only people in the lounge.

Bernt nods.

“I would have never thought of this . . .”

“Thought of what?” asks Yitzak.

“The idols,” says Bernt, absently, his eyes on the reader.

“What idols?” says Dad.

“Jacob's idols,” says Bernt, looking up. “You know the story. Dinah is violated. Her brothers slaughter the men of Shechem. Jacob is afraid. He knows the people of the neighbouring villages will avenge the men of Shechem.”

Yitzak and Dad are both nodding.

“Now Jacob has to leave. God gives him protection, but before he goes, he has his household bury all their idols and their earrings under a terebinth tree near Shechem.”

Yitzak's nodding increases.

“They are an idolatrous people,” says Yitzak. “Jacob cannot arrive back at Bethel, the House of God, with such idols.”

“I did not know that Göran even knew this story,” says Bernt, shaking his head as he stares down at his son's iPad.

“It seems as if he decided to go looking for the buried idols of Shechem,” says Dad. “What exactly is a terebinth tree, Yitzak?”

“Some translations of your Bible say oak,” says Yitzak. “But it is more likely the *Pistacia Palestina*. But surely you don't believe it is still standing, Anderson? A four-thousand year-old tree?”

Dad laughs.

“Probably not. But tell me, Yitzak? Has this stash of idols ever been found?”

Yitzak shakes his head slowly.

“Not to my knowledge, no.”

“The tree might have rotted away,” says Dad. “But the stash could still be there.”

Yitzak nods.

“In fact,” Dad continues. “If the tree rotted away or was chopped down, that would increase the likelihood that it is still there. The tree was the only marker. If no one found the idols right away, then it would not be a widely-known story until Moses recorded it, many years later. If the tree were gone by then . . .”

“Of course, there has been much digging and rebuilding over the last four thousand years,” says Yitzak.

“True,” says Dad. “But this tree was located outside of Shechem. Not in the heart of the city. It could have been in an area that was never touched by the Israelites or Romans.”

“Then it will be like looking for a needle in a haystack,” said Yitzak. “The spot could be anywhere in the countryside.”

“But you don't want to find the idols,” says Julia boldly. “You want to find Göran.”

The adults are startled. Then Dad and Yitzak look embarrassed. They were caught up in the excitement of possibly making a great archeological find.

“You're right, of course, Julia,” says Dad. “What does it matter where the idols were buried or whether they're still there? What we have to figure out is, where did Göran think they were?”

Yitzak takes the iPad off the table and switches over to the internet. The last page Göran viewed was the Wikipedia entry

to Shechem, but as Yitzak points out, “It doesn't exactly give us the coordinates of Jacob's terebinth tree.”

“You say that the terebinth tree was outside of Shechem?” I ask Dad and Yitzak. They nod.

“Then Göran probably didn't go on foot,” I say. “He probably doesn't know the bus routes, so he would have taken a taxi.”

“You're right,” says Dad, standing up. “Let's see what we can find out!”

All of us on our feet.

Outside the hotel, there is a taxi.

The driver is leaning against it, smoking a cigarette.

Muhsin!

“Marhaban, Ginny,” he says, giving me a big smile. Dad is startled. “Masaa' al-khayr!” Good afternoon or evening.

“Masaa' al-nuur,” I reply. The standard response.

Yitzak has a small smile on his face. All the adults seem to be leaving it to me.

“We were wondering if you took a young man anywhere earlier,” I say. “Bernt's son.” I point. “Ismahu Göran.” His name is Göran.”

“Na'am,” says Muhsin, nodding and tossing his cigarette into the gutter. “I took him around for a drive. He was interested in trees. I showed him some trees.”

All the adults exchange glances.

“Did you bring him back here?” asks Bernt, the anxious father.

“La,” says Muhsin. “No. He wanted to look around. I said I would come back for him if he wanted.” Muhsin glances at a watch. “Half an hour.”

“Take us now,” says Bernt, climbing into the taxi.

“Amrak,” Muhsin says, getting into the driver's seat. I am at your service.

We drive out of the crowded streets of Nablus to beyond, where there are fields and trees. Muhsin winds through the hills, Yitzak points out how close we are to Mount Gerizim. The temple ruins that we were going to picnic near are being visited by a group of tourists.

Muhsin brakes to a stop by a field. Out in the middle of the

field is a single tree.

“Pistacia,” says Yitzak.

“This is where I pick him up,” says Muhsin.

But there is no Göran.

Bernt is out of the car and hurrying to the field. All of us, including Muhsin, follow. To our amazement, there is the beginning of a hole by the base of the tree.

Then, coming rapidly toward us, is an angry middle-aged man wearing a white dishdash and waving a shovel at us.

“Go!” he shouts. “Imshee!”

He is serious.

Muhsin says a few words in Arabic. The man replies, still looking at us suspiciously.

“Fellah says young Firinji comes here digging up his tree. He called the police.”

Bernt gasps.

“What's a Firinji?” Dad asks.

“It is a term for Europeans,” Yitzak explains. “From Frank. You know, French. The Crusaders were mostly French.”

“Ahh,” says Dad, enlightened. “Well, that must have been Göran, then.”

“What police station would they have taken him to?” Bernt asks Muhsin.

Muhsin shrugs. The gesture infuriates Bernt. Bernt begins to shout at him that he'd better figure it out soon because otherwise . . .

“Ta'al,” says Muhsin, signalling for us to follow. Come.

Back in the taxi, Bernt is still a simmering volcano, but Muhsin says a whole load of Arabic to Yitzak who translates for us.

“He didn't want to say in front of the farmer,” says Yitzak. “But he doubts they would have taken Göran to any police station. They have real criminals to take care of in Nablus. Some crazy foreigner digging up a tree would probably just get a warning.”

Bernt's anger collapses and he just looks defeated. He doesn't apologize to Muhsin though.

“Where now?” says Dad.

“Probably back to the hotel,” says Yitzak. “That's the most

likely place the police would have dropped him off.”

It's a quiet and uncomfortable ride back into Nablus. Muhsin gives me a quick grin in the rearview mirror. I'm glad he's not letting Bernt get to him.

Bernt goes straight into the hotel when we get back. Dad and Yitzak share the cost of the cab-ride.

“Shukran jazeelan,” I say to Muhsin. Thank you very much.

He gives a slight bow.

“La shukr ala waajib,” he says with a sparkle in his eye.

“What does *la shukr ala waajib* mean,” I ask Yitzak back in the lobby.

He smiles.

“No need to thank me, it is my duty.”

The Buried Gold of Shechem

CHAPTER FOUR

Of course, if they were wood, they would have rotted away. Only stone and gold will survive,” says Yitzak. “Or clay.”

Göran nods.

His father hasn't forgiven him yet, but Dad and Yitzak have decided that the best approach to the whole thing is to take Göran seriously. They are talking about the idols buried under the terebinth tree.

Bernt is upstairs resting, so Göran has been invited to join us for dinner at the hotel's Sultan Restaurant.

Julia is staring at Göran with open adoration, but so far, he hasn't glanced at her once. His focus is entirely on Dad and Yitzak.

Göran has repented of his escapade and now admits that the likelihood of the original terebinth tree still standing is nil. Yitzak points out that it's even a stretch that the original trees in the Garden of Gethsemane are still standing, although the guides like to tell the tourists they are the same ones Jesus prayed in the midst of.

“But it is my understanding that olive trees can survive for thousands of years,” say Göran.

“Oh, they can,” says Yitzak. “In ideal conditions. But you must think like an archeologist. What is one of the things that has happened time and time again in this land?”

Göran thinks.

“Umm, war?”

Yitzak nods.

“And war means soldiers, and soldiers chop down trees for their fires. They also chop down trees as an act of war. So time and time again, trees have to be replanted.”

Göran nods.

Even if she can't have his attention, Julia continues to focus on Göran. My focus is on the view of Nablus out the window. When the food comes, Julia turns her attention to that.

It's a feast of lamb and beef and chicken, rice, and a tabbouleh salad. Halfway through it, Bernt joins us, giving us all a weary smile.

Dad pulls a chair out for him.

“I have behaved badly,” he says, once he is seated. “I want to say sorry to you all. I have already said my apologies to our driver who was on the receiving end of my anger earlier.”

“No need to apologize,” says Dad. “We all knew you were worried.”

“And I want to apologize to you,” Bernt says to Göran. “I have known for some time that you have your own interests and pursuits, but I have never encouraged them for the simple reason that I did not want to lose you. I lost your mother and . . .”

At this point, Bernt's voice almost breaks.

But the awkward moment is relieved by Julia who announces to Bernt that when you feel a little a bit down, you should have something to eat.

We all laugh and Bernt is handed a plate to fill up from the communal platter.

Pretty soon, we're all talking and laughing. Bernt says that since he is done his talk at the conference, maybe he and Göran will check out the area and try to find some clues regarding Jacob's buried idols. Do a little research.

“Research!” Göran groans.

Yitzak smiles.

“It is the best way,” he says. “Better than digging under a farmer's tree.”

Göran concedes the point.

Julia is visibly disappointed that Göran will be out exploring ancient Shechem, rather than sitting during the conference where she can watch him.

After a dessert of baklava and some more Turkish coffee, our party goes its separate ways. Bernt and Göran head out for an evening walk. Yitzak goes off to visit a fellow archaeologist staying in the hotel. We return with Dad to the room. He wants to go over his presentation. He'll be speaking the day after tomorrow.

Julia and I sit on our bed and turn on the TV. I wish my Arabic were better because the show looks really funny. It's a comedy and seems to be making fun of all the checkpoints people have to go through.

“Dad,” says Julia, solemnly, when the show is over. He looks up from his laptop. “Don't you think it's your duty as an archaeologist to help Bernt and Göran look for those buried idols?”

Dad laughs.

“It's more of a treasure hunt, Julia. Kind of like going after the lost ark of the covenant. Some farmer could have discovered those idols a thousand years ago and sold them in the marketplace and we would have never heard a word about it.”

Dad returns to his serious work, while Julia despondently gets ready for bed. Personally, I'm looking forward to tomorrow. I love getting to hear these talks. But with Göran out of the picture, tomorrow is looking pretty bleak for Julia.

There has been a surprising change in Julia. She has come up with a plan guaranteed to win Göran's heart and is now filled with purpose. At breakfast, she announces to Dad that she would like to research the whole terebinth tree of Shechem thing. She knows she's not allowed to run around the countryside digging up trees, but can she use Dad's laptop during the talks to do some internet research?

Dad beams.

He has always held the theory that the best learning comes as a result of a genuine interest in something. So while Dad and I listen to the first speaker talk about Palestinian architecture, Julia is reading an online article about the history of Shechem.

Julia occasionally glances up to look at the slides of examples of ironwork or outside staircases or arches. Some of the pictures are from the days of the British mandate, others are modern.

I have to give her credit. She's really reading the stuff online. Usually, you can't get Julia to read anything more serious than a Nancy Drew novel. In this case though, all her Nancy Drew experience will probably be an asset. Nancy would have no problem finding something as simple as a four-thousand year-old tree.

Julia totally monopolizes Dad during the morning break. She drags him away from the crowd of archeologists to a quiet corner to report that Eusebius said that ancient Shechem is underneath modern Neapolis. This was confirmed in 1903 by some German guys who found some remains of Shechem.

"Shechem is in east Nablus," says Julia, her eyes shining. "Right beside Joseph's tomb. Close to Jacob's well."

"Good job, Julia!" says Dad.

"That's interesting," I say. "So, when Jesus sat down and talked to the woman at the well, he could have been sitting near the idols?"

"Possibly," says Dad. "The tree was outside of Shechem. So was the well."

"It would be easier if the tree had been at the centre of Shechem," I say. "There's a lot more land outside of Shechem to search."

Dad laughs.

"Keep reading, Julia. The clues may very well still be there."

I don't know if he's just humouring her or if he genuinely wants her to pursue this. But the change in my sister is phenomenal. She was so excited about what she found that she forget to grab some pastries that were laid out for us.

The next two presentations are completely lost on Julia. At

lunchtime, much to our amusement, she hurries us all over to join Yitzak. She wants to discuss Jacob with him, no doubt figuring that since he's an Israeli Jew, he'll know more about Jacob than Dad.

Yitzak also finds this entertaining and suggests we all go out to lunch.

Muhsin isn't outside the hotel today but we don't need a cab.

"We're in Rifidiyah," Yitzak says. "Some of the best restaurants in Nablus are around here. If you feel like a walk though, we can go further."

Dad and I definitely want to do some walking though I think Julia would be happy to go straight to a restaurant.

Although it is a built-up area, Rifidiyah is not the centre of town. We have to do a bit of walking past the high-rises and low-rises of the newer part of Nablus before we come to an area where there are restaurants and small shops lining the streets and people are out shopping.

"If we were interested in the Crusades," says Yitzak. "I could show you some ruins leftover from their days here."

Julia isn't interested, but Dad is.

"They called it Naples," says Yitzak. "And one of the Queen Mothers lived here after her son exiled her from Jerusalem."

Julia is momentarily distracted by a sweet seller. She missed the morning snack. This small shop has huge platters of some kind of a flat pastry.

"Konafa," says Yitzak, smiling. "Very delicious. Cheese and syrup with pistachios on top. We can have some for dessert on our way back."

Yitzak leads us into a large restaurant with a tiled floor and decorated with Arabic ornaments. We are welcomed by a smiling man and led to a table for four. In Arabic, Yitzak orders our meal. Soon he and Dad are drinking Turkish coffee while Julia and I sip on some lime juice.

"OK Julia," says Yitzak with a broad grin. "Tell me what you have."

Julia nods solemnly. She's seated across from him.

"When Abraham first came to Shechem, there was a large tree that he camped by, called the great tree at Moreh. He set up an altar to God there. When Jacob came by that way, he

bought land and also set up an altar to God. After all that stuff with the people of Shechem, killing all the men and all that . . .”

Yitzak looks amused.

“. . . the idols were probably buried under that same tree that Abraham camped by.”

Yitzak nods.

“Probably,” he agrees. “Now, Julia?”

“Uh huh?”

“Was that great tree on Jacob's property?”

“I dunno,” says Julia. “Probably. Why?”

“Because,” says Yitzak leaning forward and putting his elbows on the table. “Joseph's bones were later brought back by the Israelites when they left Egypt. They were buried in the plot of land bought by Jacob. And we know where his tomb is today.”

Julia's eyes widen.

“Yes,” says Yitzak nodding. “We also know where Jacob's well is today. So that would make that great tree somewhere in the area of those two sites.”

“Can we visit them?” says Julia, excited.

“Certainly,” says Yitzak. “But we cannot start digging under them!”

We all laugh.

Julia wants to set out for Joseph's tomb right after lunch, but Yitzak says that, alas, he has plans to meet with some people at the university. Dad is invited to join him, but he says he wants to go back to the hotel and put the finishing touches on his presentation for tomorrow.

The food comes and we all focus on that. Yitzak tells us it's musakhan, a popular Palestinian meal, roasted chicken, fried onions and pine nuts served on flatbread. Dad comments on the spices and Yitzak tells him they are allspice and sumac.

After the meal, Julia excuses herself to go to the bathroom.

“Is she onto anything, do you think?” Dad asks Yitzak, once Julia is out of hearing range. “I mean, I'm glad she's getting excited about this, but I think it's a wild goose chase.”

Yitzak nods.

“As you recall, when Joshua was an old man, he gathered all

the leaders of Israel at Shechem and they made a covenant to keep Yahweh's laws. A large stone was set up to commemorate the occasion and placed under the terebinth tree, now considered a holy site.”

“I forgot about that,” says Dad.

“Now, we know that Moses didn't complete the Torah since the five books of Moses contain the story of his death. No doubt it was Joshua who did it. But my point is, by this time it was recorded history . . .”

“I think I know where you're going with this,” Dad interrupts. “The story of the buried idols was now a common story.”

Yitzak nods.

“And the tree was still standing. Any treasure hunter could have come along and dug them up.”

“Any idea when that tree disappeared from history?”

“It was still there when Gideon's son was crowned king. It's mentioned that he was crowned under it.”

Julia returns but the discussion continues.

“In its favour, it was a holy site,” says Yitzak. “So even if the tree is no longer there, the site might have remained important. It's possible, Bernt might find something with his research. I'll be honest, Shechem is not my area of expertise.”

“Nor mine,” says Dad, as we stand up. “But in this business, we're always learning.”

Yitzak agrees and as we head out of the restaurant, he wishes us a good evening. He's going to take a taxi back. Dad nods and says he needs a walk to work off the meal.

As we leisurely head back to the hotel through the late afternoon crowds, Julia reminds Dad that she has been promised konafa for dessert.

“But that was Yitzak who promised,” he protests.

No matter to Julia. Yitzak is gone now, so Dad must keep the promise.

I'm full but I want to try some too. Dad says we'll take it back to the hotel. The konafa is prepared on giant round platters and the man selling it uses a spatula to deftly slice three portions off of it and put it in a container to go.

Julia complains that the walk back to the hotel is uphill.

“Just wait until we hike up Mount Gerizim,” says Dad, grinning.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dad will be speaking today. But first, there is a woman from the university, a professor of economics, who discusses the way the Israelis fight the Palestinians on the economic front. Nablus has a thriving soap industry, a unique olive-oil based product that is known for its quality and is exported all over the region and even throughout Europe. Consistently, the Israelis have targeted the factories and the industry has been repeatedly damaged. She gives a history of soap-making in Nablus and points out that it is an attack both on their culture and on their current economic situation.

Then it's Dad's turn to speak.

He starts by discussing workable models for bridge-building in Palestine. He cites several examples of organizations that are committed to bringing Arabs and Jews together. There are several integrated schools. There are cultural events organized by people committed to peaceful solutions. Another obvious example is the people in this room, the archaeologists and scholars who are committed to preserving the common heritage of Palestine.

“These are all good,” says Dad. “In the end though, for lasting peace, we need a model that is able to transcend

personal tragedy. For example, a Jewish man might be committed to attending cultural events with the Arabs of Palestine, until a member of his family dies in a suicide bombing. An Arab mother might be committed to putting her child in an integrated school, until Israeli soldiers arrest her oldest son for being a suspected terrorist.”

There is some nodding.

“So I propose that we need a workable model for bridge-building based on people who have a philosophy of life that is committed to peace and is not subject to the vicissitudes of politics or the tragedies of everyday life here. In fact, it has to be a model that transcends patriotism, because a peacemaker will not always be a patriot.”

Dad has the attention of the audience.

“Jesus lived in a time when patriotism often required taking up arms against the oppressors, at that time, the Romans. But he taught a message that was sharply contrary to human nature. He said that if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, let him slap you on the left cheek. If anyone forces you to walk a mile, walk two miles with him.” Dad surveys his audience.

“Everyone in this room knows what I mean. We see it everyday when a country is occupied. The soldiers invariably insult the civilians. In the days of Jesus, it was Romans to Jews. These days, it's Israelis to Palestinians.”

There are murmurs in the audience. I'm not sure if they are in support or not.

“Christianity is the only system of belief that requires its followers to love their enemies,” Dad continues. “It actually goes so far as to teach that you should do good to those who harm you. If your enemy is hungry, you should feed him. If he is thirsty, you should give him a glass of water. Vengeance is left to God. And in case anyone thinks that that will mean someone will get away with murder, he might, if he subsequently puts his faith in a saving God. But if he doesn't, the Christian scriptures are quick to point out that God is not mocked, whatever a man sows, he shall reap.”

Dad's talk is stirring people up. The soap-industry presentation didn't have this effect on people. Some people look annoyed. Others look cautiously interested.

“And the vengeance we have in this life is inadequate and imbalanced. If an Israeli soldier kills an Arab child and then in retaliation, an Arab youth kills an Israeli soldier, nothing has been accomplished. There has only been an escalation of violence. Only God can exact true vengeance on the correct people. And for those who don't like the idea of leaving this all to some judgement in the life to come, I can say, in own experience, I have seen the scales balanced and judgement come in this life.”

I see one man nodding, but others are just staring.

“But the judgement in the life to come is something that is common to all people of the book,” continues Dad. “So even if the wicked seem to prosper in this life, they cannot escape the consequences of their action. Jesus told a story of a man who owed a great debt but couldn't repay it. I believe this parable has tremendous power to bring healing to Palestine, so I'd like to relate it to you.”

There is shifting in the audience. The Jews present don't believe Jesus was the Messiah. The Muslims present believe Jesus was a prophet but that the Christian scriptures have been corrupted.

“There was a king who was settling his accounts. One of his servants owed him ten thousand talents. Keep in mind, a talent was about twenty-years wages for a labourer.”

Some of the Jewish scholars in the audience nod.

“The servant could not pay his debt, so the king ordered that he and his wife and children be sold to pay the debt. The servant fell to his knees and begged for mercy, saying he needed more time for the debt to be repaid. The king was so moved, he had mercy on the servant and forgave him the debt.”

I glance around. Now people are interested.

“This same servant went out and met one of his fellow servants,” Dad continues. “His fellow servant owed him a hundred denarii. A denarii was about a day's wages. Now, this first servant grabbed his fellow servant and began to shake him. 'Pay me what you owe!' His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged for mercy, saying he needed more time for the debt to be repaid. The servant refused to show any mercy and had his fellow servant put in prison until he could pay the

debt.”

There is a murmur through the audience.

“The other servants saw this and were greatly disturbed,” says Dad. “They reported the incident to the king. Naturally, the king was outraged. He called that servant to him and said, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you your debt because you begged for forgiveness. Shouldn't you have forgiven your fellow servant the way I forgave you?' The king then had his servant put into prison, until he could pay all his debts.”

Dad looks up from his notes.

“That last little statement is important. Until he could pay all his debts. All debts will be paid in this life or in the life to come. I'll take a particularly horrific example. Adolf Hitler. One man. Yet his actions had tremendous impact on millions of lives. For all the suffering he caused, according to God's justice, he will reap what he sows. Time is no issue to God. Adolf Hitler might have to live ten million lifetimes to pay his debt. The same is true about policymakers in Jerusalem today.”

Now there is a murmur of agreement in the crowd.

“But here's the real stinger,” says Dad, his eyes going back down to his notes. “The parable ended with Jesus saying, 'so my father in heaven will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.'”

Dad's eyes return the audience.

“Naturally, these principles are binding on Christians. It's not easy to practise, but it *is* a workable model for the present situation here. So I put forth the idea to you that the strongest bridge you have here is the one that can be built by Messianic Jews and Christian Arabs.”

Now there is a gasp from some of the people.

“The bond between the two groups is one of cherished beliefs, common values. Regardless of the world around us, Christians are called to love one another, love their enemies and be peacemakers. And it falls upon Christians all over the world to support their brothers and sisters here both in Palestine and in Israel, not in perpetuating the conflict, but in promoting peace.”

Dad's eyes move around the room, taking in everyone that is sitting there. There is complete silence.

“And so I'll end with one of my favourite quotes of Jesus. He said, 'blessed are the peacemakers. For they shall be called the children of God.'”

Dad steps down and rejoins me and Julia. The audience is silent and then there is some polite applause.

Everyone gets up for the break and moves into the other room to have tea and fruit.

“Very courageous, Anderson,” says Yitzak, who happens to be in front of us in the line.

Dad laughs.

“In other words, I committed academic suicide.”

Yitzak shrugs.

“Why shouldn't you have your say? Just don't expect anyone to actually start adapting your model.”

Dad grins.

“We Christians remain optimistic.”

Two more scholars talk after the break. The first man talks about how the refugee camps have become part of the permanent landscape of Palestine. He discusses the situation that brought about these camps – the displacement of Arabs from their homes when the Jews started aggressively driving them out of Palestine, starting around 1947, the year before the State of Israel was established.

He also mentions Count Folke Bernadotte and reads some of his impressions when he first visited the refugee camps in Palestine. The Count was appalled and said he'd never seen anything like it and that was coming from a man who had done a tour of Hitler's concentration camps in Europe.

“If we do not find a solution to the disappearing culture of Palestine,” the man concludes, “our culture will be one born of a refugee camp.”

To applause, the man sits down.

The second man gives a talk on hope amid checkpoints, curfews and imprisonment. He is a psychologist and discusses how negative emotions, such as fear and anger, can be channelled into art, citing examples in modern-day Palestine. Not only does visual art and music and dance provide a way to preserve heritage, it also gives an outlet for strong emotions. Palestinian literature is known for its themes of despair and

hope; weakness and strength; loss and gain. Palestinian film is bringing the suffering of the Arab people to the world in a personal way, using individual stories to make sense of the greater chaos.

He concludes that the vast majority of Palestinian culture has political undertones.

“But is this not to be expected from a people whose greatest desire is for a homeland?”

He sits down to applause.

Yitzak heads out with some of his fellow Israelis, so we're on our own for lunch.

Julia is desperate to visit Joseph's tomb. I'm not sure what she plans to do there. But Dad says we'll do it with Yitzak.

“Uh, Dad?” I say. We're now out in the lobby.

“Uh huh?” he says. He leads us to the lounge where we went with Bernt for coffee to discuss Göran's disappearance. There is a café in the hotel, but it's patrons are all men. You can smoke nargilah and I don't think Dad is going to take us there.

When we're seated and Dad has ordered us some drinks and sandwiches, I tell him what's on my mind.

“I don't think Yitzak will take us to Joseph's tomb,” I say.

“Why's that, Ginny?”

This is hard but I have to say it.

“Well, I noticed that the speakers always have people around them after they've talked.”

Dad nods.

“Except for me, right?”

“Yeah.”

Our drinks arrive.

Dad has coffee while Julia and I have lemonade.

“And Yitzak isn't a Christian,” I say.

Another slow nod from Dad.

“You're right, Ginny. I've always felt a connection with Yitzak. He's a very understanding man and one of the best archeologists I've worked with. But, of course, I can't expect him to stand by me when I put my faith right out in the open like that.”

“I kind of think we're on our own now,” I say, sipping my drink.

“I agree,” says Dad. “OK, then. After lunch, we head out to Joseph's tomb.”

Muhsin is happy to drive us. He and I exchange wishes of peace and then we get into his cab.

For a tomb, I'm expecting a drive out into the countryside. But we stay in the built-up areas, driving through residential neighbourhoods until we stop in front of a stone building with whitewashed walls and a matching dome.

“No riots today!” says Muhsin, grinning.

Dad takes in the situation and asks Muhsin if he minds waiting for us. This shouldn't take long. Muhsin nods.

“What did he mean, no riots today?” asks Julia, as we approach the small building.

“Well, this site is holy to Muslims and Jews, and to a lesser extent, Christians, so it has been a spot of contention. The type of place you see on the news where lots of people are waving Palestinian flags and the IDF is out in riot gear.”

Today is the opposite of a riot. Even for a tomb, it's deathly quiet. In fact, it's not even open.

“Well,” says Julia. “I didn't think the treasure was here anyway. Just someplace close by. How about Jacob's well?”

We return to the cab.

Dad says we'll go to Jacob's well instead.

Muhsin nods and starts up the engine.

“Very close by,” he says. “Right beside Balata.”

“Balata?” asks Dad.

“Refugee camp,” says Muhsin, pointing in the direction of a particularly densely-populated area.

It's more lively at Jacob's well than Joseph's tomb. The well is now part of a Greek Orthodox monastery. Muhsin says this visit will take longer, but he doesn't mind waiting. He gets out of the taxi with us and leans against it to have a cigarette.

We enter the monastery grounds and follow the signs. The way to the well is through the church. Dad points out that although the construction is relatively new, the church is built in Crusader-style architecture. There are stairs down to a small crypt. At first I don't even realize we're looking at a well. It is a stone room with tiled floor and gold-framed paintings on the

wall, ironwork protecting an altar and an ornate stone box in the centre. There is elaborate rigging above the stone box to indicate you can attach a bucket and lower it down to get water.

I can't imagine Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman here. But I guess a lot has changed in the last two thousand years.

We return to the cab.

I think Muhsin knows that these tourist sites are not satisfying for an archeologist like Dad. He says that ancient Shechem is close by.

"Lots of ruins," he says, grinning.

"Sure," says Dad. "I need to have my equilibrium restored. Something authentic."

It takes five minutes for us to get to the site of ancient Shechem. Modern Nablus is still right beside us.

Now Dad can go into archaeologist mode.

As we step out of the cab, he points out to me and Julia that the ancient ruins are located right in the valley between the two mountains, Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal.

"Mount Gerizim was where half the Israelites stood to proclaim the blessings for keeping God's law," Dad reminds us. "Mount Ebal was where the other half stood to proclaim the curses for not keeping His law."

We stroll among the ruins. Dad says he's been doing some reading online and that the ancient city was excavated by Germans in the early twentieth century. There have been other more recent excavations, but as we can tell, there is still much more that could be unearthed.

We wander through the ruins with Dad pointing out various spots of interest. There is a well-preserved defensive wall. Dad stands and spends a lot of time looking over the remains of a temple.

Julia asks if the buried idols might be here somewhere and Dad says that the tree would have been somewhere beyond these ruins.

"In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if those idols aren't under some apartment building," says Dad, waving a hand in the direction we came. "Remember how close together Joseph's tomb and Jacob's well were? That was probably the area where

the tree with its altar to Yahwah was.”

On our way back, Dad asks Muhsin if he can recommend the best place to get falafel in Nablus.

Muhsin laughs and drives the taxi back to modern Nablus. The roads are busy but Muhsin double-parks in front of a tiny restaurant. It is clearly takeout only and there's a small line on the sidewalk out front. Dad joins the line while Julia and I stay in the cab.

“You like Nablus?” asks Muhsin, turning around in his seat.

“Yes,” I say. “Na'am.”

“It's better here now,” says Muhsin, lighting a cigarette, but hanging it out of the window while he smokes. He ignores the honks of the cars trying to manoeuvre around him.

“Did you grow up here?” I ask.

He nods.

“Balata,” he says.

The refugee camp. I looked over at it before we went into Jacob's well. It was a village made of concrete blocks.

“What's it like there?” I ask.

“Very crowded,” says Muhsin. “My family is from Ramleh, but had to leave in the 1950's when the Israelis pushed them out. They started off in a tent. Everyone did. Then everyone just built where the tents were.”

Dad returns with the wrapped falafels and some soft drinks. Muhsin drives us back to the hotel. While Dad pays Muhsin for the afternoon, I wonder if we'll have a chance to visit Balata. Dad told Mom he wanted us to see the whole picture. I think that if we don't see Balata, we won't see the whole picture.

Once in the room, Dad falls onto his bed while Julia starts unwrapping her falafel.

“What's the matter, Dad?” I ask, sitting down on one of the chairs.

“Oh, Ginny,” he groans. “It's just what we were saying earlier. Today I spoke my heart to these people and now I'm thinking I was fool for doing it.”

I've never thought of my father as a fool. He's had so many successes in his career.

“I don't think you're a fool,” I say. “You could have told them all about the treasure at Tadmor or about the other stuff

you've done. But you told them something that might help them.”

“I guess I was naïve for thinking it would do any good.”

“You don't know that it won't,” I say.

I think I know what's happened. My dad could have spoken as a scholar and held onto the respect of the people here, but instead he decided to speak as a Christian and risked losing it.

Dad sighs.

“In any case,” he says, sitting up and reaching for his falafel, “I followed my conscience.”

We're halfway through our dinner when there's a knock at the door. Julia, being the closest to the door, answers it. It's Bernt and Göran. I try not to snicker. Julia has some sauce on her cheek.

But Göran isn't looking at her.

“Come in! Come in!” says Dad, standing up and waving them in. I quickly hop on my bed to leave the two chairs to our guests.

“I am sorry to intrude,” says Bernt as he and Göran sit down.

“Not at all,” says Dad. “Would you like a soda or anything?”

“No thank you” says Bernt. “We just got back from dinner.”

There is a pause. Bernt has come to say something but seems hesitant.

“It is just that, well, you were the main topic of conversation at dinner.”

“I was?” says Dad.

Bernt nods.

“You apparently presented an idea to them this afternoon . . .”

Dad nods, understanding.

“Ah, yes. How did they take it?”

“Not too well, I am sorry to say. It is not considered acceptable to present such a solution to the problem.”

“Mm hmm,” says Dad. “I was afraid of that.”

“I wanted to stop by though,” continues Bernt, “and say how much I admire you for speaking the way you did. The problem of peace is not going to be solved in this area unless

forgiveness is applied and the only person who spoke of how to practise such a severe forgiveness that would actually work is Jesus.”

“Thank you, Bernt,” Dad says.

“I wanted to stop by to tell you that I support you and the stand you took,” says Bernt.

“I take it, though, you were the only one who agreed with what I said.”

Bernt nods.

“It is an issue of Arab unity. The Arab Christians must be Arabs first and Christians second. At least, in the eyes of their Muslim brothers. They certainly cannot reach across the border and extend the hand of friendship to like-minded Jews.”

“Were there any Christians present?” Dad asks.

Bernt nods.

“They were the first to express their outrage. They say they have suffered equally under the hands of Israeli oppression and are not going to turn their back on their homeland and become some kind of a bridge envisioned in your presentation.”

Dad shakes his head ruefully.

“I should have known better.”

“No, Anderson. I think it had to be said. I just wish it had not come at such a high price.”

“A high price?” says Dad.

Bernt nods.

“You are going to be asked to leave the conference.”

The Buried Gold of Shechem

CHAPTER SIX

Our jaws drop. Even Julia stops staring at Göran to turn and look at Dad.

His reaction is calm.

“Well, I won't contest it.” He turns to us. “Girls, pack up your stuff. We'll stay in Nablus, but we'll leave the hotel tomorrow morning.”

“If I may be bold to suggest,” says Bernt, “why don't we all go to the Al-Yasmeen Hotel?”

Dad is surprised.

“Aren't you going to stay here?” he asks.

Bernt shakes his head.

“I have already told them that I am leaving the conference. If they cannot tolerate a logically consistent, thoughtful presentation I do not want to participate in this conference.”

“I can't thank you enough . . .” Dad begins.

Bernt smiles.

“I did it for myself as much as for you. Besides, this will give us the next week or so to see if we can discover the buried idols of Shechem!”

“Do you think it's possible?” Julia asks, beside me on the bed. I got her attention earlier and her face is now clear of

sauce.

Bernt looks thoughtful.

“We have done much research,” he says. “In the Bible, the oak trees and terebinth trees are places associated with idolatry. So in zealous purges of idolatry, the tree could have been cut down. We know for certain that during the Hasmonean period, John Hyrcanus cleared out the whole area. Anything that remained was destroyed by the Romans before they built Neapolis.”

Julia looks disappointed.

“But,” says Göran, glancing at his father. “That does not mean the idols are not still buried somewhere. Just that the tree marking them is gone.”

His father nods.

“On the positive side,” says Bernt. “We could find no historical record of the idols ever being dug up.”

There is another knock on the door. This time, Dad answers it.

“Yunus!” he says. “Come in!”

It is the archeologist who rode with us in the van. He looks uncomfortable as he steps into the room.

When he sees Bernt, however, he relaxes slightly.

“Ah, you have been told . . . ?”

Dad nods.

“Have a seat,” he says.

Yunus sits down at the foot of Dad's bed.

“I do not know why I was chosen to tell you. This is highly unusual and in my opinion, very unprofessional.” Yunus shakes his head. “We are not being objective. But this is not a place for objectivity, perhaps.”

“It's OK, ” says Dad, sitting down on the bed with me and Julia. “I went out on a limb and I'm paying for it. I understand.”

Yunus looks down at his hands.

“It is not that what you said isn't true. In fact, I am a Christian and I will take the idea to heart. But I think you were talking to an audience of people who are looking for a different solution.”

Dad nods.

“We are all called to be peacemakers,” says Dad. “Wherever we are. This just happens to be a region that desperately needs peace, so it would come with a cost.”

“A high personal cost,” agrees Bernt. “In my trials, I turn to the Bible where I find solutions for my problems. They are simple solutions, but never easy.”

Yunus nods his agreement.

“I’m an outsider,” says Dad. “Most of the people in the room have to live with curfews and conflict that I can’t even imagine. So in that sense, I didn’t have the necessary credentials to speak.”

Yunus shrugs, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

“Thank you for understanding my position,” he says, standing up. “I dreaded coming here tonight, but you have put my mind at rest.”

Dad and Yunus shake hands and Dad sees him to the door.

Bernt and Göran also stand up and head out, with a promise to stop by tomorrow before breakfast.

At about eight o'clock, there is a knock on the door.

Despite being in her pyjamas, Julia hurries to answer it, thinking it will be Bernt and Göran. It's Yitzak.

“Anderson,” he says, coming in. Dad has long since dressed so can receive him with some dignity. “I have just heard. I am so sorry!”

Dad nods.

“Thank you, Yitzak. I'm OK with it though.”

Yitzak shakes his head.

“It's most unfortunate,” he says. I can't help but notice though that he doesn't seem as outraged as Bernt or as remorseful as Yunus.

“I should have anticipated it,” says Dad. They are both still standing. I've always liked Yitzak, but somehow, I don't think he's going to stand up for Dad in all of this.

“What will you do now?” asks Yitzak.

“Well, we're here, so I think we'll take in the sites,” says Dad, vaguely.

Yitzak nods.

“This is an area filled with history. Perhaps it is a blessing in

disguise to be able to take the time to see more?”

“True,” says Dad. And I know he means it. Dad has always said that all things work for the good when you're serving God.

“Well, Anderson,” says Yitzak, extending his hand for Dad to shake it. “I hope we might meet again in the future.”

“Thank you, Yitzak. God go with you.”

Yitzak gives him a smile as he exits.

Julia has just enough time to get dressed before there is a final knock at the door. This time it is Bernt and Göran. They have their luggage and we join them in the hallway with ours.

We decide to skip the complimentary pastries and coffee since the room will be filled with the scholars and archaeologists who have asked Dad to leave.

Muhsin is standing by his cab and is shocked that we are leaving Al-Qasr. He knows the conference isn't over.

Bernt explains that we are simply moving to a different hotel and would like to be taken to Al-Yasmeen.

Muhsin nods and climbs into the driver's seat. We drive through the new town and right into the old. The hotel is a hub of activity, both inside and out. It is a low-rise, white stone building with arched windows. The arched doorway is made of metal and glass with a stained-glass circle as a finishing touch.

Bernt points out the Khan Al Tujar beside the hotel, a busy shopping area for locals and visitors.

“It has been a centre of trade since the days of the Ottomans,” says Bernt as we get out of the cab and look around at our new surroundings. Muhsin is paid and gives me a grin and a “Ma' a-salaamah” before heading back.

Inside, the elegant lobby, Dad and Bernt check us in. The lobby is filled with people who look too purposeful to be tourists. A lot of them are wearing UN vests. Other people have cameras and look like journalists. It's obviously a happening place. But I doubt any of them know much about the buried idols of Shechem.

Once our luggage is in our room, Julia suggests we have breakfast. Everyone agrees.

There is a restaurant in the hotel, but Bernt leads us out into the busy streets of the Old City. The streets are crowded with shoppers. I want to check out some of the beautiful

embroidered scarves but Bernt is already talking about the buildings. Most of them are a white stone, but some are obviously older than others. Bernt is pointing out all the mosques (twelve, I think), a couple of churches and the ruins of a Samaritan synagogue. We pass a traditional Turkish bath. Then a soap factory. This one is operational, but the next one Bernt points out was destroyed by the Israelis in one of their many raids on the city.

If Göran weren't with us, Julia would be ready to faint with hunger. But since he is listening intently to his father, she does too.

Finally, closer to lunch, we turn in to a small family-run restaurant. Bernt orders a full mezza and soon we have a feast of fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, pita bread and a whole variety of things to dip the bread into – hummus, baba ghanoush, a spicy lamb dip, feta cheese, olives, fried cauliflower, tabbouleh, and a hot pepper dip.

“Tell me more about the Samaritans,” says Dad. “Do you think they have anything to do with the buried idols?”

Bernt shakes his head, as he dips some pita bread into the baba ghanoush.

“They have always worshipped on Mount Gerizim and I think we can safely guess that Jacob's tree was not up there. The same underground spring that feeds Jacob's well must have also watered the great tree.”

“Good point,” says Dad, nodding, as he reaches for some olives. “We can assume that the tree was close to the well.”

“I think so,” agrees Bernt. “But the Samaritans are worth studying. They have been here longer than any of the other current inhabitants.”

“Good point.” Dad turns to us. “You know the story of the Samaritans, don't you?”

“I know the story of the good Samaritan,” says Julia, her plate full of feta cheese and hummus.

“Well, to understand the full intent of that story,” says Dad. “You have to understand that the Samaritans were despised by the Jews. They were descendants of people who had been settled in Israel by the Assyrians after they deported the Israelites. The Assyrians had a habit of moving people around

rather than letting them stay in their local area.”

“It reduced the likelihood of further uprisings,” says Bernt, nodding.

“The Samaritans adopted a lot of the Jewish practises,” says Dad. “But they had their own traditions and so their religion wasn't acceptable to the Jews of Jerusalem. Shechem was their central city because their temple was on Mount Gerizim.”

“They still celebrate the Passover festival on Mount Gerizim,” says Bernt.

“This sounds familiar,” I say, putting down my pita bread. “Didn't the woman at the well that talked to Jesus say that they worshipped on Mount Gerizim?”

Dad nods.

“Yes, and that the Jews worshipped in Jerusalem. But Jesus said there would be a time when true believers would worship the Father in spirit and in truth, as the Father wanted. He stayed here in Shechem for two days, teaching them.”

“It is a beautiful thing that this whole town accepted Jesus as their Saviour,” says Bernt, glancing around.

“But you said this whole area had been destroyed at the time of the Maccabees?” Dad asks.

Bernt nods.

“I think that had something to do with the way the Samaritans handled the attack of Antiochus on Jerusalem. It is a well-known story, the Hanukkah story. The Jews are forbidden to keep the Mosaic laws. Paganism becomes the law of the land. A pig is slaughtered on the altar of the temple in Jerusalem. Rather than stand in solidarity with the Jews, the Samaritans quickly send a letter off to Antiochus saying that they are not Jews, but a colony of Medes and Persians. They state that the punishment of the Jews is just but as they are not related to them, they should not suffer in a similar way. Since their temple on Mount Gerizim currently has no name, they will name it the Temple of Jupiter Hellenas. Their strategy worked at the time and they were left alone by the new local governor. But they paid heavily when the Maccabees overthrew the invaders.”

“It sounds like the Samaritans were just being practical,” says Dad.

“I agree,” says Bernt. “But the point that probably irked the Jews was that in times of prosperity, the Samaritans didn't mind being counted with the Jews. Josephus tells of an earlier story when Alexander the Great visited Jerusalem and the Jews found favour with him. He did not require them to give up the laws of their forefathers. The Samaritans decided that since the Jews were in favour at the time, they would declare themselves kinsmen of the Jews. When Alexander left Jerusalem, there was a Samaritan deputation waiting for him outside the city. They asked that he honour their town with a visit and requested the same privileges as the Jews. Alexander asked if they were Jews, but they said they were Hebrews with the name Sidonians. Alexander said he would look into it. And in the end, the Samaritans were free to worship as they pleased. I think that sort of thing was resented by the Jews.”

Dad nods.

The scholarly discussion continues when we're back in our hotel room at Al-Yasmeen. Bernt and Göran join us. Göran is surfing the net with his iPad, looking for any clue that might tell us where the terebinth of Shechem is today. Because the word terebinth is sometimes translated 'oak' he is searching 'oak of Shechem.' Bernt suggests he also search 'oak of Moreh' too, since that was another name for this area.

There is a cry of discovery from Göran. He has discovered a picture of a five-thousand-year old tree, still standing, where Abraham pitched his tent.

This is it! We all hurry over to look at the photo.

Unfortunately, it is not the Oak of Moreh. It is the Oak of Mamre. This one is near Hebron and it is the place where Abraham received the heavenly visitors who told him that he and Sarah would have a child.

Dad is also online, with his laptop, reading a Bible dictionary from 1872. The author draws upon ancient and contemporary sources. Dad is reading some of the passages out loud. The dictionary gives a vivid description of Nablus in 1872.

Bernt has his Bible open to the original passage about Jacob.

He is musing aloud about how big the stash of idols would be.

“Most scholars seem to think it was just a case of the idols that had accumulated in his household. But it says here, that Jacob told his household and *all who were with him* to put away the foreign gods that were with them and to purify themselves and change their garments.” Bernt looks up. “I read from this that as conqueror of Shechem, Jacob is now responsible for the women and children of Shechem. The spoils of war include all their possessions, including these idols.”

“I agree,” says Dad. “We have to think of it in terms of the times they lived in. All the men of Shechem have been killed by Jacob's sons. The women and the children now fall under his care.”

“The tree was already old at this point,” says Bernt. “Since it was the same one Abraham built an altar under. That's the first time it's mentioned and it's already a great tree at that point.”

“For our purposes, I'd like to know the last place that the terebinth at Shechem is mentioned,” says Dad.

Göran answers that one.

“Abimelech, the son of Gideon, was crowned king by the people of Shechem, right under the terebinth tree.”

“Why don't they have a site to commemorate that?” Julia asks.

We all laugh.

Dad also quotes something about Jacob's well that makes us laugh.

“It says here, 'It is understood that the well, and the site around it, have lately been purchased by the Russian church, not, it is to be hoped, with the intention of creating a church over it, and thus forever destroying the reality and the sentiment of the place.'”

After Dad switches to his Bible, I go on the laptop and do an internet search for 'Shechem.' I just want to do some general reading. I don't really expect to find anything that says, “the current location of the buried idols is under the house of Mr. Abu Sa'ad.”

Since we're staying in the Old City of Nablus, I end up at a webpage that gives information about all of the sites in this

area. There are descriptions of the different mosques. It mentions that there was a Jewish presence in the city until the British mandate period, when Nablus became a centre of Arab nationalism. My mind wanders. I almost gloss over the part about the Samaritans that still live in the area. But my eyes fall on a single line.

“Listen to this!” I say. “It says here that the Samaritan synagogue in the Old City contains the oldest known documents of the region! One of them is called the Samaritan Torah Scroll and it dates back to when the Israelites first settled in Canaan!”

We all look at one another. Do any of those documents have information about the location of the terebinth tree?

“But, didn’t we see the ruins of the synagogue today?” Dad asks.

Bernt nods.

“It was another of the buildings destroyed in an IDF raid. But they still have a synagogue and a village on Mount Gerizim. It is possible the documents have been moved there.”

“I wonder if they would let us look through any of them?” Dad asks.

Bernt shakes his head.

“Probably not. Not if we just showed up and announced that we wanted to see them.”

“We could request to see their documents if we were doing some sort of research project . . .” Dad is thinking out loud. “Unfortunately, the Samaritans are not a people who I’ve done much reading about.”

“They are a small group here,” says Bernt. “They can’t be more than a thousand people.”

I’m doing a Google search for more information about the Samaritans in Nablus.

I quickly skim the Wikipedia article and then move on to a newspaper archive, a short history of the people and an interview with a Samaritan priest.

“This is interesting!” I say. “This Samaritan priest talks about how they are caught between the Muslims and the Jews. Since they carry Israeli identification and Palestinian identification, both sides are suspicious of them. To the

Muslims, they follow what seems like the Jewish religion. To the Jews, they are apostates. But this man says that the Samaritans would make a good bridge between the Palestinians and the Israelis.”

I look up.

“It's like what you said, Dad, about building bridges!”

“Well,” says Dad, slowly. “That's true. But I didn't exactly present the model of a third party being a bridge . . .”

“But, Dad,” I insist. “You said you weren't an expert on the Samaritans. But you are an expert on workable models for bridge-building in Palestine!”

Bernt laughs.

“She is right. We could approach the Samaritans from that angle. The fact that you were expelled from the conference may work in your favour. They are a persecuted people. They would sympathize.”

“Maybe we can call and schedule an appointment . . .” says Dad.

“Do you see any telephone wires going up to Mount Gerizim?” says Bernt, smiling. Dad goes to the window and looks.

“No,” he says, ruefully, returning to his seat on the bed. “We'll just have to say a prayer and go up there, eh?”

Bernt nods.

“But I do not think it would be wise to take our children along,” says Bernt. “They will not take us for serious scholars.”

Dad glances at me and Julia, concern in his eyes.

“I don't like the idea of leaving them here by themselves.”

“I, too, am a cautious parent,” says Bernt. “As you know. But there is no safer place for them. All the UN workers are here.”

“That's a good point,” says Dad. “OK, tomorrow, we visit Mount Gerizim.”

It is agreed that Bernt will stop by tomorrow morning and that Göran will stay here with me and Julia. Göran looks neutral about this. But Julia is unable to hide her joy. A further sign of her euphoria is that when we all go down to the hotel restaurant for dinner, she barely eats.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The next morning, after a quick coffee and a light breakfast, Dad and Bernt head out for Mount Gerizim. We are not restricted to our room, but we are instructed to stay in the hotel. And we must all stay together. Göran nods. Julia gazes at him with adoration. I wonder if Göran is dreading a day stuck in a hotel with us.

But he has his iPad and quickly establishes himself in one of the chairs in our hotel room, intent on his reading.

“Would you like a drink, Göran?” Julia asks, trying to play hostess. There is a coffee-maker and a kettle for tea on the dresser.

He shakes his head, not even looking up from his iPad.

“I could make coffee,” says Julia, trying to be sophisticated. Göran shakes his head again.

“I did a lot of reading about the buried idols,” says Julia.

“That’s nice,” says Göran, with his heavy Swedish accent, not rude but disinterested.

“Yitzak thinks the tree is somewhere near Joseph’s tomb and Jacob’s well,” Julia persists.

I try not to grin. I’m sitting on the bed, leaning against the headrest and using Dad’s laptop to read up on Shechem. Dad

took his digital camera with him but didn't want to have to lug the laptop up the mountain.

"I do too," says Göran, scrolling a page with his finger. His tone is absent-minded. We've heard this tone before when we're trying to talk to Dad and his mind is on something else.

Poor Julia is obviously going to have a boring day.

Göran is perfectly content to spend the day in the hotel room. He doesn't even seem inclined to explore the hotel. I remember one archaeologist's son we met when we were in Syria, Steve. He would have had us out of the hotel and on the streets of Nablus within five minutes of our parents' departure.

Before we came to Nablus, I never knew anything about ancient Shechem. I'm finding out that it was a pretty happening place. I'll easily be able to spend the day reading about four thousand years of history.

Julia is restless though. She can't turn on the TV because that might disturb Göran's reading. I think she expected that the day would be spent talking and listening to Göran.

But Julia adjusts.

She can't talk to Göran, but nothing's going to stop her from staring at him.

So she sits beside me on the bed and watches him. I'm trying hard not to snicker.

Then something happens to get even Göran's attention.

In the distance, we hear explosions. Then silence. Then gunfire. A lot of gunfire.

All three of us run to the window. But all we can see is the Old City of Nablus.

"I think it was from behind," says Göran, pointing in the direction of our door.

"Is that where . . ." Julia is alarmed. "Mount Gerizim is?"

I was thinking the same thing.

Göran shakes his head and points to a side.

"This is normal for here," says Göran, returning to his seat.

Shakily, Julia and I return to the bed.

I try to go back to my reading. Göran is right, of course. In my earlier reading about Nablus, it said there are a lot of incidents here, sporadic gunfire and explosions. That's exactly what just happened. And the gunfire has stopped, so probably

everything is OK.

It's wishful thinking.

Fifteen minutes later, the whole city seems to erupt.

"Oh my God! What was that?" Julia practically falls off the bad. Even Göran looks concerned. Whatever happened was closer by. Explosions. Gunfire. But now there are people noises too. Screaming, yelling.

"Come!" says Göran, leaping up and going to the door.

There are people in the hallway.

"What is happening?" Göran asks a man who is hurrying down the hallway. He's wearing a UN vest.

"Sounds like Balata's going up," he says briefly. Other people are hurrying for the elevators and stairs. Obviously, journalists want to be out there.

Nobody orders us to stay in our room, so we join the rush. I don't get the sense that the hotel is in danger, more that people are heading out to see what's going on.

Of course, we're forbidden from dashing into the streets. But the lobby is crowded with people. Some are Arabs, mostly women carrying bags of fruit and other purchases. One of them is sitting on a couch crying, while one of the female UN workers is talking to her. I move in closer to hear what she's saying. She has a wide-eyed little boy beside her.

"It's starting again," she moans, over and over again. The UN worker is rubbing her back, soothingly. I smile at the little boy, but he just stares at me, dazed.

Through the glassed archway, I can see that there is nothing actually happening in the streets, except for a lot of people hurrying around and jeeps with Palestinian police zipping by in the direction of the noise.

"It's Balata," announces one of the UN workers, coming into the lobby. "They're rioting in the streets."

"What happened?" asks one of his colleagues, hurrying over.

"At this point, it looks like some of the youth from one of the Jewish settlements stirred things up. Threw some explosives into the streets and unfortunately, must have hit something important. Then there was some shooting."

Everyone nods. That's what we heard earlier.

The woman on the couch is just moaning. It's a primal wail. The female UN worker is holding on to her. Several other Arabs are just standing around, looking grim.

"They've already shut down Balata," continues the UN worker.

The moans of the woman on the couch increase.

Then I get it. She's from Balata. She's out shopping with maybe her youngest child, but she could have five other children in that camp waiting for her.

"Don't worry," says the UN worker with her. "We'll get you back." She switches to Arabic, although the woman doesn't seem to hear her.

We hear the sounds of sirens as Red Crescent ambulances zip by.

In the background, the gunfire continues. Now it's steady, not sporadic. The woman on the couch is silently crying. I feel sick at the thought of her children, without her, hiding in their small house from the gunfire.

There are people hurrying in and out of the hotel, mostly the foreigners – the UN workers and the journalists. The Arabs that have taken refuge in the hotel lobby just stand grim and silent. Soon the streets are silent too. People have hurried home. But it also has something to do with the police jeeps and the men in the dark uniforms. They are the only ones patrolling the streets.

"The IDF will be here soon," says one journalist, grimly.

I remember what Muhsin said about "no curfew."

Something tells me that we have a curfew now. The full implication of that starts to sink in. We're prisoners in this hotel. And Dad and Bernt are stuck on Mount Gerizim.

"How long can a curfew last?" I ask the journalist beside me.

He shrugs.

"Two or three weeks. Sometimes months."

Julia and I gasp. Even Göran looks concerned.

"But the IDF might let people out for an hour or two to buy food."

It's not food I'm worried about at the moment. It's Dad.

Old Nablus is subdued, but we can still hear gunfire in the distance.

“Balata is fed up,” says the journalist.

We can't see anything, but no one seems inclined to return to their rooms. And the journalist is right. Soon there are the green jeeps and green uniforms of the Israeli Defense Forces passing by.

Tense looks are exchanged. I take it that it was better when just the Palestinians were handling things.

Beside me, Julia sniffles. I turn to her and realize that she is on the verge of crying.

I want to take her upstairs but we're not supposed to separate from Göran.

“Should we go back to our room?” I ask Göran. He looks hesitant, as if he wants to stay down in the lobby where the activity is.

“Might as well, kid,” says the journalist, glancing at him. “The excitement's over. Now it's the long boring part.”

That sounds ominous.

“I wonder if the hotel will run out of food,” says Göran.

The journalist doesn't answer because he's been distracted by a fellow journalist coming through the glass doors. But the thought of the hotel running out of food is enough to make Julia momentarily forget about Dad being trapped on Mount Gerizim.

“Will we starve?” she asks me quietly.

“No,” I say. “Because God is taking care of us.”

“Yeah, that's true.” Julia is quiet for a minute or two. Then she says, “I'm hungry.”

I laugh.

“Me too,” I admit.

“Let's go to the restaurant,” says Göran. “We can charge it to our room.”

There is a glass-enclosed bridge that connects two parts of the hotel that is also a small café. Not surprisingly, every seat is taken. It offers a view of the city and in lieu of the curfew, it's the only way the journalists and other people staying at the hotel can gather news at this point.

The restaurant is also crowded but they are able to put us at a table for two, with an extra chair. The menu has both Arabic and North American cuisine. Julia orders a hamburger and

fries. Suddenly, I feel like the same. Usually, I would order something that I can't get back home, but the thought of a hamburger and fries is comforting. Göran orders fish. Maybe fish is comforting in Sweden.

We shamelessly eavesdrop on the conversations around us.

Someone says the explosives thrown by the Jewish settlers hit a school. If that's true, I can understand why the whole community reacted. We can still hear gunfire in the distance.

Another person gloomily predicts that we'll be here for a while. I think of the empty fridge in our room and the abundance of fruit that was in the marketplace. We could have stocked up and survived for weeks in our room, if only we'd known . . .

Then I remember that Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us this day, our daily bread."

I automatically told Julia that God was taking care of us because it was the right thing to say. Now I have to tell it to myself. I say a quick prayer to God that he'll look after us.

Our food comes and we eat in silence. With Göran, I don't really feel like that's a problem.

But the people around us certainly think there's a problem. There is a lot of talk of the pending curfew and speculation that it will be a long one. Some people look like Arab businessmen who came to Nablus but live somewhere else. There are also a few European travellers – the kind of people who like to go to places more exotic than Disneyworld.

"Just when things were getting a little bit normal around here," says one UN worker, shaking his head.

We pass through the lobby on the way back up to our room. The Arab lady who was weeping is now stretched out on one of the couches, sleeping. Maybe someone gave her a sedative. Her little boy just sits on the floor by the couch, wide-eyed and unseeing.

The lobby is still crowded, but it is quieter. People who came in off the street have settled themselves against walls, in corners. For the time being, there is food. Many of the people brought in shopping bags. Some are eating. Some are talking softly in Arabic. But mostly, they are waiting.

I don't want to be morbid, but when we get back up to the

room, I go online and read a bit about curfews in Nablus. The internet is not reassuring. Nablus has been a city known for its lengthy curfews. The IDF and the Palestinian militias have had many battles in the streets. The refugee camp, Balata, is known for its active resistance to Israel, including producing the rockets that get fired throughout the region. Having Jews in nearby settlements doesn't help. They believe that all of Israel should be in Jewish hands.

My eyes start to glaze over as I read the statistics, the number of people who have died in the Nablus area, including Arab civilians, Jewish settlers and soldiers on both sides. It's hard to take in. Until I start thinking of individuals. Like that lady sleeping in the lobby. And her sad-eyed little boy. And Muhsin. Muhsin said he was from Balata. Where is he now? At Al-Qasr? Or somewhere in the middle of the fighting?

After the stats about the human casualties, there is a long list of historical sites that have been damaged in the conflict. Mosques, a Greek Orthodox church in the Old City, a whole bunch of Turkish baths that go back to the days of the Ottomans, three soap factories . . . the list just goes on. Even something simple like the stone-paved streets of the Old City. Less than 20% of the original stones now remain. The UN worker in the restaurant said things were getting a little bit normal here. But I wonder what normal means here?

I can't read it anymore. I close up the laptop and get out Dad's Bible instead. The only thing I feel like reading are the Psalms.

The afternoon drags. Julia takes a nap. Even Göran puts down his iPad and rubs his eyes. I tell him to feel free to use Dad's bed if he wants to take a nap. He nods and soon he's sleeping too. Finally, when I can't read anymore, I fall asleep too.

Julia wakes up first and nudges me. It's dark now and she points out that Dad isn't back yet.

"I don't think he can get back until this curfew ends," I say, groggily.

Julia goes to the window and reports that the streets are still empty. The gunfire continues though. An explosion makes me jump. But not with the same startle-factor as the first one.

Göran sits up and yawns.

"I think I should move my luggage and Father's luggage into here," he says. "They may need the extra room."

"That's a good idea," I say, thinking of all the people in the lobby.

Göran picks up the phone and calls the front desk, telling them his intentions. He reports that they appreciate this gesture and soon Göran is hauling his and his father's suitcases into our room.

None of us are hungry, but we do feel a bit stir-crazy. So we take the elevator down to the lobby. The bar off the lobby is busy. But we can't exactly go in there and order a cocktail. People are sleeping in the lobby. I feel sorry for them. If this drags on, they won't have a shower and a real bed like we do. We wander around the hotel for a bit, aimlessly, but eventually have to return to our room.

"How long will this last?" asks Julia.

Göran shrugs and groans as he sits down again.

"Months?"

Julia looks as if she might cry again.

"I just want to go home," she says.

This whole thing seems to have knocked the crush on Göran right out of her. Months of being in a hotel room with him don't seem like paradise anymore.

I think about home. Mom and David, and our familiar house. Canada. A place that doesn't have curfews. Or explosions. Sometimes there's gunfire in downtown Toronto, but the whole place doesn't shut down and there's not a feeling of being on the edge of war.

"Let's pray," I say.

"I am sure there are many people already praying," says Göran. It may be his longest sentence yet.

But Julia looks hopeful.

"Yeah, let's," she says.

So we basically ignore Göran and pray. We pray for Dad and Bernt, that we'll see them again, that they'll be taken care of. We pray for us, that we'll be protected too and that we won't be hungry. (The request not to be hungry comes from Julia.) And then I decide we should pray for Nablus and Balata. That

takes a bit longer and we probably sound absurd to Göran, but we pray for the family of the woman sleeping in the lobby. We pray for Muhsin and his family. We ask God to solve all the problems in Nablus and to make a better life for the people in Balata. We pray that this curfew will end soon and that life will get back to normal and that there will be peace.

“Amen,” I say.

“Amen,” says Julia, loudly.

“Amen,” Göran mutters.

This time it's me who asks Göran if he wants coffee and he says he does. So I make us all coffee and Göran switches on the TV. There is a station called Nablus TV and we watch a bit to see the news footage. It's all in Arabic, but the newscaster says, “Balata” a lot. Sure enough, it seems to be all about what happened today. There are scenes of people out in the streets of Balata waving Palestinian flags and shouting. There are also some shots of a damaged building. The swing-set out front indicates that it's a school. There are interviews with weeping parents.

Then there are some brief shots of Palestinian police arriving and a final shot of a jeep-load of IDF soldiers. But the TV also has satellite access. So we end up watching some English movies. After the afternoon nap and the coffee, none of us can sleep. And I keep hoping that Dad and Bernt will come through the door. But they don't. Finally, at about one in the morning, we switch off the TV and all go to sleep.

The Buried Gold of Shechem

CHAPTER EIGHT

I wake-up. The memories of yesterday come back.

I look over at Dad's bed, hoping that he will have returned in the night. But it is Göran, sleeping heavily, mouth slightly open and looking younger than seventeen.

The first thing I do is pray. I pray for Dad. I pray for us. And I pray that I won't freak out. Then I pray for everybody in Balata and Nablus.

Julia wakes-up and announces that she feels disgusting. She fell asleep in her clothes. While she's taking a shower, I wonder if Dad is going to have to make it through this whole curfew in the same outfit. At least here we have a whole suitcase.

Göran yawns and sits up. He's wearing blue pyjamas. I wonder if our parents will return and question the propriety of us all staying in the same room. Probably not, under the circumstances.

I make us all some tea and then we decide what we're going to do. Our choices are limited. There is the lobby or there is the room. In the distance, we can still hear sporadic gunfire.

Since we skipped dinner, we're all hungry. So the decision is to go downstairs and get something to eat.

The lobby is busy.

The UN people are organizing the Arabs that have had to sleep there for the night. Outside, there are a couple of jeeps with Palestinian police and I gather that these people will be escorted back to their homes. They have the full strength of the United Nations behind them. Somehow, I suspect the Samaritans will not be able to provide the same service for Dad and Bernt.

Still, it's comforting that Dad and Bernt are with the same people who Jesus talked about in his parable of the Good Samaritan.

The glassed-in bridge is quiet today. So we take a seat and a waiter brings us some mint tea and some pastries. From here, we can see the Old City. It's still deathly quiet. There is a tall clock. Dad would probably be able to tell us approximately when it was built. There is also a mosque. An Israeli tank is parked outside of it.

"A tank." Göran shakes his head. "That means they will be staying awhile."

Julia just stares out the window, blank dismay on her face.

I send a prayer up. *Dear God, please make this all go away fast. Make the tanks go away. Make everything get back to normal. Bring Dad safely back. And Bernt too. And please help it to be soon.*

From here, we can see the two mountains, Ebal and Gerizim. I just keep my eyes on Mount Gerizim while we sip our tea and eat. It makes me feel closer to Dad.

We linger over our breakfast. A few UN workers come in for a coffee, taking a table next to us. They glance over at us. I guess we're an odd group – three teenagers by ourselves.

"You guys OK?" asks one of them, a lady. She smiles. I almost start to cry.

I nod. If I say anything, I'll start sobbing. Julia is in the same state as me, but manages to blurt out, "Is Mount Gerizim OK?"

The lady looks surprised. I guess it does sound kind of funny.

"Yes, I believe so," she says. "Everything's concentrated in Balata, as far as we can tell."

"Our fathers are on Mount Gerizim," says Göran, to explain. "They are scholars."

The lady nods, understanding.

“Well, they should be safe there.”

One of the UN men laughs.

“The Samaritans know how to stay out of trouble. They've survived here for a long time.”

“And you'll be safe here too,” says the lady, giving us another reassuring smile. “Just stay here until they get back, OK?”

We all nod.

The UN workers have a quick coffee and then are back to whatever work has to be done during a curfew. I envy them. They're busy. We get to go back and sit in our room.

When we're in our room, Julia pulls out her diary and writes out loud, “Curfew, Day 2.”

Göran turns on the TV. Nablus TV is showing footage of Israeli soldiers running through narrow streets. There is some footage of rubble. The voice says “il-yaum” which means today. I wonder why something that was started by Jewish settlers means Arabs have more ruins in their refugee camp. We watch the news in silence. This stuff is happening within walking distance of us. And the longer it goes on, the longer we're going to be separated from our dads. The news ends and another show comes on, three men talking around a table. Göran switches over to a station playing old movies.

We rarely watch TV at home. Today, we watch it all day. My eyes are glazed over. The movies are alright – *No Time for Sergeants*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and a whole line-up of John Wayne Westerns. We call for room service and eat hamburgers and fries while we watch. But it doesn't bring Dad back.

The lobby is active when we go down the next morning.

The UN lady who spoke to us at breakfast yesterday gives us a quick smile and tells us what's happening. Any nonresident of Nablus is being permitted to leave. The IDF will escort them to a checkpoint and they can make their way out of here from there. Judging by the number of people in the lobby, most of the hotel is leaving. The UN lady is too busy to say much else. She has a list and is writing down names. People

are pushing their way through the crowded lobby with suitcases.

“But we can't go without Dad!” says Julia, hysterically.

“I know! I know!” I say, thinking frantically. Should we go? We could maybe, somehow, get a flight home . . . Dad could follow later. It would be wonderful to be home with Mom, but my heart breaks at the thought of leaving Dad behind . . .

But it's all crazy anyhow. We'd be stuck just outside of Nablus with no money. How would we take a cab all the way to the airport and then get on a plane without money? Here at the hotel, everything just gets charged to the room. I glance up at Göran. I can tell he's thinking fast too.

“We have to stay,” he says.

I nod.

We go have our mint tea and pastries in the glassed-in bridge. Except for the waiter, it's empty. The tank is still in front of the mosque.

“This is bad,” says Göran. “If they are getting all the foreigners out, they think it will last awhile.”

This is no comfort for Julia. In fact, she wails.

I grab her hand and hold on to it.

“Oh God,” I say out loud. “Save us! Save Dad! Get us all home!”

“Please!” adds Julia.

“Amen,” I say.

“Amen,” grumbles Göran.

“Curfew, Day 3,” says Julia, writing in her diary, once we get back to the room.

Göran switches on his iPad. At least we still have electricity. He recharged it while we had breakfast. I get on Dad's laptop, but I don't really know what I want to do. I just stare at the screen. Then I turn it off and just stare at the walls.

Julia finishes up in her diary. I don't know what she had to record – tea and pastries, I guess.

She says she wants to go online, so I get out Dad's laptop again. She uses it to go to a free online novels website and finds a mystery to read. I should have thought of that.

Instead, I wander over to the window and stare out at Nablus. It has the two mountains, it has the white stone

buildings. But it is like a corpse. It should be busy with life. There should be falafel sellers and fruit sellers, cars honking and traffic jams, people shouting out greetings and people hurrying, people out shopping and people out for coffee. That's how it was when we first got here. Now the only thing that happens is an occasional ambulance with the Red Crescent on it passes by. Or a jeep with Israeli soldiers, or sometimes the Palestinian police. There is still occasional gunfire.

I don't know how people with small children cope. Antsy children who want to run around outside but are stuck indoors. I mention this to Göran. He glances over at me by the window.

"Some people will starve," he says, briefly, before his eyes return to his iPad.

That's a cheerful thought. I just stare at him. Then I look back out the window. But, of course, it's true.

For a long time, I just stare. And sigh. And stare.

If Dad and Bernt hadn't left for Mount Gerizim, we'd be at a checkpoint right now, probably in a yellow cab on our way to the airport.

We go downstairs to the restaurant for lunch. The only people left in the hotel are the UN workers and the journalists. Since they have pizza on the menu, we share a large one. It comes with peppers, olives and mushrooms and is a comforting taste of home.

I look around. The UN workers and journalists are all chatting. The goings-on haven't affected their appetite. Why would it? This is what they do. We, on the other hand, are just frightened rabbits in the middle of a fox hunt.

"Do you think Dad's worried about us?" Julia asks.

"Probably," I say, wiping some tomato sauce off my face with a serviette. I don't like to think about it.

That's pretty much it for discourse for this meal. None of us have any desire to make the best of this, only to get through it. I just want to get on a plane and go home to Canada, with Dad. But at the same time, I know I'm never going to be able to forget this place. The thought of people having to sit in mind-numbing boredom waiting for a curfew to be lifted, some of them hungry, is going to stick with me for the rest of my life.

A new dimension of the horror comes to my attention after

lunch, as we're passing through the lobby. There are some furious UN workers talking among themselves. All the rules of etiquette don't seem to apply here, so we stop and listen.

There are people bleeding to death in Balata. Some kind of a raid took place, on a home. It was filled with women and children, but one of the older boys threw something at the Israeli soldiers. No one knows for sure what it was. It could have been a water balloon for all they know. But the result was a lot of gunfire and a houseful of bleeding people. But with the refugee camp sealed off, the Red Crescent ambulances can't get in. The UN people are working out a way to get the people to the ambulances, that are waiting outside the camp.

"We're going to lose most of them," says one man.

"How can they do it?" I ask, as we go back upstairs on the elevator. "The Israelis, I mean."

Göran shrugs as the elevator door opens to our floor.

"They have to think of security," he says. "Those camps have terrorists."

It's a conversation-killer.

Julia takes a nap and that leaves the laptop to me. I go to the free online novels page she bookmarked and pick out something. *Little Women*. Soon I'm lost in another world. Early America. About as far away from modern Palestine as you can get. But in some ways, it's a bit like what I'm going through. The March girls have their mother, but their father is a chaplain serving at the front lines of the Civil War. Life is unsettled, but they do what they can to make it pleasant for each other. I look at my younger sister sleeping beside me on the bed. I'll do everything I can to help her through this.

When Julia wakes up, I give her back the laptop and pick up Dad's Bible instead. More Psalms. They seem to be written for times of trial and distress. I'd have them memorized if I lived here.

Just as we're heading for dinner, there is a loud explosion. It seems to shake the whole hotel. Julia bursts into tears and starts trembling. I wrap my arms around her and hold on to her. Göran says he will go downstairs and see what's happened. I say we'll go with him. With my arm around Julia, we take the stairs down. There is an unspoken understanding that none of

us would want to be trapped in an elevator if the power suddenly went out.

There are people milling around in the lobby. Göran asks one of the UN men what happened. He shrugs.

“It came from over there,” he waves his hand.

“What's over there?” Göran asks.

“The entrance of the camp. Jacob's well, that area.”

“It sounded as if they dropped a nuclear bomb,” says Göran, in his heavy Swedish accent. He fits in with a lot of the people here who are speaking English as their second language. I guess Julia and I got lucky when we were born in an English-speaking country.

“God forbid it should come to that,” says one tired-looking UN worker, a woman. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail and she has circles under her eyes. “Balata isn't taking this one sitting down. And the Israelis are just looking for an excuse to bulldoze the place.”

Balata may not be taking this sitting down, but Julia and I have to. She's still trembling and I lead her to a couch, the one that the Arab lady with the little boy was sleeping on.

“It's OK,” I say to her, my arm around her shoulder. She nods, a tear running down her cheek. I brush it away. “I don't care what they say. God is going to get us out of here and he can make it end soon.”

She nods and puts her head on my shoulder. She's never done that before.

We sit for a bit and watch the activity outside. There are IDF soldiers running past. UN workers seem to be permitted to move freely. Occasionally, a UN worker passes by helping an injured person to one of the Red Crescent ambulances that are parked nearby. I guess the ambulances still can't get into the camp itself.

Now the gunfire has started up again. It's coming from the camp, says a UN man.

“The IDF?” asks Göran.

“Both sides are shooting,” he says, pulling out a cell phone and checking it's signal. He hits a button.

“C'mon, Jul,” I say, helping my sister to her feet. “A cup of tea will help.”

She gives me a smile of understanding. When we were in England, a cup of tea always helped.

The restaurant is empty. Everyone is in the lobby wanting to know more about the explosion. We take a seat and order.

“Is this lunch or dinner?” asks Julia.

We all laugh. It feels good to laugh. Göran suggests we order something we've never eaten before. We all carefully read the menu and decide on an appetizer of boreik with meat. We don't know what it is, so we're pretty sure we've never eaten it. For dinner, we pass over the kebabs and the shawerma and all order Makhshi. To drink, we have mango juice. The boreik turns out to be meat-filled pastries. Very tasty. Makhshi is zucchini stuffed with meat and cooked in yoghurt. We're too full for anything else but we agree that next time we'll order just appetizers and then have Lebanon Nights for dessert.

The gunfire continues throughout dinner.

When we return to our room, Göran switches on the TV and we watch some more old movies – *Casablanca* and *The African Queen*.

Then we fall into uneasy sleep, the gunfire in the distance.

“Curfew, Day 4,” groans Julia, writing in her diary the next day. “I just want to sleep until this over.”

We finished our breakfast in the glassed-in bridge café and are back in our room. More Psalms. Göran is visibly restless, pacing the room instead of sitting with his iPad. We haven't had fresh air since this all started. I feel like running, just running, out in the open, anywhere. I'm reading, but my leg is tapping against the bed. I feel edgy.

It doesn't help that Göran just keeps pacing. It's annoying. Finally, he sits down with his iPad.

At some point, in the middle of the morning, Julia starts crying. It's a hysterical crying and it just comes out of nowhere. Göran looks at Julia and then he looks at me. Then he looks back at his iPad. The message is obvious. This is my problem, not his.

Julia is huddled up, just crying. I hold on to her until she runs out of tears. Then I make her a cup of tea. I She's just rocking back and forth on the bed, with unseeing eyes. I almost

have to force her to drink the tea. But she does. And then I tuck her into bed like a little girl. She doesn't resist. I kiss her forehead, feeling like Mom.

Göran says he wants to go downstairs for lunch and see if there any developments. It's completely unreasonable of him. We're not supposed to separate but I can't wake up Julia and drag her downstairs.

“I'm just going to order some room service,” I say.

He shrugs. He's determined to go downstairs.

“Go ahead,” I say coolly. He's useless anyhow.

Göran heads out and I lock the door behind him.

When he's gone, I go to the window and look at the view again. Same view. Should be busy with activity. Everyone's stuck inside like us. Antsy. Edgy. Not knowing when it's going to end.

The Buried Gold of Shechem

CHAPTER NINE

Day Five. I wonder if the conference at Al-Qasr is still going on. If Dad hadn't been asked to leave, we would still be there, all together. Or maybe Muhsin would have already driven us to the airport.

Göran returned to the room yesterday to report that there is a crater at the entrance of the camp. A suicide bomber. He took out three IDF soldiers and their jeep.

“We will be here for the rest of our lives,” is Göran's conclusion. Thankfully Julia was still sleeping when he said it. I've been praying non-stop ever since.

God makes this end. God make the soldiers go home. God make this mess go away.

The UN people don't seem to be able to make this mess go away. They are too busy negotiating for the Red Crescent ambulances to be able to actually enter the refugee camp.

The suicide bombing has justified a massive retaliation. There was gunfire all night.

I want to scream. I want to run out into the street and screech. It's all so stupid. Common sense tells you that the wrong people will be shot. People who had nothing to do with the suicide bomber will get hurt. Dad's point at the conference

will be played out again and again. There will be no justice. Only blood.

Maybe the parable of the Good Samaritan story would work. A Palestinian could bind up the wounds of an IDF soldier. An Israeli could carry a wounded Palestinian to one of the Red Crescent ambulances.

Julia's a bit better today. She has some camomile tea at breakfast. They ran out of pastries, but we are eating some pita bread with jam, along with all the other UN workers and journalists who are in the glassed-in bridge.

"How are you kids holding up?" asks the UN lady who talked to us earlier. Holding a mug of coffee, she joins us.

"Well," I say, cautiously. I don't want to set Julia off again. "We're OK, I guess."

Göran is completely insensitive.

"She had hysterics yesterday," he says, nodding at Julia.

Julia glares at him. I don't think she even remembers that she had crush on him.

"That's normal," says the lady. She gives Julia a pat on the back. "We all go through it."

Julia is soothed.

"In fact," she continues. "We have a few doctors here. If you need a sedative, you let me know and we'll see what we can do. These experiences can be nerve-wracking."

"What about the poor people in the camp?" I ask.

She nods.

"It's awful. I can't describe it any other way. I never get used to it."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" I ask. It's a crazy question, I know.

But the lady takes me seriously.

"Do you guys have a computer, or anything with e-mail?"

We nod.

"Then you can send e-mails," she say, standing up.

"Bombard the Israeli government. Everyone you can think of who has something to do with this. Describe what you see. Tell them what you're going through. Send an e-mail to the Israeli ambassador in your country. Send an e-mail to your embassy here. Don't take this quietly."

She flashes us a smile before returning to her colleagues.

This is a new idea.

In fact, it saves the day.

Julia and I get onto Dad's laptop and start surfing the net. We find the webpage for the Israeli government. We find the webpage for the Israeli embassy in Canada. We find the webpage for the Canadian embassy in Israel. They all get e-mails from us. We tell them who we are and what we're doing here. Our dad had an important interview and now we're stuck in this siege. We even post our story at various websites that update people on the state of things in Palestine.

I think Göran might be doing the same on his iPad because he's typing things too.

We have a quick lunch of falafels and then return to our room.

More e-mails. We write to the Israeli ambassador to the UN. Our story gets posted at more sites. We try to make it as detailed as possible, including what triggered it all off, the scenes in the lobby, the panic, the gunfire, the explosion. Even a description of the streets when we first got here compared to the ominous silence out there now. We use Julia's diary, which is surprisingly helpful, and create a pretty good idea of what's happened so far, including what it feels like. It's scary, edgy, not knowing when it's going to end. We're trapped and we can't do anything.

Except pray. I'm doing a lot of that.

We haven't had maid-service since this started. The hotel staff that wasn't here at the time of the lockdown is obviously stuck at home. None of us care about our sheets being changed, but we've run out of coffee and tea. It's not like any of us need coffee and tea, but making it and drinking it helps to pass the time. I imagine there's a lot of coffee and tea-drinking going on all around us in Nablus, if people haven't run out.

I'm looking forward to dinner. This is the evening we're going to order Lebanon Nights for dessert. But when we get down to dinner, we find the selection has diminished. There is a list of items that aren't available now and Lebanon Nights is one of them.

We all have kebabs and rice and I have a strong sense that

we should be grateful for it. I wonder how well-supplied the Samaritans are. I hope by now they've given Dad and Bernt robes, or something, to change in to.

After dinner, we can't think of anymore people to e-mail. Bernt switches on the TV. There is news footage of something that looks like a crater. Probably the result of the explosion created by the suicide bomber. As the camera scans, I recognize the church built over Jacob's well.

Then Göran switches over to a movie. I didn't mind the old ones, but this is an action one that doesn't seem to have a plot, just lots of shooting and car chases. It's hard to get into. I reach for Dad's Bible and read more Psalms. Julia updates her diary.

The day ends with a feeling of lethargy.

Day Six. Mint tea and pita bread for breakfast.

Life in this limited way revolves entirely around meals. Which is ironic because the food is diminishing. With the UN here in the hotel, I doubt we'll starve, but what about the people in the camp? The ones who are now using the last of their provisions? Will people quietly starve or will desperation bring people out into the streets to die standing rather than in their beds?

Bored, we decide to sit in the lobby for a bit. As it turns out, food is on the mind of everyone. The UN workers are mostly outside, arguing with the IDF. We gather from the talk around us that trucks of food are waiting at the checkpoints but can't get through. Medical supplies are equally as abundant – on the outside of Nablus.

There's an open battle going on, is what the IDF are saying. They can't allow the trucks of food through until there is a ceasefire. I gather a ceasefire is hard to achieve when one side is made up of people who are firing shots from undisclosed locations and throwing homemade explosives and then running for it.

Intifada, is a word that keeps getting thrown around. I think we've arrived to witness the beginning of another one. Or maybe there was just a lull and the one that was going on started up again.

“I wonder if the UN can get our fathers back?” says Göran.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

He shrugs.

“Our fathers are not combatants. Maybe a jeep could go up there and get them.”

“We could ask them,” I say. Suddenly, I feel optimistic.

“You two do it,” says Göran. “You look more pitiful.”

Back in the days when Julia was in love with Göran, that would have crushed her. At the moment, she looks hopeful.

I don't want to approach any of the UN workers who are in the middle of something important, so I wait until one of them sits down and pulls out a cell phone. He makes a call and then puts his phone away. I grab Julia and we hurry over.

He smiles.

“What can I do for you?” he asks. “You're the kids whose dads are . . . somewhere.”

I nod.

“On Mount Gerizim,” I say. “They had an interview with the Samaritans. But now they're stuck up there. We were wondering if someone could go up there and get them . . .”

The man looks thoughtful. He's about Dad's age. Maybe he has kids too.

“It's possible. Let me look into it. But you kids shouldn't worry. Nothing's happening up there. Maybe we can get a message through, or something. But it's quiet up there. So don't worry.” He gives us a smile before standing up and heading outside. The UN workers seem to be the only people allowed out in the streets.

“Good news!” shouts one of them, dashing into the lobby to round up all his colleagues. “We've got an hour!”

“Starting when?” calls out one of the others.

“Three o'clock.”

He hurries back out.

Everyone's rushing around. Sounds like the trucks will be able to get through, but distribution will have to be fast.

We all look at each other. Will Dad and Bernt hear about this? Will they be able to use the one hour to get back down to us?

“If only they had a cell-phone,” says Göran.

I don't even know if Dad brought his cell-phone. I doubt it,

or else he would have phoned the hotel by know.

“Someone up there must have a cell-phone,” I say. Maybe not though. Are the Samaritans like everybody else? Or are they like Mennonites? I don't even know what they look like.

“We could ask,” says Göran, but everyone is rushing in and out and even the man at the front desk is busy, on the phone, alerting everyone in rapid Arabic that relief is on the way, starting at three o'clock. I only know this because I recognize the Arabic for three o'clock.

Göran, Julia and I are anxious. We don't want to miss anything so we stay in the lobby. But then we agree, this gives us only a limited view. At lunch we move to the glassed-in bridge. We have it to ourselves. The UN people are too busy for lunch. We have some hummus and some pita bread and sip coffee, very slowly. This is the best view of everything and this is where we want to be when three o'clock rolls around.

At 2:59 the streets are quiet. At 3:00, it's like a switch is flicked on and the whole scene changes. The front desk guy must have phoned all of Nablus, or else, word just spreads fast. Store fronts go up. People are out on foot, buying up all they can. The roads are crowded. From the looks of it, some people are leaving the city. The heavy trucks start rolling by. We rush from one side of the window to the other, taking it all in. Then I realize, my eyes should be on Mount Gerizim. I desperately want to see Dad and Bernt making their way down. But the mountain looks quiet. No one from Mount Gerizim seems to be coming down to Nablus.

I sigh. And then I pray. I should have done that as soon as I heard about the one-hour reprieve. I should have been praying that somehow Dad and Bernt would hear about it and make their way back.

Better late than never. While Julia and Göran watch the streets, I watch Mount Gerizim and pray. It's sort of a babble pray. I hope God doesn't mind. It's heartfelt, at least.

Then the hour ends. It stops as abruptly as it started. The people evaporate. The IDF patrols and the rumbling trucks, now empty, are the only things on the street.

“Dad,” says Julia, turning to me, anguish in her eyes.

I nod. I know. Mount Gerizim was quiet that whole time.

After all the activity and the return to silence, I want to weep. My legs almost collapse when I stand up.

We've been in the glassed-in bridge for three hours now. Wordlessly, we all head back to the lobby.

The UN workers are all back there now. Most of them look exhausted. They must have just had the craziest hour. A UN jeep pulls up and two more weary men enter the hotel.

Beside me, Julia gasps.

I look at her. And then I look at what she's looking at. The two weary men are Dad and Bernt!

I didn't recognize Dad because he hadn't shaved in six days. His clothing is different too.

Julia rushes to Dad and throws her arms around him. She's crying. I follow. Soon we're all hugging and crying.

Crying turns to laughter.

Then the talk turns practical. Dad and Bernt want showers. Since Bernt and Göran's room was never occupied, soon they have their own room back. In about half an hour, Dad is looking like himself again. He's in his own clothing and has shaved. But he looks tired.

Over coffee and french fries in the restaurant, they tell us their story.

They were pretty cut off from the world up there on Mount Gerizim. In fact, Mount Gerizim was never part of the Nablus curfew. The people up there have more contact with the Jewish settlements now than they do with Nablus. Their synagogue in the Old City is gone and the checkpoints just make it too impossible to move around freely. It's like the UN people said. It was safe up there.

They didn't hear about the one-hour break from the curfew until they saw all the activity in Nablus. They were so relieved and thought everything was back to normal. Leisurely, they thanked the Samaritans for their hospitality and slowly made their way down, by the side not visible to the hotel.

To their horror, halfway down, the curfew resumed. They almost decided to go back up again but agreed that they'd come this far and they were in God's hands. They praised God for His provision. A passing UN jeep, escorting the trucks back to the checkpoint, had picked them up.

Now it's our turn.

Bernt asks Göran how we did.

"We were fine," is Göran's summary.

Julia is more loquacious.

She gives a detailed summary of our six days, including what we ate and every movie that we watched and what we did online. Dad nods his approval.

As we leave the restaurant, some UN people are going in, including the lady who talked to us. When she sees Dad, she gives us a big smile and a thumbs up. Our grins say everything. We're each holding on to one of Dad's arms.

After that, there is a conference in our room.

Dad and Bernt have exciting news. Initially, things did not go well with the Samaritans. They were received politely, but the high priest was only mildly interested in Dad's paradigm for Middle East peace. When the curfew descended, they were invited to stay and treated with such graciousness that Dad could only remark how little had changed since the days of the Good Samaritan.

The Samaritans were sympathetic about their separation from their children. Many prayers were said for our safety. As the curfew progressed, the conversations became more interesting and they discussed archaeology, theology, history and pretty much everything else related to the area, past, present and future. The high priest even showed them some books from the library in the synagogue.

But there had been limitations. The high priest held the books and only drew their attention to certain pages. One book in particular was of incredible interest. It was a compilation of maps. The maps spanned a time period of four thousand years, but the high priest only showed them the more recent ones. Then the explosion occurred.

Bernt and the high priest hurried out to make sure the mountain was still intact. Dad hesitated for a moment. The book was just lying there on a table. With trembling hands, he turned quickly to the earliest maps and started snapping photos with his digital camera. He hadn't time to even look at what he was photographing. When he heard the high priest and Bernt talking as they returned, he frantically tried to turn back to the

page they were on. Apparently he got the right one because the high priest picked up the book and resumed the talk without any sign of suspicion.

Now Dad and Bernt are eager to look at the photographs. First, they have to wait for the laptop to recharge.

Bernt is quick to see that our coffee and tea supplies are replenished. Göran is back to his iPad. But when the laptop is recharged, he joins us around the table.

The first picture is blurry.

Dad groans.

The second picture is better. It shows a rough map of early Shechem, the city.

Dad and Bernt speculate that it's the Canaanite site, the city that Jacob camped outside of and the one inhabited by the prince who fell in love with Dinah.

"It's impossible to say what it's based on," says Bernt, putting his glasses on for a better look. "Is it just conjecture, or did they copy something earlier?"

It's the third map that causes everyone to take in a sharp breath.

"It's the tree!" Dad practically shouts.

The writing is in a cramped Hebrew, but it's unmistakable. The detail is crude, but there is the outline of the settlement, the two mountains, a few wells, and near one of the wells, a large tree.

"Terebinth," Bernt nods. "It is definitely the one."

"But is it in proportion?" Dad asks. "They whole map could just be a rough sketch."

"It is easy enough to confirm," says Bernt. "We know where all the other landmarks are."

He's right. The mountains are still here and the settlement probably matches with the ruins of Shechem that we visited.

There are only five more photos, but they are not helpful, although one of them is from the days of Jesus. Dad and Bernt are enthused about examining it more later.

But first things first.

Dad and Bernt go online to try to get measurements of distances between the mountains.

This turns into a major research project.

They are examining old maps of the area that are online – ones from Bible dictionaries and commentaries that are now in the public domain. The study goes late into the evening. None of us dares switch on the TV or do anything to distract them.

Julia and I end up falling asleep on our bed and I think Göran even starts to snooze on Dad's, until we're all woken by an announcement.

“The map is proportional,” says Dad, jubilantly. “We know where the terebinth tree was!”

CHAPTER TEN

How do you explore a city under curfew? That's the question at breakfast. We're back to the glassed-in bridge for tea and pita bread. It is such a relief to be back together. Nothing has changed, but in a way, everything has changed. With Dad here, my fear drops down to nearly nil. I'm still going to keep praying though. Even when we get out of here, I'm never going to stop praying for this place.

Dad and Bernt are eager to get out and start measuring distances. They're pretty sure that the well by the tree is Jacob's well. It would be easy to measure from that point but to get the exact location, they may need surveying equipment. As an archeologist, Dad has had plenty of experience with surveying equipment, but he doubts he can buy any archeological supplies in Nablus. If we weren't trapped here, we'd be on our way to a supply place in Jerusalem. Archaeology is a past-time in Israel so there's no shortage of places where you can buy what you need.

To complicate things, the conference would have been wrapping up in a few days and our flight home is in a week. But if things go on the way they're going, we'll still be here.

The men are running their hands through their hair, trying to come up with something.

“You should pray,” says Julia. “Ginny and I prayed that you'd get back here and you did.”

Dad and Bernt both laugh.

“Out of the mouths of babes, eh Anderson?” says Bernt. “She is right.”

After breakfast, we return to our respective rooms for prayer.

In our room, Dad thanks God that we are all together again. He thanks God for this little oasis in the midst of trouble and asks God to bless the Samaritans for their hospitality. He also prays for the people of Nablus and for a peaceful resolution to the conflict here.

Then he asks for a way for us to investigate this terebinth tree further, to find the idols if they are still here and that the whole thing will bring glory to God however it turns out.

“Will finding idols glorify God?” Julia asks.

“That's something I've been thinking about,” says Dad, thoughtfully. “It's bothered me, actually. Those idols were buried for a reason. I'm not sure I should be the one to dig them up.”

“But idols are meaningless,” I say. “They only mean something if people want them too.”

“Good point, Ginny,” says Dad, nodding. “Finding those buried idols wouldn't turn anyone to idolatry. They would just demonstrate, once again, that the Bible is accurate.”

“Maybe it would help this area a bit too,” I say.

“It might,” says Dad. “A bit of extra tourism wouldn't hurt.”

With Dad here, even the boredom doesn't seem so dreary. He doesn't let us just sit around and watch TV. We're on Google Maps, looking at Nablus, comparing the streets with the images on Google Earth. He says we'll do all we can from inside the hotel.

And Dad and Bernt aren't shy about talking to the UN people. At lunch, we actually sit with a table of UN workers and Dad and Bernt ask a lot of questions. The general consensus is that this is going to be a long one. If we want to get out of here, we may just have to wait until the civilian

population snaps and starts going out regardless of the curfew.

“It happens when the people run out of food,” says one man. “It happens when they can't take sitting in their homes for three straight months.”

“It happens when they have a dead body to bury,” says one middle-aged woman with frizzy brown hair and a loud voice. She's seated between Dad and Bernt.

“Every time these people make a little progress,” she continues. “You know, rebuild their government buildings, rebuild their schools, some idiot starts another skirmish and the tanks are out again. And they're gunning everything down with their M-16s.”

She's not a UN worker. She introduces herself as Dawn and says she's with a human-rights organization that monitors the Middle East. Surprisingly, she's heard of Dad. One of her friends was at the conference.

“Interesting solution to the problems in Palestine, Dr. Kent,” she says, shaking her head. “Completely naïve, of course.”

He smiles.

One of the UN workers wants to know what Dad's solution is.

“To love your enemies,” Dawn calls out.

The UN worker groans.

“We'd be out of a job if everyone did that,” says another, jokingly.

It's good-natured kidding here, though.

Did I mention that for a middle-aged woman, Dawn is attractive? She quickly assesses that Dad is a happily married man, the ring on his finger probably gives it away, and then focuses on Bernt.

Bernt can be as stiff as his son and seems overwhelmed by her attention. The UN workers have things to do and leave us alone at the table. A waiter obligingly brings us more coffee. Dawn asks Bernt all sorts of questions about what he does and why he's here and what his thoughts are about the Middle East today. Bernt answers all her questions with a yes or a no or a maybe. At times, her hand rests on his very inert arm.

Göran is wide-eyed. I don't think he wants anyone interested in his father. Julia and I are trying not to snicker. Even Dad is

hiding a smile beyond his cloth napkin.

Bernt announces that he is tired and must have a rest. Very reluctantly, Dawn relinquishes his arm but assures him she will be here in the restaurant for dinner, say, around seven. Bernt nods slightly but commits to nothing.

Back in our room, Bernt forgets that he's tired and he and Dad start creating a scale map of Nablus, in particular, the area around Joseph's well, based on the Google Earth images and the Google map streets.

Other maps are found online, older maps, to scale. The whole thing takes the rest of the afternoon. At six o'clock, Bernt glances at his watch.

"We should go for dinner," he says.

"Don't you want to wait until seven?" Dad asks, mischievously.

Bernt almost shudders.

"I am hungry now," he says.

He has an ally in Julia who has her appetite back with the return of Dad.

"Well, perhaps you will see Dawn on the way out of the restaurant, then," says Dad to Bernt, giving me a wink. He can be a real tease sometimes.

"I would be happy not to see the lady again," says Bernt, standing up.

"Perhaps we could use her to gain information for our search," suggests Göran, as we all stand.

"I am not in the habit of using women," says his father, thus ending all conversation about Dawn.

We take the stairs down to the restaurant and are led to a table for six.

Now that Dad is back and Göran has lost his appeal, Julia has decided she's in love with one of the waiters. Actually, she confided to me earlier, there are two waiters she has her eye on. There's the one in the glassed-in bridge and there's one here in the restaurant. She can't decide which one is her true love. I'm sure her diary is filled with pages regarding this momentous decision. Both of them smile and are friendly so they're miles ahead of Göran, as far as I'm concerned.

The waiter that Julia has a crush on serves our table. Julia

gazes up at him with adoring eyes. Some fresh food must have come in during that hour that the curfew was lifted because all the salads are now available again. We have an eggplant salad and some tabbouleh, along with some pastries stuffed with cheese and parsley. Our waiter is busy as the restaurant fills up and Julia never takes her eyes off him. Dad notices and gives me a wink over her head. We're all used to Julia's infatuations.

But Julia's interest in our waiter is benevolent compared to the tornado that enters the room. We must have lingered too long over coffee because Dawn appears in the entranceway, spots Bernt and gives a big smile and a wave.

And since we are at a table for six, there is an empty seat beside Bernt.

Bernt is too polite to groan. The cloth napkin goes back up over Dad's face to hide his amusement. Because now we're stuck. Dawn announces to the waiter she wants the lamb and then turns all her attention to Bernt. We can't just get up and walk away and leave her to eat her meal alone.

She lets us know that the conference over at Al-Qasr ended early due to the current circumstances. Everybody was bused out this morning.

"That's ironic considering we were here to protest the Israeli destruction of the Palestinian heritage," says Dad.

Bernt nods.

"Well, I guess you could have all joined hands and stood in front of the Israeli tanks," says Dawn.

"It would not have solved anything," says Bernt, staring across the table rather than looking at Dawn.

"I was just joking, honey!" says Dawn giving him a gentle punch on his arm. Bernt looks down at his arm to make sure it is still intact. I don't get the sense that he is a snob, only that he is intensely uncomfortable with this attention.

"It's hard to protest a curfew when we're in the middle of it," says Dad, looking around. "I didn't realize that."

"We are impotent," says Bernt, grimly.

"Maybe it's better to be on the outside and protest it from there," Dad agrees.

"But on the outside we'll get back to our own lives," I say. It's something that's been bothering me. I know that when I get

home to Canada it will be easier to forget what's happening here. But I don't want to forget. I want to keep remembering. If I don't, I'll feel as if I betrayed something.

Dawn nods vigorously, without looking at me.

“If the world ever knew about Nablus, they forget it pretty quickly. And what helps to fuel this whole war machine are the *Christians* in North America.”

Dad is silent. She knows he's a Christian.

“Without the right-wing fundamentalists pushing for support for Israel,” Dawn continues, “they would be held up to scrutiny for what they are doing here and it would be treated as a human rights issue rather than a religiously-justifiable war.”

“I am a Christian,” says Bernt. It is a simple statement. I don't think he intends it to be a rebuke, his tone is low and soft, but Dawn looks as if she has been slapped in the face.

The waiter arrives with Dawn's lamb. She mumbles “shukran.”

Julia beams up at him which helps to cover up the horrible silence. He grins back.

When he's gone, Julia turns to Dad.

“Why are Christians in North America fuelling this whole war machine?” she asks.

Dad smiles.

“It has a lot to do with how people view prophecy, particularly prophecies regarding the second coming of Jesus,” he explains. “Some Christians look at various scriptures and piece them together into a whole sequence of events that will take place in the future. One of the things in their sequence is that the Jews have to be back in Israel. Because they believe that it is God's will that there be a Jewish nation here, they throw their support behind Israel.”

“But doesn't that make it hard for the Arabs?” Julia asks, her eyes on our waiter who is now distributing plates of food to another table.

Dad nods.

The romance between Bernt and Dawn seems to have ended as abruptly as it started. As soon as her food is finished, she joins a table of journalists for her coffee.

Dad is diplomatic enough not to refer to Dawn when we

return to our room.

After an hour more of work on the internet, comparing maps and referring back to the photo of the map from the Samaritan synagogue, Dad and Bernt come to an exciting conclusion. “We won’t need surveying equipment!” Dad announces. He points to a spot on Google Earth. “The terebinth tree would have been right here!”

The Buried Gold of Shechem

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It's just outside of the entrance to Balata," says Dad. Göran, Julia and I look at each other. That's the worst place imaginable right now. A tank is probably parked right on top of it.

Dad moves the mouse down to look at today's date.

"We have a flight out of here in six days."

Bernt nods.

"Göran and I also have a return flight in a week." He walks over to the window and looks out at the quiet street. "But I would have a hard time leaving. We may never come back."

Dad agrees. A curfew means that not only is it hard to get out, it's hard to get in too.

Bernt gets on the internet and starts looking up information about curfews in Nablus. He reads newspaper article after newspaper article out loud. In the last ten years, there have been so many curfews here. Some have lasted only a few days, others have lasted months.

As Bernt reads about suspected Arab militants being shot as they move across rooftops, we hear gunfire in the distance. I wonder if they are just people out trying to get some food. My mind goes back to Muhsin. I hope he's OK.

It's one thing to hear all these news reports, but now we have faces to fill in the picture. Muhsin, the smiling waiters, the man at the front desk who was eager to let all his family and friends know they would have an hour to get out and go for more food.

Finally, even Dad and Bernt want to take a break. The TV is switched on. They eschew the modern movies and go for an old black-and-white version of *The Mutiny on the Bounty*. Like *Little Women*, it's about as far away from Nablus as you can get. But in the background, the sporadic gunfire continues.

There is a rumour at breakfast that there might be another one-hour chance to get out today.

“On one hand, it's a good thing,” says the UN worker who joins our table in the glassed-in bridge. “On the other hand, it's a bad sign that the Israelis plan to keep the general curfew going for a while.”

“This may be our only chance,” says Bernt, when we are all back in our room.

“It's risky . . .”

“Not if we are back within an hour.”

Dad shakes his head.

“I don't think we'll be able to get there, dig up the idols and return all within an hour!”

Bernt chuckles.

“No, but we have to see the location. We can assess it and maybe return when there is another chance.”

Dad nods slowly.

“Dad,” I say. “We don't even have shovels. How are you going to dig, even if we could?”

“We'd be conspicuous with shovels,” says Bernt. “We can't arrive at the spot and start digging. Any strange behaviour would immediately draw attention.”

Dad agrees.

“We're just going to have to pray, Ginny. We'll go out today, look the spot over and plan from there.”

The UN worker said it would be three o'clock again.

Bernt and Dad are reviewing their map. Dad goes downstairs and makes sure that we'll be able to grab a cab at

exactly three o'clock if the curfew is lifted. The man at the front desk assures us there will be cabs if it happens.

We're all restless. Lunch breaks up the day. But after that, we pace the room, looking out the window, waiting. At 2:45, we go downstairs to wait in the lobby.

The UN workers are all out and about, which is a good sign. *Something* is happening.

At exactly three o'clock, the city bursts into life.

Some cabs appears outside the hotel and we practically fall into one of them.

"Beer Ya'coub," cries Bernt.

The cab driver takes off. Like everyone on the street, he appreciates the value of every minute and doesn't go at a leisurely pace. Within five minutes, we're in front of the Orthodox church.

Bernt and Dad, consult their map and then direct the driver to a point just further on. But the driver shakes his head. Where we want to go, is toward the entrance to Balata. There are three tanks lined up on the street. IDF soldiers are patrolling. People from the camp are moving quickly by them. Taxis are lined up to take them into town.

"Wait here!" says Dad to our driver. He hands him some money. The man nods, looking pleased with the number of shekels that have just been thrust into his hand.

Now we are walking rapidly. We can't run. We don't want to draw attention to ourselves, although, we're a conspicuous group. Some of the soldiers crossing back and forth on the street have their eyes on us.

Dad consults the map and reorients himself. We all follow as he leads us straight to . . . a crater.

"This must be where that explosion happened!" I say, looking down into the crater. It's at least three metres deep and about six metres across.

Göran and Julia nod. We saw this on TV.

"Whatever was there must have been blown to smithereens," says Dad, dismayed.

Bernt is checking the map again.

"This is definitely the location," he says. Ignoring the soldiers eyeing us, he moves to the edge of the crater. We join

him.

Bernt tells us to scan everything, for anything, gold dust, whatever might be left.

We look the whole thing over but all we see is concrete remains and dirt, lots of dirt.

Dad glances at his watch.

“Thirty-five minutes left,” he says.

Some journalists are arriving at the site. They are snapping a few photos and news cameras are scanning the whole area.

One man, who I recognize from Al-Yasmeen, is doing a report with Balata in the background and the IDF in the foreground.

One journalist is attempting to talk to the soldiers but is being waved away.

“What now?” says Bernt.

Dad shrugs, his eyes still on the huge hole in the ground.

Our driver shouts something to us. We turn and look. He points at his wrist.

Obviously he has to get us back soon or he won't be able to get home before the curfew starts up again. Dad nods and we all start walking back.

We're halfway to the cab when we realize Göran isn't with us. In fact, he's gone. We turn and scan the area. Bernt gives a little cry. Göran is in the crater. He must have jumped in. All we can see is the top of his blond head and then it disappears as Göran drops down to his knees.

We hurry back to the edge of the crater.

The soldiers are watching the crazy European teenager. So are the journalists.

Our driver shouts again.

Dad hesitates and then waves him on. He nods, gets in his cab and drives away.

Göran is digging with his hands in the dirt.

“Majnoon,” I hear one of the Arabs mutter as he hurries back toward Balata. It's actually a word I learned. It means crazy.

The soldiers are laughing at Göran. The journalists have decided that it is not much of a news story and are turning their attention back to Balata and the Palestinians.

Bernt is smart.

He doesn't jump in with his son. He just lets everyone think he has a kooky son. Instead, he calls out in Swedish. Instructions probably, because Göran moves about a metre over and starts digging there. I doubt if anyone understood what Bernt said.

Göran has grabbed a stick and is now poking the ground with that. He's stirring up a lot of dirt. We all watch, eagerly.

Then the soldiers start shouting at us. Dad understands Hebrew, but even if he didn't, the English is clear enough. All people who aren't residents of Balata should start returning to their places of domicile. The way they wave their guns around makes even Göran, breathless at this point, jump out of the crater.

We hurry over to a taxi and in six minutes, are back at the hotel. The driver is paid before he screeches off to get home before the curfew resumes.

The lobby is filled with milling UN workers. But we go back up to our room. Göran's eyes are wild.

As soon as the door closes behind us, he says, "My stick hit something! Just when they started shouting at us!"

Dad and Bernt look at one another. Was it just a rock or a piece of concrete? Will we ever be able to go back and actually do a proper dig?

Dad drops down on his bed, while Bernt and Göran take a seat in the chairs. Julia and I sit down on our bed.

"It was too deep," says Bernt, shaking his head. "Jacob could never have buried something that deep."

"I don't know," says Dad. "You know how it is in this field. We dig through layers to get to different levels. Four thousand years of history lie on top of those idols."

"Good point," says Bernt. "The location was certainly right."

"That crater may turn out to be a blessing," says Dad. "It might have done most of the work for us already. Though I wish it hadn't been formed by the loss of human life."

We all agree.

At dinner the talk is of an upcoming press conference at seven o'clock. An Israeli general will be speaking just outside of the hotel. He has promised the journalists five minutes, no

more.

“I think we should be there too,” says Dad.

Bernt agrees. He leans forward so that no one at a nearby table can hear.

“Do you think we should have a private word with him? Perhaps he could authorize something. This is part of their heritage.”

Dad looks thoughtful.

“Good point. It's worth a shot. This is going to bother me for the rest of my life if we don't follow it through to the end.”

Bernt nods.

“But don't the people of Nablus count?” I ask. “I mean, whatever's there belongs to them now.”

“The people of Nablus do not count,” says Göran, who has looked slightly crazed ever since his jump into the crater. I remember how he was the one who got this whole thing going, digging under that farmer's tree. “Even if we could get the mayor of this place to agree, he cannot help us. The Israelis have the power. They are the ones to talk to.”

Bernt and Dad exchange looks.

“I'm afraid he's right, Ginny,” says Dad, turning to me. “It's a case of realpolitik. Realpolitik is when you put aside morals and ideology and just look at it in terms of practical power. I don't like it either. But if this curfew goes on for months, then the Israelis are the ones we'll have to talk to.”

“The idols will go straight to a museum in Jerusalem,” I say, leaning forward. “The people of Nablus will never even get to see them!”

“The idols were buried by Jacob,” says Göran, who is directly across from me. “Jerusalem is as good a place as any.”

I lean back. I don't like the idea. It doesn't feel right.

When I look at Dad, I can tell he doesn't like it either. He looks uneasy.

Bernt's eyes are troubled.

We eat slowly and linger over coffee. There are forty-five minutes until the press conference.

At 6:45, Bernt and Göran return to the room for the maps. Julia and I visit the bathroom in the hotel lobby. Already the lobby is filling up with all the journalists staying in the hotel.

Dawn passes through on her way to the restaurant but pretends she doesn't know us. Bernt and Göran return.

I wish there was something we could do for the people of Nablus. I wish that whatever we find could go to them. It's part of their heritage now. That's what we came here to do, to protect their cultural heritage. And now, when it gets hard, we're going to turn to their enemies to try to find these artifacts.

I know Dad has to think like an archaeologist. I look up at him. I can tell he's still unsettled. But he can't do anything.

There's only one person who can do anything. God. I pray.

I pray that there's something we can do for the people of Nablus and say amen, just as the jeep carrying the Israeli general pulls up in front of the hotel. All the journalists rush out through the glass doors. We follow behind at a slower pace.

Questions are being thrown out at him before he even steps out of his vehicle. Soldiers surround him, their M-16's poised for trouble.

He answers in English. He is a solid-looking man, balding, alert and abrupt.

Have the Jewish settlers who started all this been punished?

“Yes.”

Imprisonment?

“Yes, they are awaiting trial.”

Is the curfew on Nablus political? A lot of right-wing people in Jerusalem are angry that their settlers are being punished for defending Eretz Israel.

“Here it is all military.”

What about the left-wing people who are angry that Nablus is being punished for something that was started by the Jews?

“We are not punishing. We are restoring peace. The situation is volatile.”

How many dead Palestinians so far?

“Those numbers aren't available.”

How many dead IDF so far?

“Three.”

The five minutes pass by quickly and the general is back in the jeep. Now it is Dad and Bernt's turn to push forward and try to stop him before the jeep takes off. It's not easy when the

journalists are all going in the other direction, back into the hotel, but Bernt is now within touching distance of the jeep.

I prayed that there was something we could do for the people of Nablus. But at that moment, the people of Nablus decide they're going to do something for themselves.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The jeep's engine never stopped running. But the vehicle doesn't move.

The streets of Nablus are filling up with people. They come from the direction of the Old City, but as people see what's happening, more people come out of doors to join them. It's not a wild mob. It's just people out on the streets again.

We all stare.

The journalists turn around and start filming and snapping pictures. I look over at the general and his armed men. They look annoyed, but with all the cameras running, they aren't going to start shooting.

It is an amazing sight. The curfew is being broken right in front of us. Stores are opening. People have decided that they aren't just going to sit at home anymore.

"Come on," I say, tugging Dad's arm.

He looks at me, startled.

"Let's go!" I say. "We don't know how long it's going to last ..."

He's making a decision – surveying the crowd, glancing over at the Israelis for their reaction. Then he nods.

Göran is already ahead of us, anyhow, so we just follow

him. It would be a long walk, but soon a yellow taxi appears and we hail it. He delivers us to the site of Jacob's well and then, after being paid, takes off. We walk the rest of the way.

Now, we're in a danger zone. The soldiers outside of Balata are tense, guns pointed, tanks ready. Balata is stirring. People realize that Nablus has taken to the streets and they are prepared to do the same. But the soldiers guarding the entrance to their camp won't let them out, even when they become a crowd.

"This could get ugly," says Dad.

We've reached the edge of the crater. Göran is already in there, digging with a stick. Bernt hesitates. It's a high jump. But there is some gunfire in the distance, coming from Balata. We don't hesitate then. We all leap into the crater.

The soldiers are too busy monitoring the refugee camp to care about some crazy unarmed Europeans who suddenly want to dig in the dirt.

Göran's stick is right where he left it and he is frantically clawing at the hard object that he struck earlier. But it's only a stone. So we spread out a bit and all dig. The soil was loosened by the explosion so it's not impossible. But it is gruesome. This crater was the result of a suicide bomber. There are fragments of metal and even some fragments of cloth. I don't want to think about it.

And I think there may be a gun battle raging over our heads.

We're all too busy to stop and look. This is our one and only chance to dig. Three of my fingernails are broken and when I hit a large stone, I use that to help me go deeper. But it's becoming increasingly obvious that we are too deep. Even factoring in four thousand years of accumulated dirt, there's no way Jacob would have buried anything this far down.

I wipe the sweat off my forehead with my sleeve.

Göran is still digging like a maniac, but Dad and Bernt are starting to look discouraged. To make it worse, it's getting dark. Soon we won't be able to see anything.

The gunfire is getting closer. The conflict that was going on somewhere in the centre of Balata is now making its way to the entrance of Balata.

Dad and Bernt look at one another. The message is clear. We

need to get out of here, and fast.

But there isn't a taxi in sight.

Dad is hauling me and Julia out of the pit.

Bernt is having a harder time convincing Göran to leave, but in the end, the father prevails.

Some of the IDF are firing in the direction of Balata. The tanks are already pointed at the people attempting to leave the camp.

Dad is holding mine and Julia's hands and we are running. We might have to run all the way back to the hotel. There is an explosion behind us. I just about jump out of my skin. Dad veers off the road and we fly toward the Greek Orthodox compound that houses Jacob's well. It's the only sanctuary in sight. The compound is deserted. I guess the priests are all safely inside somewhere.

The main church door is locked. But we run around until Bernt discovers a small door that is unlocked. The fighting is in the streets right outside of the compound. A whole mob has managed to push their way past the Israeli line of defense. This crowd is different from the one in the streets of Nablus. They are angry, defiant and willing to risk being shot at in order to send a message to the world.

My eyes are still on them as Dad drags me down a short flight of stairs and into a dark basement.

"We will be safe," says Bernt. "The tanks will not fire in this direction."

Göran is simmering with emotion. We can hardly see, the room is so dark, so we just take a seat on the ground near the door. The door is ajar so that we have a bit of light. But Göran doesn't sit. He paces in the small space that is still illuminated by the last bit of daylight.

"Two more minutes," he says. "That's all it might have taken!"

"Dad," I say. "Those people out in the street . . ."

"Uh huh?" says Dad.

"They were willing to die just to get out of their houses!"

"I know," says Dad, nodding.

"Will anyone get shot?" Julia asks.

"Probably, Jul," says Dad.

Göran can't get his mind off of the buried idols. I can't get my mind off of the people in the street.

The ground rumbles. The tanks are moving. Mom said we might end up throwing rocks at tanks. I wonder if Dad will tell her all about this? There's probably no rule in the Bible that says you have to tell your spouse *everything*.

When the sun goes down, the gunfire continues. But we can't see a thing.

"I wonder if there's a light switch somewhere?" asks Dad, standing up. The floor is damp and I don't like the idea of sitting in a dark room that could have all sorts of smaller rodents.

"I wonder if there's a bathroom somewhere?" says Julia. We laugh.

"I think we should do some exploring," agrees Dad.

Bernt gets out his car keys. His keychain has a small light for unlocking your car in the dark, for back in the days when you didn't just click a button to open it. He shines it around but, pardon the pun, it is not very illuminating. There are shelves with boxes all along one wall. A statue of a saint in the corner. A lot of spare pew benches. We all decide that we'd rather sit on the pew benches than on the ground so we relocate.

Bernt is still looking for a source of light. Finally, after surveying the ceiling for a second time, he finds a small string that leads to a lightbulb. He pulls on it and the room is dimly lit.

But that doesn't solve Julia's problem of having to go the bathroom. With light, now she can explore. There is a door she tries out, only to discover a closet. But there is nothing else. Finally, she and Dad have to risk their lives by going back out and finding a bush for her to pee behind.

They return to report that, if anything, the fighting has gotten worse.

Bernt groans.

"We're going to be here all night."

"What's that smell?" I ask.

"Tear gas," says Dad, tersely. "Thankfully the wind is blowing away from us."

"It stunk out there," says Julia.

Julia goes back to the closet that she discovered.

"It's pretty interesting in here," she calls back.

"Julia, that's private property," says Dad, now sitting beside me on one of the pew benches.

Obedience has never been Julia's strong point.

"I wonder if this box is from the time of Jesus?" she calls out. "It's beautiful."

The archaeologist in Dad is kindled. He can't resist checking it out.

"This *is* incredible," he calls back to Bernt, coming out of the closet, carrying a small wooden box. "The lighting is horrible in here, but my first impression is that it's a Crusader piece."

He and Bernt huddle over the box, carrying it over to the lightbulb to get a better look.

I join Julia in the closet. The room is the size of a bedroom, with shelves. The shelves are packed with sturdy boxes, but some of them aren't locked. I open one and find statues, icons probably. I don't know much about the Greek Orthodox faith. I pick up a large silver cross, wondering if it's real. Julia is down by my feet, opening a small trunk on the ground. Inside is a long robe.

"Look Dad!" she says, exiting the closet and holding it up to her.

It's gorgeous when it's unfolded. It looks like something a medieval princess would wear.

"That's nice, Julia," says Dad, absently. "Put it away."

I turn in the closet and stub my toe on the trunk that Julia pulled out.

"Julia!" I say. "Put that robe away and stuff this back where you found it!"

She gives the robe one last admiring look and then folds it back up.

"I can't get this trunk back under," she says to me.

"Oh for crying out loud!" I say, crouching down. "Let me do it!"

I try to slide the trunk under but it's hitting something hard. It can't be the wall because the shelves go deeper than that.

I exit the closet and ask Bernt if I can borrow his light.

Wordlessly, he hands his key chain to me.

Now I can see what's back there. It's made of stone. It's bigger than the trunk that was in front of it. I try to slide it over slightly in order to get the trunk back. The thing is just too heavy.

"Here Jul," I say. "Give me a hand!"

She misunderstands and thinks that I want to pull the thing right out. I nearly lose another fingernail when she tugs at it.

"Thanks a lot!" I say, looking down at my finger.

And now the stone whatever-it-is, is further out when I wanted it further back.

"You're welcome," she says politely, not noticing my sarcasm. "What is it?"

"I dunno," I say, bending down and shining the light at it. "Looks old."

"Let's get Göran to pull it out," says Julia.

I want Göran to push it back, but Julia goes out and tells Göran we've found something cool. Can he help us?

Reluctantly, Göran joins us. He pulls at the thing and discovers it's nearly impossible to move. Then his pride kicks in. Two girls are watching him and he can't admit that the thing is too heavy to pull out. With great exertion, he manages to get it out to a point where it just clears the shelves.

It's like a sarcophagus with a stone lid.

"Dad," I call out. "I think we found something."

"Be there in a minute," he replies, in that tone of voice that really means he'll be there when he's done what he's currently doing.

"Let's open it," I say.

"No way," says Julia. "There are probably spiders in there."

"More likely there are bones in there," I say.

That finishes it for both of us. Neither of us wants to open the thing.

"You can do it," says Julia to Göran.

I nod my agreement.

Göran lifts the lid.

We all just stare.

"God in heaven," mutters Göran, kneeling down. He picks up one of the objects in the sarcophagus. Wordlessly, I shine

the light on it. All of a sudden, I'm trembling.

We've been to enough museums and looked at enough pictures in Dad's archaeology books to recognize a Canaanite deity when we see it.

It is a crude stone person, wide-hipped and large-breasted, probably a fertility goddess.

The sarcophagus is full of similar items. Most are stone, but one or two are even gold.

"Dad," I say, my voice shaking. "I really think you should see this."

In a moment, Dad and Bernt appear in the doorway. They see Göran on the ground, holding a large stone idol. They stare down at the contents of the sarcophagus. Shocked, they drop to their knees. A few of the idols are held up for examination. Then they stand up and brush the dust off the knees of their pants.

The first task is to get the idols out into the light where they can examine them.

Slowly, over the next hour, we take inventory. There are about three hundred idols here, mostly small.

Finally, Dad says what we've all been thinking.

"I don't think there's any doubt that this was what was buried under that terebinth tree," says Dad. "But who knows how they ended up here?"

"But if these are Jacob's idols," says Bernt. "What about the earrings that were also buried with them?"

A careful search of the closet has the answer. They have their own small sarcophagus – child-sized – filled to the top with gold and other precious metals.

"The craftsmanship is superb," says Dad, examining one of the earrings. "And definitely Canaanite."

Bernt glances at his watch.

"Ten minutes after twelve," he says. Outside, the gunfire has abated. "We had better start putting these back . . ."

"Put them back?" Göran is incredulous. "Just put them back?"

His father nods.

"They are not ours," he says, stating the obvious.

But I don't like the idea either. These don't belong in a closet

buried under a church.

Dad nods, agreeing with Bernt, and carefully places an idol in the sarcophagus.

Suddenly, there is a beam of light shining on us. It came from a small doorway on the other side of the room. For a moment, we are all blinded.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

No one says anything.
Then a voice from behind the light speaks.
“Min hunak?”

“Who's there?” I translate.

But the man who steps into the light generated by the single bulb is not an Arab.

He is an old man, with a long white beard and the robes of a priest.

“I'm very sorry !” says Dad. “We were caught in the fighting and we came in here.”

The man glances at the sarcophagi.

“We have behaved badly,” says Bernt, looking ashamed. But Göran looks defiant.

“What is this?” asks the man, switching to broken English. He comes over and shines his light on the sarcophagi.

“I'm afraid our curiosity got the better of us,” says Dad.

The man bends down to pick up one the idols.

“Mother of God,” he says. “Where did these come from?”

“That's just what we were wondering,” says Dad. “Is it possible these were the idols and earrings that were buried under Jacob's terebinth tree?”

I stifle a laugh. The priest probably wanted to know where we found them, not where we think they originated from.

The priest is slow to answer. He has a lot to take in at once.

“I am familiar with the story,” he says, finally. “But how would these come to be here?”

“That’s what we were wondering,” says Dad.

Led by the priest, Dad and Bernt sit down on the pew benches.

The old man inhales.

“This church is relatively new,” he says. “But we built a church when we first came here.”

“What year would that have been?” Bernt asks.

“Around 1860,” says the man, slowly. “In 1927 there was an earthquake that destroyed it.”

An earthquake!

All of us look at each other.

“That could have been the time when the idols and the earrings were found!” says Dad.

Bernt is also excited by the idea.

“Of course!” he says. “The ground would be all shaken up and the idols were so close to here. Someone must have found them!”

Even the priest is nodding.

“It is possible, yes. We did not have a church anymore, but someone took great care to store these safely in the sarcophagi. No doubt, they were transferred to the new church when it was complete.”

“But no one knows they’re here now?” Dad asks.

The priest shakes his head.

“I am the oldest member of this community and I was not aware of them.”

“Now that they’ve been found,” I say, excitedly. “The people of Nablus will be able to study them!”

“Ginny,” says Dad. “These belong to the Greek Orthodox Church, not the people of Nablus.”

The priest nods, but I can see he has a faraway look in his eye.

“Are you saying these could end up in . . . Greece?” I ask.

Dad laughs.

"I don't know, Ginny."

"They could very well end up in a museum in Greece," says the priest.

There is silence. Then the priest speaks again. He doesn't look my way but I think he's talking to me.

"I have lived here all my life. My home is here. I have only been to Greece once." He gets up and walks over to the sarcophagi. "The people of Nablus have so little . . ."

"Could you donate them to Nablus?" I ask, as we all join him.

He shakes his head.

"I do not have that authority." The priest stares down at the idols. "We have no way of knowing whether a priest even found these. Maybe it was an Arab shepherd, for all we know . . ."

I catch his drift and I'm inspired.

"Dad!" I say, an idea beginning to form. "What if we pretend that we found these in that crater out there?"

Dad looks appalled that any daughter of his should come up with such an idea. But Göran is immediately on my side.

"Yes!" he nods vigorously. "We will say we found them there tonight!"

"I refuse to participate in such a thing!" says Bernt.

"It's not right . . ." I say.

Dad looks relieved that I'm seeing things his way.

". . . that these should just sit here when they belong to the people of Nablus," I finish.

Dad sighs.

"It is deceptive," says Bernt stiffly.

"You don't have to deceive anyone!" Göran practically shrieks. "We will do it!" He waves at me and Julia. "You can just say you weren't looking at us when we found them!"

It must be the tension level, but this outburst of Göran's all strikes us as being hysterically funny and suddenly, instead of arguing, we're all laughing. Even the priest is smiling.

Göran is not going to give up the idea and for the first time I feel connected to him.

Dad and Bernt watch grimly as we look around for some way of transporting the idols back to the hotel. The stone

sarcophagi are too heavy and we don't want to take anything that will link them back to the church. Plus, as the priest points out, the two sarcophagi may sit here for another thousand years before anyone notices the idols are missing.

The priest returns upstairs and comes back with some empty rice sacks.

“This is going to be heavy,” groans Göran. The idols have been divided into three bags for each of us to carry, since Dad and Bernt refuse to have anything to do with this.

Dad and Bernt look at each other and both men sigh.

“Come on, Anderson,” says Bernt, lifting one of the sack. “If we don't help, they will get back to the hotel in pieces.”

Dad agrees and commits to carrying one of the loads. The idols are redistributed into four sacks and Julia gets to carry the lighter load of all the jewellery.

We clean up the place, putting the sarcophagi back and shutting the closet door.

“Three fifteen,” says Dad, looking at his watch. “We have to get out of here before morning.”

I can't believe we're doing this! It's probably intensely illegal. But I don't feel bad about it.

Neither does the priest. He gives us a smile and wishes us all the best. He even says a prayer over us.

Stealthily, we head back up the stairs to the open night air. But it is not fresh air. The smell of tear gas lingers.

The streets are quiet now.

But that doesn't mean it's safe. There's still a curfew on and as Bernt points out, we could be shot on sight.

I pray. I pray like I've never prayed before. As we hurry through the dark, quiet streets, I pray we won't be shot and that we'll get all these idols back without them being damaged. It's a long walk, but we have no other options. Occasionally, I hear some noise, like maybe other people are sneaking around like us.

The Old City is silent now. Everything is closed-up. In the distance, we hear an engine. By the time the jeep passes, we are tucked in the shadows of a wide doorway.

We still have to cross an open street to get into the hotel. Unfortunately, the hotel is well-lit and so are we as we dash

across.

There is the sound of a gun firing as we practically fall through the glass doors. I almost drop my sack.

Was someone firing at us? We don't stop to find out.

The concierge glances at us when we come in and then looks back down. I guess nothing's too strange in Nablus. We hurry up the stairs and down the hallway. Dad unlocks the door and we all ease our sacks down.

Arms aching, I collapse on my bed.

"Well Anderson, we did it," says Bernt, sitting down on a chair. "We have now broken a large number of international laws."

Dad nods, almost grinning.

"Did we do the right thing?" he asks.

Bernt looks solemn. There is silence for a minute. Then he nods and smiles. A broad smile.

"Yes! Yes we did!"

The Buried Gold of Shechem

EPILOGUE

Göran gets all the credit. We all agree, from every angle, that that's the best plan.

The media is told that he came up with the idea, that he convinced us all to go out to the crater and that we all helped him to carry the idols back. That's the official story.

In a hotel full of journalists, it's easy to get the story out.

In fact, Göran manages to tell the story without lying. He gives me and Julia the credit for actually finding them. He just doesn't mention that we found them in a stone sarcophagus in a storage closet of the Greek Orthodox church. Taking refuge at the compound is left entirely out of the story.

I'm terrified that one of the journalists might ask how we continued to dig through a crater with tear gas in the air. But since none of them were actually there, no one thinks to question it.

Once the story is in all the papers, the Israeli government sends a convoy to escort us back to Jerusalem . . . with the idols.

We refuse to go. It's the same Israeli general who gave the quick press conference. And it's scary to have a showdown

with him. But the journalists are on our side and soon representatives of the Palestinian government arrive to officially receive the idols. The idols have attracted the interest of scholars from all over the world, and soon Nablus will have many visitors.

That's the best part of it all. The discovery of the idols is going to make a big difference in Nablus. A wealthy Israeli who is part of the Peace Now movement has donated enough money to build a small museum to house the idols and the jewellery. It is hoped that the museum will be expanded over the years to include many exhibits about the long and colourful history of Shechem, Neapolis and Nablus. Dad is already working on raising funds for a room that will recreate the scene of Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. It will give people a better idea of what it was really like than the current well does.

Before we leave, there is a well-attended ceremony beside the crater. One of the attendees is an honoured guest, the oldest member of the nearby Greek Orthodox community. Bernt and Göran plant a small terebinth tree on the same spot that the ancient one used to grow. They paid for the crater to be filled in and for the area to be landscaped. It is partly symbolic and partly strategy. It will prevent further excavation of the area and reduce the likelihood that anyone will dispute our claim that we found the idols there. Furthermore, Bernt and Dad release the map that they created, the one pinpointing the location of the tree. They tell the media that they relied on older maps to work it all out, but don't refer to the book in the Samaritan library.

Mom is horrified at the thought of us running around during the curfew. And she doesn't know the half of it! Dad really downplays the whole separation when we were in the hotel and he and Bernt were on Mount Gerizim.

But she's happy to have us home and sighs that this is what she gets for marrying an archeologist. David has gotten bigger and we all catch up on holding him and making gurgling duck noises for his amusement.

I keep updated on Nablus via the internet. The curfew is now lifted in Nablus. But life there remains edgy.

Epilogue

I regret that we were never able to see Balata for ourselves.

Julia thinks no more of her Arabic waiters, but I can't get Muhsin out of my mind. His smile made me feel welcome in Nablus. I'll never forget how he looked, standing there in the spring sunshine, leaning against his cab, waiting for us while we wandered among the Roman ruins.

THE END

The Kent family adventures

The Treasure of Tadmor
The Strange sketch of Sutton
The Hunt for the cave of Moravia
The Search for the sword of Goliath
The Buried gold of Shechem
The Cache of Baghdad
The Walls of Jerusalem
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