



The Treasure of Tadmor

A Kent family adventure

Jennifer L. Armstrong

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By
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CHAPTER ONE

Uncle Ken has really come through for us!” Dad bursts into our living room. He was on the telephone a minute earlier. He must be pretty excited to interrupt our lesson. Mom’s teaching us how to write hieroglyphs, which is pretty cool.

We’re a pretty close family because my sister, Julia, and I have always been home-schooled. Dad’s an archaeologist specializing in the Bible and Uncle Ken is his brother and his assistant. I’m Ginny and I’m fourteen. Julia is twelve. There, now all the facts are out of the way.

“What is it, Andy?” Mom asks. Dad’s first name is Anderson, his mother’s maiden name.

“Tadmor in the wilderness, Helena!” Dad says, excitedly.

We all look at him blankly.

“A city built up by Solomon,” explains Dad. “Now believed by most scholars to be Palmyra in Syria.”

“Dad!” I say excitedly, realizing where this might be going. “Are we going to . . . ?”

“Uncle Ken knows an archaeology professor at the University of Toronto who’s organizing a dig in Palmyra this summer,” continues Dad. “He’s a Christian and an expert in

the Davidic/Solomonic reign in Israel and he's going there with the sole intention of learning more about Tadmor. He's been granted a small area to investigate. Palmyra is an active tourist site bringing in a lot of revenue for Syria so they certainly don't want all the later monuments being affected by this."

"Well," says Mom shutting up her book of hieroglyphs. "I think we'll be putting this on hold for a while and learning Arabic instead."

Dad laughs.

"It wouldn't hurt to know some conversational phrases, but for the most part we'll be with English speakers like ourselves," says Dad. "In fact, everybody there will also be Canadian. Right now relations with America are a bit strained so Professor Lineman is only recruiting Canadian archaeologists. Ken has arranged that I'll go as one of Professor Lineman's assistants and that you guys will get to be in the loci."

Being in a locus is like being in a sandbox, except that you are digging through the sands of time.

"How many people are going?" asks Julia. My sister is the sociable one, pretty and well-liked by everybody we meet. I tend to be more serious. I like to learn when we travel with Dad and Mom.

"There will be another assistant of Dr. Lineman's, his teaching assistant actually. And about thirty of his university students will be coming to do the digging. I think Dr. Lineman is also bringing along his family so there may even be some kids close to your age there to make it more interesting."

"So, I take it we'll be roughing it?" says Mom.

"Hard to say," Dad grins at her. Mom's never complained about some of the conditions we've experienced when traveling with Dad, but it's a lot nicer when the conditions are comfortable. "If the Syrian government gives us permission, we'll be setting up camp just outside Palmyra. However, if they decide that that won't enhance the aesthetics of the ancient city, it will be one of the luxury hotels for us."

Mom looks hopeful.

“Palmyra is a beautiful ancient city and draws in a lot of tourism for Syria,” says Dad. “Here, hold on.” He’s back in a minute with one of his expensive, highly illustrated, archaeology books.

We ooh and aah over the pictures of Palmyra.

I’m getting excited. The Middle East is my favourite place to go. It’s hard not to have an adventure when you travel to the Middle East.

“We’ll land in Damascus and hopefully have a day or two to see the sites,” says Dad. “Then we’ll all caravan up to Palmyra . . .”

“You mean on camels?” interrupts Julia, sounding concerned.

Dad laughs.

“No, probably in rental cars. I just mean we’ll all travel as a group. Dr. Lineman thinks it will be easier and safer if we stick together. Plus, I believe his assistant is very proficient in Syrian history so we’ll probably learn a lot from him . . .”

“Great,” says Julia rolling her eyes. “Just what I’ve always wanted to know about, Syrian history.”

Dad chuckles.

“Well, hopefully you’ll learn to enjoy it. Tadmor history is interesting too . . .” Dad prepares to launch into a lecture but is interrupted by the phone ringing.

We’re too distracted to carry on with our lessons so Mom lets us get on the internet and learn more about Syria and our destination, Palmyra. Thankfully we have two computers and a network that allows us both to surf the net separately because Julia looks up what clothing is appropriate in Syria and what kind of food they eat while I read up on history. We don’t stop until Mom calls us for dinner.

We keep our passports up-to-date and Dr. Lineman is taking care of the group visa. Thankfully, Syria is a relatively safe, clean country so there are no shots we have to get before going. Mom goes to the bank to get our Canadian dollars changed into pounds and piastres.

I’m relieved to read online that a lot of Syrians speak English because Arabic isn’t easy to learn. I’ve totally given up

on reading it but I'm going to learn a few useful phrases just to show the Syrian people that I'm trying. Yes is *na'am*. No is *la*. Hello is *marhaba*. Thank you is *shukran*.

Because Syria is an Arabic country, Dad wants us to dress modestly so we don't offend -- long skirts and shirts for sightseeing, no short shorts for the dig. But then again, Mom and Dad have never let us wander around in anything too radically revealing.

We're leaving in two weeks, the first week in May. According to what I've read, May is the transition between winter and summer so we have to be prepared for any kind of weather. Julia's packed and unpacked three times because she doesn't just have to dress for the weather. She has to have some attractive outfits in case she falls in love and wants to make a good impression. Me, I pack once and then forget about it.

The big day for our departure arrives. Since we're traveling as an entourage, Dr. Lineman suggests that we meet at Toronto's Pearson International Airport an hour earlier than we have to, just to get acquainted with each other. He names a restaurant in the terminal that we're departing out of.

It's 6:00 p.m. and we're the first to arrive. Since our flight doesn't leave until 9:00, we all want a snack to see us through until the first meal on the plane. I get some rice pudding, Dad and Mom have pie and coffee, Julia orders a hamburger and fries. We all look at her, startled. She shrugs.

"I'm hungry. Besides, who knows when I'll get to see a burger and fries again?"

Dr. Lineman, along with his wife and three sons, arrives halfway through our snack. Dr. Lineman and Mrs. Lineman look a few years older than Dad and Mom. They're both dressed comfortably for the long trip, him in a rumpled white shirt and khaki pants, she in a long, loose floral dress. Even though we've never met them before, they greet us like old friends.

Dr. Lineman introduces us to his sons.

Liam is eighteen, taller than his parents, with wavy brown hair and a handsome face. But he's aloof, obviously not

interested in our family in a big way. As the college students begin arriving, he perks up. Some of them are only one or two years older than him.

Steve is fifteen. He has freckles and curly blond hair and although he's not good-looking like Liam, he's friendly and strikes me as being energetic.

Glen is thirteen. He has straight dark hair and glasses and looks serious. He's carrying a knapsack that we find out later is full of books.

Mrs. Lineman goes and orders her family some Cokes while we wait for the last few students to arrive.

"Two more to go," says Mr. Lineman checking his list and surveying those who have already arrived. He and Dad are soon discussing the layout of the dig site and how many people will go where and what area might yield the best results.

"Any news on whether we'll be camping or in the hotel?" Mom asks Mrs. Lineman.

Mrs. Lineman laughs.

"My vote is for the hotel. I imagine yours is too. Unfortunately, it's still up in the air. A representative from the Syrian government will be meeting us in Palmyra in four days and letting us know then."

"Do we have the gear for camping?" Mom asks.

"Apparently we can purchase tents like the Bedouins use in the marketplace," says Mrs. Lineman.

"That would be so cool!" says Steve enthusiastically.

"I'm afraid that if we end up camping, the task of equipping our camp may fall to us ladies," says Mrs. Lineman. "My husband would be happy in a sleeping bag under the stars eating beef jerky for breakfast. So if we want to live a little more civilized we might have to become well acquainted with the local marketplace."

"Camel meat," says Steve cheerfully. "Roasted over a big pit."

"I was thinking along the lines of pita bread and hummus and fresh vegetables and fruit," says his mother. "Maybe a roasted lamb," she concedes. "On the other hand, if we're in a hotel it may be continental breakfasts and a nice dinner served on real china . . ."

“Aaaaagggghh,” Steve groans.

The last two stragglers arrive and Dr. Lineman claps his hands for our attention.

“OK folks! Grab your luggage! We’re going to check in. Stick together.”

We’re flying to New York City first where we’ll have two hours to make the connecting flight to Damascus. We cause quite a commotion with our large group but eventually we’re all processed and our luggage is tagged and sent on hopefully to arrive with us in Damascus. A few students have family or friends to see them off and they linger for a while on the public side saying their good-byes while the rest of us move through the metal detectors and then onto the waiting room where our flight boards.

Dad and Dr. Lineman talk archaeology. Mom and Mrs. Lineman compare travel stories. Liam is in the midst of a group of college students where he’ll remain for the rest of the trip. Steve is fidgety and keeps getting up to look out the windows at the planes. Glen pulls a book out of his knapsack and begins to read. I do a crossword puzzle in a book I’ve brought along. Julia people-watches.

The flight from Toronto to New York goes by quickly. There’s just enough time for a light supper of sandwiches and chips to be served before we’re touching down at La Guardia. Once off the plane, Dr. Lineman leads us all to the Syrian Arab Airlines waiting area, which seems to be a mile away from where we disembarked. Thankfully, we’re not carrying our luggage. By the time we are all checked in there are just thirty minutes until our flight so no one goes exploring except maybe to buy a pop or a magazine.

By the time we’re on the plane, I’m ready to sleep. It’s dark outside and once we’re up in the air I settle back and try to doze. Most of our group does the same, although a few pull out a magazine or use the headphones to listen to the in-flight music.

At about two in the morning a snack is served to anyone who is awake. Julia shakes me awake. She has an instinct for food.

Sleepily, we nibble on cheese and crackers and grapes. After that, an in-flight movie starts except that I'm too tired to watch it and drift back to sleep.

Breakfast is served -- scrambled eggs, beef sausage, biscuits, fruit, coffee, tea, and juice. Most of us are grateful for the coffee. I've been drinking coffee for years now. When you have to get up before the sun on a dig-site, it's the only way to get going.

I'm starting to feel restless and I long to just stretch my legs. Due to our stop in Amsterdam to refuel, we won't arrive in Damascus until the afternoon. The only way to take a walk on a plane is to visit the bathroom, which I need to use anyhow.

When I get back to my seat, Glen is in it. Much to my surprise he's being quite animated considering how quiet he's been up to now. He seems to be telling Julia about the book he's reading and she doesn't mind which is funny considering how little reading she does herself.

Well that leaves me to sit in Glen's seat which is on the aisle beside Steve. My plan is to pull out my crossword puzzle book, but I don't get the chance.

"Gold, silver," says Steve to me abruptly, but quietly. "Lost treasure. You do know all about that, don't you?"

My look tells him that I very clearly don't know all about that.

"The students don't know, of course. My dad knows. Your dad knows. That's what we're looking for. The riches of Solomon."

"The riches of Solomon?!" I whisper in shock. "I had no idea! Are you serious?"

"No," says Steve in a regular conversational voice as he sighs and leans back in his seat. "But I wish."

I laugh.

"What are we looking for then?" I ask.

Steve shrugs.

"Any sort of evidence that Solomon had anything to do with the city. A nice clay tablet with his name on it would make my dad die of joy."

"But you think treasure would be more exciting?"

“Of course! Then we’d have all sorts of treasure hunters lurking around our camp, waiting to steal our booty. We’d have to fight them off . . .”

“Don’t forget a wild foot-chase through the local souk while being pursued by knife-wielding Arabs,” I say.

“But of course,” says Steve. “Standard operating procedure.”

“I guess sitting in a pile of dirt chipping away one centimetre at a time can be a little monotonous,” I concede. “I wouldn’t mind a little adventure but if anyone starts waving guns and knives around, I’ll be happy to let you do the battling.”

“My pleasure,” says Steve gallantly. “And I promise that if there’s any hint of adventure in this whole dig, I’ll be sure and let you know. So I hear you guys home-school too.” He abruptly changes the topic.

“Oh for sure,” I say. “With dad’s job, our parents have always thought that traveling with him should be part of our education.”

Steve nods.

“That’s my dad and mom too. The irony is my dad’s a teacher and he’s totally against classroom learning. Says it’s a great way to kill most people’s love of learning.”

“I know. Mom’s always been pretty creative about our learning. I just took it for granted until a friend at church told me how bored she is most of the time, even though she gets good marks.”

“You guys go to church?”

“Yeah, definitely. Don’t you?” Dad and Mom have always taught us not to be embarrassed or defensive about our faith and not to let anyone make us feel inferior because we believe in God.

Steve shrugs.

“I’ve been to church. Not voluntarily though.”

He sighs heavily and continues.

“Dad has always read the Bible because it’s good ancient history. Mom has always prayed a lot, especially since she thinks everything’s dangerous. But I dunno . . . God, I mean. Who believes in God these days?”

I smile. That's something Dad's heard a lot and I remember one of his answers.

"Who cares who believes in God these days?" I say. "If he exists, it doesn't really matter. And if he exists, ignoring him isn't going to make him go away."

"Yeah, but no offence, why do we need God?"

I'm kind of surprised to be having this conversation. Dad said Dr. Lineman was a Christian. I guess Steve isn't though.

"Maybe right now you think you don't need him," I say. "But what if this plane suddenly started nose-diving for the ground? The Bible says that God hears the prayers of the righteous. No offence, but your prayers wouldn't do a lot to save this plane. I've accepted Jesus as my saviour and have his righteousness as my own. God would hear my prayers."

Steve grins.

"Odds are this plane isn't going to go down."

"Yeah, but what are the odds you're going to die? Maybe not today, but someday?"

Steve shrugs.

"Pretty high odds, I guess."

I'd be happy to leave it at that, but Steve keeps pushing. He goes on about how you don't need God to be successful and that most of the people at his Dad's church are losers. God is just for people who don't have a life.

If he's trying to get a reaction from me, it works.

"The Bible says that after you die there's a judgement," I say. "How do you think you're going to do in the judgement?"

"I'll do OK," he says. "I'm basically a good person. I may even make it into heaven."

"I'm sure you've told a lie or been less than loving with someone . . ."

"OK, OK, I didn't say I was perfect," says Steve sounding exasperated. "But who is? It's not really fair to say I have to be perfect. Who's perfect?"

"Jesus was perfect," I say. "That's why when you accept him as your saviour his righteousness becomes your righteousness."

Steve sighs.

“Are you guys Bible-thumpers? ‘Cause I’m not going to hang out with you if you spend the whole time trying to get me to say a prayer to let Jesus come into my heart . . .”

It’s my turn to sigh.

“We’re not Bible-thumpers. In fact, if you hadn’t asked me about church, this conversation would have never got started. I don’t think everyone’s going to become a believer anyhow.”

Steve looks surprised.

“I thought you guys think everyone should hear about Jesus.”

“Hear about him, sure. But Jesus said it’s a broad path that leads to destruction. Only a few people find the narrow path with him.”

“Only a few people, huh?” Steve thinks about this for a while.

“Well,” he says, finally. “Truce. I’m not dumb enough to mess with someone’s faith.”

“I thought your Dad was a Christian,” I say.

“*He* is. He had some weird experience about two years ago where he came home from a Bible scholar’s convention. He’d met some guy who talked to him and convinced him he was a sinner and needed to be saved. And, like, he was all happy about it, as if somebody telling him he was a sinner was the best news he’d ever heard . . .”

I laugh.

“What about your mom?” I ask.

Steve shrugs.

“She goes to church with him.”

A flight attendant is coming around with earphones for another in-flight movie. Steve and I both take them. After a lunch of finger foods and a brief nap, the long-awaited words come.

“Passengers, this is your captain speaking. We are due to touch down in Damascus in twenty minutes.”

CHAPTER TWO

Damascus! Even the modern airport feels exotic. Once we are past customs and into the public section, we are enveloped by a completely different culture. Groups of Arabs are enthusiastically greeting the people from our plane who are returning home. They get hugs and smiles and boisterous enthusiasm. I feel kind of left out that we have nobody who's excited to see us.

Getting everybody's luggage and making our way to the rental car kiosk takes us about an hour. Dr. Lineman has chartered a bus and a driver and is earnestly hoping that it will all be waiting for us.

It isn't, but the lady at the rental desk assures us that it's only a matter of a phone call and it will be here in fifteen minutes.

Julia has to go to the bathroom and we have a rule when traveling, nobody goes anywhere by themselves. So Mom and I escort her.

Arabic bathrooms have no toilets, just a tile floor and a hole in the middle. It's actually a pretty clean system; you just have to get used to it.

The bus and driver arrive and we all get on board. We enjoy the mix of modern and ancient as we drive through the busy streets of Damascus to our hotel.

In the interest of economy we are staying at a small middle-of-the-road hotel rather than a luxury one, but Dr. Lineman assures us that it's only a short walk to the Old City and some of the most important sites in Damascus.

"If you're up to it," he says standing at the front of the bus before we disembark, "there is the Umayyad Mosque, a beautiful work of architecture. Please travel in groups of at least two or three and the ladies need to be escorted by one of our gentlemen at all times. If you're more inclined to do some shopping, there's the Souq el Hamadiyeh which will give a taste of local culture and cuisine. And speaking of cuisine, we will meet back at the hotel tonight at 7:00 for dinner in the hotel dining room. I'll see you all then."

There's no way my family is going to stay in our hotel room until dinner, although some students seem happy to head upstairs with their luggage for a rest in a real bed.

We drop off our luggage in our room and then head out -- Dad all decked out with camera and guidebook.

"Umayyad Mosque is the place to start," he declares. He consults the map in the guidebook. "This way." We start walking through the busy street.

I'm glad that our parents insisted on long skirts and modest shirts for us since many of the women are wearing the long robes and head covering of devout Muslims. Some of the female college students in our group are going to get a lot of stares from the locals.

The funny thing about traveling is how some things seem so exotic and some things seem so familiar. Some of the buildings are modern enough that we could be in Toronto except that the signs are in Arabic.

When we get to the mosque, Mom revels in the architecture while Dad reads aloud from the guidebook. Julia and I are both glad that our parents don't quiz us on all the historical facts thrown at us when we travel.

Dad and Mom insist on seeing the whole place inside and out, including an extensive collection of wall mosaics so we're

there for nearly two hours. Dad promises that we'll head over to the Souq el Hamadiyeh for some shopping and then try out a famous Damascus treat -- home-made vanilla ice-cream wrapped in pistachios at Beckdach.

The Souq is an authentic shopping experience. It has a few stores geared towards tourists but most of it is for the average city-dweller.

Dad buys us some long dresses and head scarves, just in case we need to blend in, not to mention that they make great souvenirs.

Mom checks out the brassware while Julia and I oooh and aaaah over some of the beautiful silks. Julia eventually buys a silk scarf while I hold on to my money in case anything appeals to me later on.

Beckdachs is packed. There are about three hundred Arabs in this one restaurant that seems to exclusively serve vanilla ice-cream. When we try the ice cream we can understand why. This is no ordinary buy-it-in-your-freezer-section ice cream experience. We agree that we would have all had seconds except that it's now 6:30 and we need to return to the hotel for dinner.

Back in our hotel room, we take turns washing up and then head down to the hotel dining room.

It's a small dining room so our group takes up most of it. Dr. Lineman has gone ahead and ordered a meal in advance so that our food will be ready when we arrive. We're seated at a large table with Dr. Lineman and his family and his teaching assistant, Henry. Henry is in his early twenties, slim, with sandy brown hair and glasses. He's quiet while Dr. Lineman and Dad immediately begin comparing notes about their sight-seeing.

We enjoy our meal of hummus, pita bread, raw vegetables, and roasted lamb. Custard is served for dessert, along with fruit platters.

"Get an early night," Dr. Lineman calls out as our dinner group begins to break up. "It will be a full day of sightseeing tomorrow and then in the late afternoon we'll start heading north for Palmyra."

“The walls were built in the Roman era,” Henry is saying the next day.

A few students are stifling yawns. Henry is knowledgeable, but somewhat dry in his presentation. He’s at the front of the bus while we’re driving around the Old City.

“Note the tapered stones. The design is similar to a Roman military camp or fortification. There are seven gates, Bab Sharqi, Bab al-Jabieh, Bab Keissan, Bab al-Saghir, Bab Tuma, Bab al-Jeniq, and hmmm, I’m missing one.” Henry thinks for a minute.

“I can’t believe he’s doing all this from memory!” I whisper to Steve who’s seated across the aisle from me. Steve gives me a wicked grin. He’s reading a Louis L’Amour novel.

“Oh yes, Bab Faradiss. Now, the main road ran from Bab al-Jabieh to Bab Sharqi. Corinthian columns ran down both sides and numerous triumphal arches were erected by the Romans.”

Dr. Lineman and Dad seem to be enjoying themselves, both listening attentively. Mrs. Lineman appears to be listening but she’s also knitting. Mom is spending a lot of time looking out the window.

“Since most of you hopefully visited the Ummayad Mosque yesterday, our first stop will be the Azem Palace, built in the eighteenth century for the governor of Damascus. You’ll find the simple exterior is deceptive. The interior is one of space, beauty and sophistication.”

We pull up to a parking lot and begin to unload while Henry keeps talking and directing us to our destination.

“So,” says Steve conversationally, outside the bus. “Have you seen anyone following us? Any shady characters who might possibly be on our trail because they know it’s only a matter of time before we discover the treasure of Tadmor?” He sounds hopeful.

“Sorry,” I say regretfully. “I think that today we’ll just have to resign ourselves to being tourists.”

“Well, while Henry’s being a guidebook, I think I’ll sneak away for a bit.”

“Are you allowed to do that?”

He sighs.

“Of course not. That’s the whole point. Wanna come?”

“No thanks. Sneaking off in foreign countries is the type of thing that upsets my parents. They’re strange that way.”

He shrugs.

“Suit yourself.”

He lingers behind and I try not to give him away by looking back. Julia and Glen are hanging out together and having a great time so I decide to join my mom and Mrs. Lineman on our tour around Azem Palace.

Henry proves himself every inch a tour guide, even going so far as to give a little talk on wall tiles and how they’re manufactured in the Middle East. Most of the people at the Azem Palace look like tourists, but there is still an exotic feeling about the experience because most of the visitors are still Arab. A few are Europeans. I recognize some of them speaking in French, some in German.

It is to Henry’s credit that he keeps Steve’s parents so entranced with his abundant knowledge of mid-eighteenth century Arab architecture that they don’t notice he’s missing until we pause to buy some cold drinks from a street vendor. I can see his mom worriedly looking over our group and then approaching her husband for a brief, hushed discussion. I feel bad. I mean, I didn’t run off on the group but I feel really low for even knowing about what Steve’s done.

Dr. Lineman grimly surveys our group. Thankfully he doesn’t focus on me because I think I would crumple and confess everything on the spot.

When it is clear that Steve is not in the group, Dr. Lineman approaches Dad and they have a discussion that very quickly includes their wives. Mom glances at me and then comes over.

“Steve seems to be missing,” she says quietly. “Any idea where he might be?”

“No, Mom,” I say truthfully.

Mom just looks at me. Can mothers read minds, or something?

“Did he leave voluntarily?” she asks.

“Yes, Mom,” I say, holding my head down.

By this time, Julia and Glen are straining to hear the conversation and some of the students are looking around to try to figure out what’s going on.

Mom goes back to report her information to the adults. Thankfully the Linemans don't seem mad at me. I guess they know their son well enough by now.

The adults are conferring, obviously trying to decide what to do next. Henry is oblivious to it all and begins herding everyone to the bus.

"We've got to hurry if we're going to fit everything in," he calls out. "The Damascus Citadel is next."

Dr. Lineman opens his mouth, looking as if he's about to interrupt Henry, but then changes his mind.

"It's the only fortress in Syria built on the same level as the city," enthuses Henry. "It was erected by the Seljuks in 1078. The stones were taken from the city wall to build the citadel. It's a city within a city. They built houses, baths, mosques and schools. But I'll save the details for when we get there . . ."

By now, most of the students are aboard the bus. I linger behind with my parents and the Linemans.

"I'm afraid we'll just have to stay here until he shows up," sighs Dr. Lineman. "Anderson, you and your family go on ahead and watch the troops. My wife and I will catch a taxi and meet you at the citadel . . ."

Just then a young Arab boy runs up to Dr. Lineman.

"Please, sir," he says.

Dr. Lineman is about to wave him away as a beggar but then sees the boy is holding out a piece of paper. He takes the paper and reads it. A look of concern crosses his face.

"Please, sir," says the boy again. He clearly wants some money.

"Who gave this to you?" demands Dr. Lineman.

The boy shrugs.

Dr. Lineman grabs the boy's arm.

"We'll talk it over with the police," he says, but the boy is quick. He twists his arm and escapes from Dr. Lineman's grasp. He scampers off through the crowds and following him is hopeless.

Wordlessly, Dr. Lineman hands the note to my dad.

Without being too obvious, I read over his shoulder.

"Stay away from the treasure of Tadmor if you want to see your son again."

CHAPTER THREE

For a moment, we're all quiet.

“Well,” says Liam, to break the silence. He’s standing by his dad. “On the bright side, at least it confirms that there *is* a treasure of Tadmor.”

Dad and Mom look at each other. This is the first time they’ve heard of any treasure of Tadmor. Obviously it’s something the Linemans have discussed. But the way Steve talked, I thought it was all just wishful thinking.

Dr. Lineman sighs.

“Liam,” he replies slowly, “I’m not convinced this is authentic. I wouldn’t be surprised if your brother wrote this note.”

“It is the type of thing he would do,” agrees Glen, who has joined the inner circle along with Julia.

“We can’t assume that!” Mrs. Lineman cries out. She turns to her husband. “Darling, Steve could be in danger!”

“Yes, dear,” says Dr. Lineman, “and we’ll operate on that assumption. Anderson, it won’t do anyone any good to have all the students just sitting watching from the bus. You escort the group to the Citadel and whatever else Henry has planned, then head north. We’ll rendezvous tonight in Homs.”

“Darling . . .” Mrs. Lineman begins.

“We’ll rent a car,” explains Dr. Lineman. “And, no, we won’t leave Damascus until we find Steve.”

“So if you don’t show up in Homs tonight . . . ?” Dad asks.

“Do a bit of sightseeing in the morning and then head up to Tadmor in the afternoon. Start without me. I’ll be there as soon as I can. Boys,” Dr. Lineman turns to his sons. “Go with the Kents. You won’t be able to do much if you stay with us. Please pray for us.”

Silently, Mom hugs Mrs. Lineman, tears in both of their eyes, and then we board the bus.

It’s hard to concentrate on the Damascus Citadel, even with Henry enthusiastically pointing out the walls, towers, trenches, and a moat. He launches into a history of the Citadel, including a detailed description of the Crusader raids.

I have to admit, considering how Steve was talking, it sure sounds as if he orchestrated this whole thing. But what I can’t understand is why he’d be willing to scare his parents so badly.

Liam is no longer hanging out with the college students but is now silently sharing a seat with Glen on the bus.

There are some hushed conversations going on among the college students, probably speculation as to why Dr. Lineman isn’t with the group anymore, but there’s no way any of them could know the reason.

Henry has planned any hour long visit to one of the souks and then we’ll be going north to Homs. Most of the students seem happy to have a chance to do some quick shopping but Dad signals to us to stay on board the bus so we can do some praying. Henry has been briefed by Dad as to what is going on but he opts to head out with the students. Glen and Liam stay. They don’t pray but they don’t seem to mind that we pray aloud for the safe return of Steve. After that, Dad leaves the bus to buy us some cold drinks while we wait for the students to return. We all hope that Dr. and Mrs. Lineman and Steve will miraculously show up, but of course, they didn’t know where we were heading after the Citadel.

With only half a mind on the scenery, we drive through the Syrian countryside towards Homs. Absently, I notice the sheep

and shepherds, the occasional Bedouin tent, the green fields mixed with dry desert patches.

Glen has returned to reading a book. Liam is listening to an mp3 player. Julia is back beside me, staring off into the distance. Across from us, my parents are talking quietly. Finally, I pull out my book of crossword puzzles to make the long drive go a little faster.

By late evening, we arrive in Homs at the hotel that Dr. Lineman has previously booked for us. Hurriedly Dad exits the bus, muttering something about wanting to confirm our reservation, but I know he's really in a hurry to see if Dr. Lineman, Mrs. Lineman and Steve have preceded our arrival.

Henry begins to usher us off the bus to retrieve our luggage and enter into the lobby of the hotel. Dad rejoins our group, looking grim. We don't have to ask him whether Dr. Lineman is here.

"OK folks," Dad calls out. "Get your keys at the reception and then when you've taken your luggage to your room, there will be a light supper served in the dining room."

Henry sits with us and Dr. Lineman's sons at supper. It's so late we're the only group in the dining room. The food is being served buffet-style and there is only one waiter to make sure everyone has drinks and that the plates are cleared away when we're done.

"Dr. Kent," begins Henry. "A lot of the students are, uh, concerned about Dr. Lineman's absence. Some are asking me questions. What should I say?"

"That Dr. Lineman was detained in Damascus," says Dad. "Hopefully by the time we reach Palmyra we'll have some good news to report."

After the long day, we all fall into bed and I'm asleep before I even have time to think.

The first thing I notice when I wake up is that Dad and Mom's bed is empty. A shower is running in the bathroom but that only accounts for one of them. Julia is still sleeping.

A few minutes later, Dad comes into the room just as Mom is exiting the bathroom wearing a bathrobe and her hair wrapped in a towel.

“OK family,” he says. “The breakfast buffet runs for another hour, but when we go down we have to bring our luggage with us to be loaded onto the bus. So no dawdling.”

This wakes up my sister and she sleepily heads for the bathroom.

“Any news, Andy?” Mom asks.

Dad sighs.

“No,” he says.

“Homs is the third most important city in Syria,” Henry is saying. “It was also the third station on the Silk Route after Doura Europas and our ultimate destination, Palmyra. It’s still an important city because the oil pipelines pass right through it.”

I’m sort of listening. Julia’s not even pretending to listen but is writing a letter to one of our cousins back home. She can only get away with this because Dad and Mom are several rows behind us, choosing to sit amongst the students. Our travels are considered an extension of our home-schooling and Dad and Mom expect us to learn something as we go.

Henry starts talking about some Roman emperor, Septimium Severus, and his genealogy and how this all relates to Homs. I have to admit, my mind wanders.

After a while, Henry switches topics.

“We’ll be passing by one of the most significant sites in Homs, the mosque of Khaled Ibn al-Walid, the great commander of the Muslim Arab armies.” Henry points out the examples of traditional Syrian architecture, as we slowly pass by the mosque. “I’m afraid we don’t have time to stop because Dr. Lineman wanted me to take you on a tour of the many churches that still stand from the early days of Christianity in this area. If you’re into icons, one of the churches is said to possess the girdle of the Virgin Mary.”

His tone suggests that he doesn’t buy into this stuff and would probably prefer a visit to the mosque. Despite this, Henry proves to be a knowledgeable guide. Our first stop is the church of St. Elian and Henry has a whole lecture prepared on the collection of frescoes in the church discovered in 1970 that

bear Greek and Arabic inscriptions and date back to the end of the 12th century.

Liam is back to hanging out with the college students and Glen is walking along with Julia so I'm kind of stuck by myself. It makes me miss Steve even though I barely know him.

After the churches we have lunch at a Syrian restaurant -- a lavish spread of cucumbers, tomatoes, meat kabobs, pita bread, and hummus. There's a small market outside the restaurant and Dad suggests to the students that they buy some dried or fresh fruit to take with them since there won't be another stop. Mom buys our family a bag of oranges and after everyone's done their shopping, we're back on the bus, heading for Palmyra.

After a brief discussion about the desert that we're passing through, Henry sits down and we're left to our own thoughts. Whenever we travel to a foreign country, I always think that it's silly to bring a novel to read when I can be absorbing all the new sites. But I have to admit, at this point in our travels, the scenery is all starting to look the same and Julia is kind enough to lend me one of her adventure novels. I notice that most of the university students have also turned to books, magazines, and mp3 players to pass the time.

By evening, we're pulling into Palmyra.

Until we figure out what's what, we're staying in one of Palmyra's many hotels. Henry has the name of the Syrian representative who is supposed to be able to advise us about a possible campsite, so the first thing Dad does when we get to the hotel is to try to contact the man.

There's no sign of Dr. and Mrs. Lineman so rather soberly, we head for the hotel dining room for a light evening meal of soup, pita bread, hummus, fruit and vegetables.

Dad appears halfway through our meal. He signals to Liam and Glen to join us at our table.

"Boys," he says. "I have serious news. I talked to Abdullah, your father's contact in the Syrian government. He informs me that your brother hasn't been found yet and that the entire police force here in Syria is on the alert. Any hope that this is

just a hoax on the part of your brother is pretty much demolished.”

Liam and Glen look concerned as they exchange glances with each other.

“But Dad isn’t after some treasure,” says Liam, quietly. The students still haven’t been officially informed of what’s going on. “He’d be happy to find a few pieces of pottery or some sort of link between Israelite culture and Syrian culture, some sort of proof of Solomon’s influence here.”

“That’s the bizarre part,” says Dad, nodding. “The note seems to suggest that there’s more to this site than we first realized.”

“It’s only Steve who ever said that Dad should find some treasure,” Liam continues. “He even announced it to some bigwigs Dad had invited over to our place for dinner.”

“Really?” says Dad. “What people?”

Liam thinks back.

“Syrians, actually. They had something to do with this dig and the university.”

“It’s possible someone took him seriously,” says Dad, thoughtfully.

“But who would send a note like that?” asks Glen. “Who doesn’t want us to find something?”

“A good question,” says Dad. “There are a lot of people involved in this case now. The abduction of an archaeologist’s son would be big news here and the Syrian police don’t want this to become an international incident. For now, they’re trying to keep it a secret. For one thing, they don’t want a bunch of treasure hunters showing up in Palmyra tearing the place apart.”

“Then I take it we can’t tell anyone why Dad isn’t here?” says Liam.

“Fraid not,” says Dad. “I didn’t speak directly with your Dad but Abdullah says to carry on with his work here. Starting tomorrow we’ll set up a camp. I’m going to need some help with that. We’ll have to buy tents in the local market, not to mention all our gear. My wife will be in charge of the meals . . .”

Mom looks surprised at this.

“And we’ll divide the students up into rotating shifts so that she’ll get a lot of assistance,” he says glancing at her. “My daughters will, of course, be wonderful helping her.”

He smiles at us.

I would have been digging, but now, thanks to Steve, I’ll be doing a lot of shopping for food and a lot of chopping vegetables.

“Isn’t this going to put Steve’s life in danger?” asks Liam.

“That’s been discussed,” says Dad. “The note warns us to stay away from the treasure of Tadmor. It doesn’t say to go home or abandon the dig. So tomorrow the government has arranged a highly publicized press conference where I’ll be clearly stating our objectives here and believe me, I’ll be emphasizing how much we want to find the ordinary everyday objects of Solomonic Tadmor, particularly any pottery that might establish a link between this site and Israel at the time of the United Kingdom.”

Liam nods.

“Well, I’m sure that’s what Dad wants.”

Liam and Glen say goodnight to us and head up to their room.

“What’s the matter, Andy?” asks Mom softly, after the Lineman boys are gone. Dad is staring off into the distance, a frown on his face.

He takes a deep breath and then exhales.

“I’m worried,” he admits, still speaking low. “It’s true that we’d be satisfied with some pottery or some other trinkets that would establish a trading link between here and Jerusalem. But Solomon was a rich man. He made gold as common as stones in Israel. So what if the link between here and Israel really is the treasure of Tadmor?”

“Then what happens to Steve?” Mom frowns as this sinks in.

“Exactly,” says Dad.

The Treasure of Tadmor

CHAPTER FOUR

Dad is gone when Mom wakes me and Julia up at 8:00. “C’mon, sleepyheads,” she says, grinning at us. “Dad’s going to be back from his press conference any minute and then we have a full day ahead of us. I know how eager you are to get to the souk and help me buy enough food to feed forty people three times a day for the next several weeks.”

“Not to mention watching Dad buy a whole whack of Bedouin tents,” I say, rubbing my eyes and yawning. “It’s too bad Steve is missing out on all of this because he sure sounded enthusiastic about sleeping in a Bedouin tent.”

“Maybe he is,” suggests Julia. “Maybe we should try to track him down, you know, hunt for clues and all that . . .”

“Forget it,” says Mom firmly. “No Nancy Drew business. The best thing we can do for the Linemans is to try to carry on without their expertise. I have to admit, I’m a bit nervous about suddenly having all these responsibilities thrust upon me, but with God’s help, we’ll do it. The best thing you can do for Steve is pray for him.”

Dad returns when I’m in the bathroom getting dressed.

“How’d it go?” I hear Mom ask.

I can imagine Dad shrugging.

“Only two reporters showed up. But I think in this country that’s all it takes for word to get out. Abdullah told me that one was from the Syrian national newspaper and the other was from the main Arab news network.”

We head downstairs to the dining room for a breakfast of fresh fruits and vegetables, yoghurt, jam and bread.

Abdullah is sitting at a table with Liam and Glen. Dad introduces us. He’s a short, stout, deeply-tanned man of about forty, casually dressed in a white shirt and beige cotton pants. While we eat our breakfast and sip our North American-style coffee, he downs a couple of espresso-size cups of the thick coffee that is popular in the Middle East.

“Now,” he says, as we wrap up our meal. “It is just not reasonable to have your whole group running around the souk as we buy supplies for your camping. So, with your permission, I have arranged a guide to show the students around Palmyra and then after lunch, to meet us at the camp. There it will be helpful to have many hands, yes?”

“Yes,” agrees Dad. “We really appreciate your help.”

Abdullah shrugs.

“It is necessary. Your group has become of importance to Syria. We must keep you from finding the treasure of Tadmor, yes?”

He grins mischievously.

“Abdullah?” says Liam leaning forward. “Is it possible there is a treasure of Tadmor? Because if so, my brother is in danger and we shouldn’t be here.”

Abdullah shrugs again.

“It is not for me to know,” he says, standing up. “Now, as you say, let’s get the show on the street.”

We glance at each other.

“Show on the road,” says Dad.

“Yes,” says Abdullah, “that is what I said.”

Dad signals to all the students who are still lingering over their morning coffee or tea. In the foyer of the hotel, he explains the plan to them and with Henry in the lead, they head for the bus.

Abdullah has chartered a large van for us. Liam and Glen opt to go with us.

It's a good thing Abdullah is with us because I don't think we would have ever found the tent seller's shop, it's buried so deep in the souk. We are invited by the tent-maker to have some peppermint tea in his back room which Abdullah advises us to accept. With a little help from Abdullah, Dad negotiates a price for two family-size tents for us and the Linemans, as well as four gigantic ones for the students. Dad also purchases a couple of tarps, one for our eating area and one to stretch over the dig site itself.

After that we're off to buy sleeping bags and then kitchen supplies, like pots, pans, plastic plates, forks, knives, plastic cups, and large coolers as well as some ice packs that are thankfully already frozen. We have to keep stopping back at the van to drop our stuff off. Finally, we all go with Mom to help her buy food for the next couple of days. She selects a lot of fresh fruit, cucumbers, tomatoes, plus a couple of huge bags of rice and some large containers of hummus. At a bakery we buy a mammoth amount of pita bread, some regular white bread and some sticky-looking pastries. They have a wide selection of jam so Mom stocks up for breakfast. Then it's off to a butcher to buy some lamb and beef which end up in the coolers.

Abdullah tells us that there is no fresh water at the site, so we buy some huge plastic jugs of it. We also pick up some coffee, tea and hot chocolate for the mornings.

We return to the site.

Palmyra is wonderful. If you're into well-preserved ancient architecture and love to walk around the ruins of a once beautiful city, this is the place for you. From the van I can see Henry and many of the other students wandering around. But Abdullah doesn't give us any time to look. We circle around the old city and he directs us down a dirt road that is barely noticeable unless you're looking for it.

"This is it," he announces as he comes to a stop.

This is *it*?

We look around. It's a pile of dirt basically. It's as big as a farmer's field, but it's all dirt. The only indications that it's a

campsite are a dozen picnic tables all grouped and some portable toilets further back. There are some additional cubicles that look like little storage sheds.

Abdullah hops out of the van and begins unloading our supplies.

“I have other commitments today,” he says. “But I will let your group know you are here and they can come help you. It is a short walk from the site, about a mile. Tomorrow I will be back at seven in the morning to show you the portion of the site that has been set aside for Dr. Lineman.”

He is working rapidly and before we can even take it all in, he is making a U-turn in the dirt and we are standing in the dust.

“Well,” says Dad, after a moment. “I guess we’d better figure out where we want everything to go.” He picks up a large tent and begins to head towards a level part of the dirt field.

Half an hour later, some of the students start straggling in followed an hour later by the bus that carries everyone’s luggage. By evening, we have a campsite.

Henry has helped Mom and I and Julia build a fire pit so for dinner there is roasted lamb, pita bread and hummus with pastries and fresh fruit for dessert. It’s a meal that wouldn’t be very impressive in a restaurant but tastes great out in the open air as the sun goes down and we are all gratefully enjoying the rest. Our rest is short, however, since it is Julia and I and Mom who do the clean-up for tonight. Dad promises that by tomorrow afternoon he’ll have made up a schedule that will rotate the students to help us.

Even on the hard ground, I think most of us fall asleep quickly in our sleeping bags that night.

Beep, beep, beep.

It’s the alarm on Dad’s watch going off.

“What time is it?” I ask sleepily.

“5:30,” is his crisp reply as he climbs out of the sleeping bag. He pulls a heavy sweater on over his pyjamas and slips on his boots. “I’ll go get the fire going for some hot water while you ladies get dressed.”

Mom groans as she reaches for her suitcase and pulls out a denim shirt and some khaki slacks.

Julia has to be shaken awake.

“What about showers?” asks Julia. “Do they even have any here?”

“I think they’re those little cubicles,” says Mom.

“The ones that look like little tool sheds?” I ask.

Mom nods.

I imagine they’ll be pretty popular by the end of today considering that a day on a dig site leaves people filthy.

It’s chilly so we dress quickly. When we get out to the eating area Dad has a fire going and is filling up a large pot with water to hang over the fire. He turns the job over to Mom and returns to the tent to get dressed.

Mom sets out a couple of big basins of water on the picnic table closest to the tents so people can wash up if they want.

Julia and I begin to put out all the breakfast stuff -- the white bread, jam, instant coffee, tea, and hot chocolate as well as some sugar and cream. Mom gets out the plates and the tin mugs.

When Dad is dressed he goes around calling out, “Wake up!” and “Rise and shine!” until sleepy-looking students start emerging from the tents. Many of them walk over to the picnic table with the water basins and once they’ve splashed some cold water on their faces look a little more alert.

Abdullah arrives halfway through breakfast. Fixing himself a cup of coffee he joins us at a picnic table.

“I will escort you to your dig site,” he announces. “Do you have all you need or will Dr. Lineman’s absence hinder you?”

“Dr. Lineman’s absence is unfortunate,” says Dad. “But we have all we need to start.” He points to four huge metal containers that have been with us since North America and that were below the bus with the luggage. They contain ropes for marking out the site, picks, trowels, brushes, buckets, levels, containers to store pottery finds, as well as medical supplies, a couple of lap-tops, cameras, a compass, a scale, measuring tapes, clipboards, pens. One of the metal containers has just enough room for two wheelbarrows.

There's only one small problem that Dad is not sharing with Abdullah. The driver of our bus wasn't hired to stay with us. This wouldn't be a problem if Dr. Lineman were present because he has a license to drive a bus, but Dad doesn't. He casually mentioned this to us last night and asked that we say a pray for him because although he doubted that anyone would ask to see his license, he wanted a little divine help driving such a big vehicle. Considering the dig-site is a mile away and we have to bring all our supplies with us every time we go there, leaving the bus at the campsite is not an option.

"What about meals?" Mom asks Abdullah. "Should we eat lunch at the site or here?"

Abdullah frowns as he thinks about this.

"Here would be easier. No arrangements have been made at the site. You will probably want to leave a few people to watch the site while the rest of the group comes back here to eat."

Dad and Mom confer with each other about this since this means that Mom, us, and the lunch crew will have to get back a little earlier and they finally conclude that we'll have to rent a small van. Since Dad has to get the site up and running, Abdullah offers to drive Mom and Julia and I to a car rental agency after he shows Dad the perimeters of the dig site.

"What's the news on the Linemans?" asks Dad.

"The police say they have some leads," says Abdullah vaguely, standing up.

The students pile up their plates and cups and Mom says once we have the van we'll come back and clean everything before we make lunch.

"Do you want to go with Abdullah or me?" asks Dad, smiling conspiratorially at us.

"We'll go with you," says Mom, bravely.

We all board the bus, everyone oblivious of the fact that this is Dad's first time driving one. We start with a bit of a lurch and although Abdullah is ahead of us, flying down the dirt road, Dad takes it pretty slow. No one seems to notice since the students are either dozing or chatting.

Driving down a dirt road with no other traffic isn't so much of a challenge. But when we arrive at the site and Dad has to park us in one of the many spots reserved for buses visiting

Palmyra, I can see Mom silently praying for him. I add a fervent prayer of my own. Thankfully, since we're here so early there are no other buses in the parking lot, but Dad still has to get this huge vehicle in between the lines. He selects the spot at the far end of the parking lot and starts swinging into it. Abdullah has parked his van and is watching us.

We end up on an angle, forcing Dad to put the bus into reverse to back out and straighten us out a bit. Mom continues to pray.

Going very slowly we back out and Dad tries again. This time when we pull into the spot we're considerably straighter and Dad decides not to push his luck going for perfection. We all disembark and Henry gets some of the students to help carry all the equipment.

Abdullah leads us away from the beautiful ancient city. Again, we seem to be heading for dirt. Like our campsite, this is another field of dirt, with some portable toilets off to the side.

Abdullah points out four stakes that have been driven into the ground and Dad starts getting out the rope to mark off the site. It looks about two acres which doesn't sound like much. But when you're just moving slowly down, sifting through the dirt, it can keep a group busy for the summer.

After promising Dad that he will stay with us until we are safely in our rental van, Abdullah escorts Mom, Julia and me to his van.

Mom's up in the passenger seat while Julia and I each take a window seat behind. The town is waking up and we enjoy the sites as people are appearing outside shops to set up their produce and products. Abdullah drives us to a part of town that's more westernized, past a few hotels that could easily be dropped on a beach in Florida and not look out of place. A few car rental places are side by side. Two are still closed, but one is open.

"They speak English very well," says Abdullah. "You should not have a problem. But I will wait until I see you get into a vehicle before I drive away."

"Thank you, Abdullah," says Mom, getting out. We slide open the back door and join her.

There is only one large van available so Mom takes it. As we come out, she holds the car keys up so Abdullah can see them. He gives a wave and takes off.

“Well, I feel a bit like your Dad,” she says as we get into our van. “I’ve never driven a van before.”

“We’ll pray,” says Julia quickly.

Carefully, Mom backs out of the parking space. This is the easy part since the parking lot is quiet. But the main road is filling up with cars and Mom gets some honks for driving slowly. Of course, when I accidentally make eye contact with one of the honkers, it’s also a possibility that we’re getting attention for being three Western females unescorted by any male.

“Oh dear,” says Mom suddenly.

“What?” I say. I’m in the front with her.

“This road doesn’t look familiar. Do you girls remember anything about our route to the car rental place?”

“Mom!” says Julia. “Of course we didn’t! You’re the one who’s the parent!”

“I know,” says Mom mildly.

“How’s Mom supposed to remember everything?” I say to Julia.

“If we had a map . . .” says Mom. “I think I missed a turn back there but truthfully, all the streets look the same and it makes it hard when you can’t read the signs.”

I look at the street signs which are written in Arabic and I realize Mom’s right. It’s a lot easier to remember a route when you know the street names.

“Well, the archaeological site must be easy to find,” I say. “I mean, it’s the biggest tourist attraction around here. Everyone here knows where it is.”

“That’s a good point,” agrees Mom. “Of course, it’s still a little tough because even if I ask for directions, getting them in Arabic won’t help and getting them in English won’t help much either if I can’t read the street names . . .”

We’re still driving down a busy main road but absolutely none of it looks familiar and none of it looks Western. There are no hotels or other touristy places that might have English-speaking employees.

“We’ll have to turn around,” decides Mom. She puts on her signal and pulls into a little parking lot belonging to a small outdoor mall and turns us around. When we’re heading in the opposite direction, I can’t help but notice something.

“Ummm, not to add to our tribulations,” I say slowly, “but I think we’re being followed. When we pulled out into traffic, that black car back there made a U-turn. Now he’s about three cars behind us.”

The Treasure of Tadmor

CHAPTER FIVE

Oh great!” say Julia, twisting around in her seat to look at the car. “What do we do now, Mom?!”

“Pray,” says Mom calmly. “And don’t panic.” She continues. “We’re going to find our turn. Keep your eyes open for the road that we were on before we got onto this one. It should be on the right somewhere.”

She slows down at each intersection so we can get a good look down each road.

“Definitely not,” I say as I peer down each road.

“Wait!” I say as we start to pass by one.

Quickly Mom puts on the flicker and makes a sharp right turn.

“That restaurant looks familiar!” I say, pointing to a little falafel shop with a green and purple awning.

“You’re right!” says Julia, excitedly. “And there’s that funny looking sign with the camel drinking Coke. I remember that!”

Mom breathes a sigh of relief.

“Thank you, God,” she says.

“Those guys are still following us,” I say, looking back.

“As long as we stay in the van we’ll be OK,” says Mom.

“Mom,” says Julia, “do you think those guys have anything to do with Steve going missing?”

“God help that poor boy,” sighs Mom. “And yes, I wouldn’t be surprised. Somebody doesn’t want us digging at Palmyra and it would be naïve to think that they won’t do further things to frighten us. That’s why we’re going to stick together as a family at all times. I’m not losing either of you.”

“Mom,” I say slowly, “how are we going to stick together if we have to go back to the camp by ourselves to clean up the breakfast dishes and make lunch?”

“Well,” says Mom. “I think we’re just going to have to eat at the dig site regardless of the inconveniences. And we’re going to have to go on high-security alert. None of the students can wander off, even in small groups.” Mom glances in the rear view mirror. “Unless I’m mistaken, that car contains four men. Ginny, see if you can get the license plate number and then write it down.”

The numbers are Arabic but I copy them as best I can.

After that, we drive in silence, Julia and I praying the whole way.

Silent prayer may be our strategy for the drive back, but once we reach Palmyra, Mom accelerates as we head for the corner where our dig is going on. The black car is right behind us, threatening in its closeness. Mom begins honking the horn and doesn’t let up. This gets a lot of attention.

She heads for the bus parking lot without stopping the honking. This is a good strategy because the bus parking lot is actually quite dangerous. By now there are many large buses parked which means that once we got out of our van, we’ll be out of sight of our dig. The tourists that were on the buses are now out looking at the ruins, so the lot is empty of people. But Mom’s honking causes our whole dig site to look up, not to mention some of the tourists.

Dad immediately realizes the problem and along with the Lineman brothers and several of the college students, begins running toward the parking lot as we pull in.

The black car makes a quick U-turn and before we’ve even had time to get out of the van is flying down the dirt road that leads to our campsite.

“Quickly!” says Dad, grabbing the van keys from Mom. We all tumble back into the van, including the Lineman brothers and the three male students. There aren’t enough seats but some of us just plunk ourselves down on the floor and we’re off, chasing after the black car.

“This is outrageous,” Dad is saying, almost to himself. “What on earth are we doing to bug these people?”

The black car had a head start so by the time we get back to camp, the occupants of the car are already running around our campsite, overturning tables. They’re about to start slashing our tents with knives when they see us come careening around the corner. Dad doesn’t even slow down. We hurtle off the road and Dad goes flying right at the men, forcing them to scatter and run to their car. We barely avoid running into one of our own tents, but Dad slows down enough to turn the van around, drive around our kitchen area and continue to chase the men who by now are in their car and driving back towards the ruins of Palmyra.

“Did anyone get a license plate number?” Dad asks.

“Ginny did earlier,” says Mom who is in the front seat.

“Good,” says Dad.

We chase the car back to the ruins. They take a sharp left and circle around the ruins to head off back towards the town. We take a right turn and head back to the dig site where the college students have all stopped their work to wait for our return.

“Well, all secrets are out,” says Dad as we step out of the van. “First thing to do is to call Abdullah and after that we have to work out a battle plan.”

“Stolen,” says Abdullah, five hours later in our camp. “It seems these young men stole a car and then decided to be mischievous.”

Dad just stares at him.

“You’re telling me they arbitrarily selected my wife and daughters as a target and then when that failed, they just happened to know where our camp was so they could go and attempt to shred it to pieces?”

Abdullah shrugs.

“Your wife and daughters are obviously not Syrian. They would stand out. Maybe these men are extremists who have a dislike of Western ways. It is impossible to say.”

Our description of the car’s occupants -- four young Arab men dressed in t-shirts and blue jeans -- had hardly impressed Abdullah.

“Are we in danger?” asks Dad. “We’re rather isolated out here.”

“Well, there’s danger and then there’s danger,” says Abdullah vaguely.

“Should we post guards?” asks Dad.

Abdullah exhales.

“Perhaps. What harm could it do?”

“The young men might have friends,” says Mom. “Who knows how many could show up next time? Plus, they have knives. What do we have to defend ourselves?”

Dad nods.

“Buckets and picks,” he says grimly.

Abdullah acknowledges this inequality with a nod.

“Not to mention that I don’t want to go on trial for murdering someone,” continues Dad. “I hate to be cynical, but the guy who murders me may get a lot more lenient sentence than I would for killing him.”

Abdullah shrugs.

“Perhaps. You are Western.”

He doesn’t elaborate.

“Thank you,” says Dad, standing up, the signal that our meeting with Abdullah is over. Abdullah looks surprised.

“Well,” he says, “I will come to your site tomorrow and make sure you are OK.”

“Fine, fine,” says Dad.

Abdullah heads for his van.

“OK,” Dad calls out to everyone once Abdullah has driven away. “Pack it up! It’s the hotel for us tonight. All our camp supplies go in the van. Our personal stuff back in the bottom of the bus.”

Two hours later we’re all in our hotel rooms.

“This is going to cost a fortune,” says Dad, collapsing into a chair and holding his head. “First we buy all the camping

equipment, now we're forced into a hotel. If I didn't have a credit card, we would have been forced to sit in the middle of the desert and wait for some anti-Western Arabs to slaughter us all."

"You did the right thing," says Mom rubbing his shoulders. "Now I suggest we go to bed. It's eleven o'clock and I presume we're going to be up bright and early."

Dad nods wearily. He starts going through his bags and pulls out his lap-top.

"I for one appreciate the fact that I had a shower in a real bathtub tonight," says Julia climbing into the bed I'm already in. "I never had to take one in those yucky little boxes."

"What are you doing, honey?" Mom asks Dad as he plugs in his computer and fires it up.

"Enough's enough," says Dad. "It was bad enough that we let them get away with it when Steve went missing. Now my wife and daughters have become targets and our campsite is under siege. I'm not waiting for anything worse to happen."

"What are you going to do?" asks Mom as Dad opens up his e-mail and begins to type.

"Ken is going to hear all about this," says Dad absently. "Dr. Lineman hasn't given me permission to release all this info to the world at large but Ken can talk to some of our fellow archaeologists and Middle Eastern experts who will be discreet. Is there a treasure of Tadmor? Is there any reason that I should be suspicious of the Syrians? Why do they want us out of here? What groups could possibly abduct an archaeologist's son?" He pauses to think. "Ginny?"

"Uh huh?" I say sleepily.

"Where'd you put that license plate number? I don't buy Abdullah's stolen car story. I'm passing it onto Ken to see what he can do with it."

"In my purse," I say pointing to the dresser. "In the side pocket."

"Thanks," says Dad, continuing to type furiously.

I drift off to sleep before he's done.

Dad's alarm is beeping at five-thirty. Just in case we sleep through that, our phone rings and all along the hallway we can hear the phone ringing in other rooms. Our wake-up call.

With a light breakfast included with our rooms, all Mom and I and Julia have to worry about is lunch at the site. We still have most of our supplies and being in a hotel, Mom has been able to fill up the coolers with ice to keep the perishables fresh and the water cold.

After a quick breakfast of fresh fruits, cucumbers, tomatoes, pita bread and some garlicky butter, we all gather at the bus with our supplies for the short drive to the dig site. When we arrive at the site, Dad doesn't let anyone off the bus until he explains the situation to everyone.

"By now, I think you realize that we have become a target of some anti-Western sentiment. So from now on we are going to stick together in large groups. Never, ever be alone and let me know right away if anything makes you suspicious or uncomfortable."

There's probably been a lot of talk going on among the students because none of them seem surprised.

"Henry and I and some volunteers are going to go to our old campsite and grab the picnic tables so we have something to sit on for lunch. So I ask that you each start working in your locus and we'll be back shortly."

Mom, Julia and I struggle off the bus with the water coolers and cups. Dad gives Mom a quick kiss and a reassuring hug before he and about ten students head off in the bus.

Mom doesn't have to ask. We pray.

All the student know where to go. There is one dilapidated picnic table so with our help, Mom gets the ice water up on it so the students can help themselves. It's hard not to keep surveying the area, hoping that Dad will get back soon and that the men in the black car won't show up. We hear an engine before we see a car. We look at each other nervously.

But it's Abdullah who appears in his van.

"Howdy, howdy," he says, coming over to join us at the picnic table. "How are we this morning?"

He is concerned but seems to be trying to sound cheerful.

"Fine," says Mom.

“You slept well? No more nasty visitors, I hope?”

“No, none.” Mom is leaving it up to Dad to tell Abdullah that we’re no longer at the campsite.

“Well, that is good news.”

Abdullah looks around.

“Your husband is available?”

“He should be back shortly,” says Mom, pushing hair off her face and propping her sunglasses on her head to hold it in place. “He just had an errand . . . Ah, here he is.”

Sure enough, the bus is pulling up and Abdullah’s jaw drops as he sees it occupied by the students and the picnic tables. The picnic tables are all on their side so that they fit down the middle aisle. The students hop out and begin unloading them and carrying them to where we’re seated.

Abdullah continues to stare.

“Good morning,” says Dad crisply to Abdullah as he and Henry plop a table down beside us. He then joins us at our table. “We have no further need of the campsite unless your government is willing to post a substantial number of soldiers around us to keep us safe from any unpleasant encounters with some youthful extremists.”

“You are in a hotel?” asks Abdullah.

“Yes,” says Dad. “To be honest, we can’t really afford it but I have plans to raise some extra funds.”

“Raise extra funds?” says Abdullah nervously.

“Yes,” says Dad. “Currently this is a very low-profile dig. Only a few people in the academic world are aware that we’re even here. I plan to change that. My brother can put together a website and we can update it daily to let people know what we’re doing here. The opposition we’ve faced will guarantee public interest . . .”

“Hmmm,” Abdullah is thinking this over. “I do not think this is a good idea . . .”

“I have no choice,” says Dad. “I’m running low on money through no fault of my own. The head of this dig is stuck in Damascus trying to get his son back. I have a bunch of useless camping gear. I’m going to have to increase the level of security on this whole dig and first I need to raise some more money.”

“I will talk to my people,” says Abdullah, rising. “I must talk to my people before you do anything. Perhaps we can work out something . . .”

Dad grins as Abdullah gets in his van and drives away.

“Perhaps we can.”

Abdullah looks back and catches Dad smiling. Abdullah points at him and shakes his finger, as if to say, *I caught you*. But he is grinning too.

Dad gives Mom, Julia and I our own locus to work in which basically just means digging away at dirt like a kid in a sandbox. There are four student supervisors underneath Dad -- Henry, two other guys, and the girl who is in charge of our area whose name is Leah. She comes by occasionally to make sure we're OK. She has a clipboard and all the student supervisors are responsible for making constant measurements as to how far down we've dug. If we come to any shards of pottery, we call her and she and Dad come over with a brush and carefully expose as much of it as they can without actually removing it. Then they take measurements and photos and then finally the piece of pottery is extracted and taken to a picnic table that is being used as a work station.

Before we know it, it's time to start working on lunch. Because we're up so early, lunch is at 11:00. We lay the food out buffet-style and the students are happy to take a break. The sun is beating down on us but thankfully there is a tarp overhead to keep us from dying of sunstroke. On digs like this, nobody needs anything to drink but ice water, it's just so wonderful to be drinking something cold.

Abdullah is back at 1:50. We stop working at 2:00 so Mom, Julia and I get to hear parts of the conversation because we're packing up the lunch area.

“My government is willing to make a modest contribution to offset your hotel expenses,” Abdullah is saying to Dad. “They feel that would be more discreet than posting guards around your campsite. The hotel has security and it is improbable anyone would be comfortable attacking you in such a public area. But this contribution is conditional upon you continuing this dig in a low-key manner.”

“I have no problem with that,” says Dad. “But I’m concerned about our safety here on the dig as well.”

“That is not a problem,” says Abdullah. “There is already security at Palmyra. A few more soldiers will be added and they will keep an eye on you without it seeming too obvious.”

“Well, that’s fine for now,” says Dad.

Abdullah looks relieved.

The students are packing up their tools and heading for the bus so Abdullah takes that as his cue to leave.

“But Andy,” says Mom, as soon as Abdullah is out of hearing range. “Do you think the hotel is a safe option? Terrorists have no problem bombing hotels.”

“It only gives the illusion of safety,” agrees Dad. “Ultimately our safety is in the hands of God.” He stands up and begins to help us carry the water coolers and the food stuff to the bus.

Well, I have no complaints about being able to take a shower in a real bathroom and being able to relax in an air-conditioned hotel. None of the students are complaining although they’re not too thrilled about the “travel in a large group” rule. A lot of them just want to be able to freely roam around the hotel and go swimming in the pool without having to find other people to do it with. But Dad is firm and at dinner he stresses to them the importance of safety first.

As for our family, we don’t do anything without one another. Since Dad wants to spend the afternoon on the computer e-mailing Uncle Ken, the only part of the hotel we see is the inside of our room. All the television is in Arabic so there’s not much to do but read or take a nap.

For dinner, we go downstairs to the dining room. Our group is scheduled for an early dinner since we have to get up so early. Tonight the meal is being advertised as “American Style.” There are hamburgers, French fries and onion rings. The only thing that’s unusual about it is the condiments. It’s not the usual ketchup, mustard, and relish, but an assortment of exotic sauces, a cucumber salad, and a large bowl of something that looks like pesto.

After all the excitement of the last couple of days, our family just wants to sleep after dinner.

Dad has some news in the morning.

Uncle Ken has e-mailed Dad. He is still working on the license plate number but he's talked to a Syriologist. There have always been rumours of a treasure at Tadmor, but since it's not associated with Solomon, Dr. Lineman probably hasn't heard about it. The treasure belonged to a silk merchant who probably died around 50 A.D. in Palmyra. Palmyra was the last major stopover on the Silk Road just before the route reached the Mediterranean. No one would have ever suspected there might be a treasure buried somewhere in Palmyra except for an ancient letter that was said to be found in Palmyra during the Middle Ages and preserved in a small private collection of antiquities that were eventually donated by a wealthy Greek family to the National Museum in Damascus. It's not on display but scholars can study it in the museum's archives.

The letter is written from Palmyra to the silk merchant's wife and in it he apologizes for his delay in returning home but says that he has found something so wonderful while he was in Jerusalem selling his silk that he can't wait to share it with her. He mentions how he longs to be back home with her in Greece but the fact that the letter was found in Palmyra suggests that it never got sent and that something probably happened to the merchant.

"The 'treasure of Tadmor', as it's been called," says Dad, "is probably more mythical than realistic. The merchant could have found a beautiful vase for his wife that has long since broken into a thousand pieces, or it could have been some special silk pattern that again, would have dissolved into the dust. But it's interesting, isn't it?"

We all agree. It fascinates me that Steve's crazy fantasy of treasure at Tadmor is actually true.

"Uncle Ken suggests that we visit the National Museum in Damascus if we have a chance. There's some Chinese silk there that's been dated to 100 A.D. found here in Palmyra in a tomb. Could be interesting."

He quickly scans the e-mail.

“On a more up-to-date topic, Uncle Ken has provided me with the names of a few of the groups that might target an archaeological dig. These are groups that have previously made an issue of foreigners ‘plundering the treasures of Syria’. Not every nationalist organization concerns itself with archaeology. Well, I guess that’s about it. We’d better get going.”

Julia and I are already dressed. Mom is in the bathroom and as soon as she’s out, we head down to the dining room for a continental-style breakfast. There is a lot of pita bread and a wide assortment of jams and other spreads. The Nutella is popular among the students. Mom tries what looks like a sesame paste and declares it “unusual but pleasant.” Julia and I just stick with jam.

After that, we head out for the bus in the parking lot. As we’re boarding the bus, we hear screams. Next thing I know, Dad grabs my arm and hurls me into the bus. At first I think it’s for my own safety, but it’s also so that he can get back out and see what’s happening.

Mom, Julia and I, as well as the few other students that are already on the bus, rush to the back to see what’s going on.

The screams continue. They are coming from some of the female university students. Now there is yelling coming from some of the male university students.

“Oh dear God!” Mom blurts out. “They’re covered in blood!”

The Treasure of Tadmor

CHAPTER SIX

At least four of the students are covered in something red.

And then I see my Dad running right at them!

Don't Dad! I want to yell. Get under the bus! Hide!

"Stay calm!" he's yelling. "It's OK!"

We hear the squeal of tires and rush to the other side of the bus in time to see a black car driving away. There are at least two guns hanging out of the window, no longer pointed at the students but menacing nonetheless. Our group is still screaming and yelling and panicking. Many students are stumbling onto the bus, some hysterical and crying.

"It's OK! It's OK!" Dad is yelling. "Stay calm!"

He's assisting the students who have been shot, all who are miraculously still standing.

"It's OK!" yells Dad. "It's just paint!"

Paint?

Paint. This gets some people's attention and they calm down a little bit.

"It's red paint!" Dad yells. "Nobody's going to die!"

Our group settles down somewhat and although everybody is jittery, Dad is able to communicate without yelling.

“Back into the hotel everyone!” Dad calls out. “These guys need a shower and I need to make some phone calls. Please stick together.”

“So much for hotel security,” says Dad grimly to us as we troop back into the hotel. Very few people are up this early so only the desk clerk, a few waiters and a businessman in the dining room witness the spectacle of the return of our group led by several of the students dripping red paint as they walk.

“Please! Please! What is this?” The desk clerk, a young Arab man, rushes forward, clearly distressed by the paint on the carpet.

“We were attacked in the parking lot,” says Dad, heading straight for the front desk. “I need to use the phone.”

“Attacked?” The man looks horrified. “You were attacked?!”

“Bunch of hooligans with guns. Thankfully full of paint, not bullets.” Pulling out his wallet and consulting a piece of paper, Dad dials a number on the phone at the front desk. He turns his back to the students who have remained in the lobby so we can’t hear most of the call, but we gather it’s to Abdullah and that Dad wants some instant action.

By the time the students covered in paint are done taking their showers, Abdullah is already here, looking serious, frequently making phone calls, and nodding as he listens to Dad.

“Bottom line is,” says Dad, “if those guns had been real, we would have had at least six dead people. This is too serious. We didn’t know those guns weren’t real until they fired. Hotel security doesn’t cut it. Either we get 24-hour protection from the Syrian army or I take this story to the Western press and get a website up and running to chronicle our activities.”

“Done,” agrees Abdullah.

“Oh, and another thing. Those guys were the same ones who harassed my wife and daughters. They’re still driving around in that stolen car.” Dad gives Abdullah an ironic and grim smile. “Seems to me that they’re awfully foolish to keep driving around in a stolen car, eh?”

“Uh, yes,” says Abdullah looking slightly embarrassed. “Very foolish indeed.”

“So then,” says Dad. “How long till we get our soldiers?”

Abdullah makes a quick phone call, speaking in Arabic, and then replies in English.

“Half an hour,” he says.

“Very good,” says Dad. “We’ll just wait here then. They can escort us to the site.”

“Of course,” says Abdullah. “Be assured, this was just a one-time incident. It will not happen again.”

“Good,” says Dad. “Half an hour!” he calls out to the students in the lobby. “Have a coffee, if you like.” Since the dining room is adjacent to the lobby, it’s a safe location if we want to remain together as a group.

When two jeeploads of soldiers show up at the front of the hotel, it is late enough and there are enough people around for it to cause quite a stir. Abdullah seems eager to minimize the publicity. He quickly starts directing the students to head out for the bus, while at the same time waving at the soldiers and calling out in Arabic. The soldiers respond by leaping out of their vehicles and surrounding our group as we board the bus. And then they are back into their jeeps to escort us to the dig site. It’s all quite dramatic but Dad seems pleased.

When we arrive at the dig site, the soldiers are out of the jeeps once again, surrounding the bus as we make our way to the site. Once we’ve settled in, they establish themselves around the perimeters. They look pretty sharp.

“I will be back later,” Abdullah promises Dad. “There is much to do. Much is vexing about this situation.” He shakes his head. “We must get to the bottom of all this.”

Dad nods his head pleasantly and Abdullah heads for his van. As soon as Abdullah has rounded the corner, the soldiers relax and as the morning continues, they call out to each other in Arabic, laughing and joking, some even sit down and have a cigarette. Nonetheless, they remain at their posts and the guns at their side are an intimidating factor for anyone who might want to harass us.

While Mom, Julia and I are preparing lunch, Julia asks the question I’m wondering.

“Can we trust them?” she whispers to Mom. “I mean, what if they’re just like the guys who chased us who don’t like us?”

“No we can’t trust them,” Mom says quietly. “We put our trust in God. He’s our shield and defender. Dad puts his faith in God but Dad’s also exasperated and has had enough of all these shenanigans. Plus, he’s got to do all the earthly things to protect the students in case one of them decides to sue the university if they get hurt.”

“Mom?” says Julia. “Why didn’t God protect Steve?”

“That’s a good question,” says Mom. “But I think God is protecting Steve. I don’t have all the answers about that one. I know Dr. Lineman is a Christian . . .”

“Steve isn’t,” I say. “Plus, he went off voluntarily. It’s not exactly a case of someone with a whole bunch of faith suddenly being snatched out of our group.”

“Well, Ginny brings up some good points,” says Mom. “First of all, God does want us to be obedient to our parents when we’re young and Steve definitely didn’t do that. Secondly, God promises protection to the ones who put their trust in him and who make him their dwelling place. In Steve’s case, I imagine the faith of his parents will pull him through this trial. Unfortunately, Steve’s actions have caused a lot of anxiety for his parents.”

It’s time for the students to come and eat. We take over some plates of food to the soldiers.

“Shukran,” they say. *Thank you.*

“Afwan,” we say, which hopefully means, *your welcome.*

The topic at lunchtime is, of course, the morning’s attack. All the students are talking about it, but at our table we eat quietly. Dad isn’t one for speculation and the Lineman brothers, who are sharing our table, don’t seem to want to talk.

In the afternoon, one of the loci finds an intact water jug so that causes a bit of a stir. Even the soldiers seem interested, watching from a distance. Abdullah shows up and spends a lot of time talking this find over with Dad, asking him things like what period it likely comes from and is it native pottery or a foreign import?

“I can only give a guess at this point,” says Dad musing out loud, “but it looks foreign. To me it looks like an Israelite piece. So the level we’re at is probably around the first-century. Dr. Lineman will be the one to ask. Definitely not

Solomonic though. It's too far up. Actually, I'm a bit surprised to find something that looks like an Israelite piece of pottery so high up considering that in 70 A.D. Jerusalem was taken by the Romans and the Israelite culture suffered enormously."

"I do not understand . . ." says Abdullah.

"Well, I thought we were higher up. Early second-century from what I was told. I didn't realize we'd got down to a level where we'd find an Israelite piece. By the early second-century, Israel had been destroyed by the Romans and the Jews scattered so I thought we'd be digging for a little while before we found any of their artifacts."

"Hmmm," says Abdullah, absorbing this and walking off thoughtfully. He makes the rounds, talking to the soldiers in Arabic and glancing over occasionally at the digging.

"He's concerned," says Dad crouching down and quietly talking to us as we work in our square. "By previous agreement, anything found here belongs to the Syrian government so maybe he's concerned that we're going to try to take off with one of the country's antiquities."

Dad is staring off into space.

"There's something else on your mind," says Mom.

"It's this treasure of Tadmor business. If we're at the level where we can find an Israelite piece then we're at the level where we could find something pertaining to that treasure. I really need to talk to Dr. Lineman because he was under the impression we were starting out in the second-century and wouldn't get to the Solomonic period until the end of the summer. At this rate it will be sooner."

"But what can he do?" asks Mom. "His son is his first priority right now."

"Of course," says Dad straightening up. "But he needs to know."

By the end of the day, the water jug is safely extracted from the ground and packed away after all the measurements are taken. Abdullah has not left and does seem concerned about where the water jug will be stored.

"In the hotel safe," says Dad. "I can't turn it over to the government until Dr. Lineman has had a chance to examine it. It's only fair to him."

“Of course, of course,” says Abdullah quickly.

“Are you in contact with Dr. Lineman?” asks Dad.

“Well, yes,” says Abdullah.

“I need to confer with him about some archaeological matters,” says Dad. “Do you have a phone number I can reach him at?”

“I will be happy to have him phone the hotel,” says Abdullah.

“Good enough,” says Dad.

The soldiers escort us back to the hotel and then take up their posts on the third floor where our rooms are. The hotel doesn’t seem thrilled with this but they begrudgingly supply chairs for them to sit on. There are roughly two soldiers for every 10 students so Dad says that if any group of ten people want to leave the third floor they can have two soldiers escort them. A group of about ten decide they want to go swimming in the hotel pool.

As is usual on a dig, after taking showers, Dad is meeting with Henry and the other student leaders for a run-down of the day’s discoveries and plans for tomorrow. They meet in our room. Normally, Mom and I and Julia might go out while this goes on but this time we stay since we’d need to get seven more people in order to go anywhere.

As the meeting’s wrapping up, Dr. Lineman calls. Dad catches him up on all that’s been happening. They discuss at length the idea that we’ve already dug down to the early first-century. The phone call ends on a hopeful note.

“The police have reason to believe they’ll be finding Steve soon,” says Dad when he gets off the phone. “It’s pretty obvious to them that the people who have been harassing us probably took Steve and with a license plate number it’s only a matter of time now.”

“Well, that’s some good news,” says Henry.

“I’m going to go tell Liam and Glen,” says Dad as he opens the door for the students to file out. He’s the last person to exit and he leaves the door slightly open, signifying that he’ll be back in a few minutes.

After the students leave and once they’re all back in their rooms, the hall is quiet.

Suddenly, we hear laughing. It's the soldiers out on duty in the hallway. They were obviously in the middle of a conversation that they broke off when Dad and the students came out of our room. But now it's resuming. Though they're talking quickly, I decide that for fun I'm going to scribble down what they're saying and then try to decode it with our Arabic/English conversational phrase book. Obviously I just have to write the words down as they sound to me.

"Fel al massa," I write down.

"Mafeesh mushkila," says one guy a couple of times.

They're talking fast but I manage to scribble a few more words.

"Hona . . . Kulna . . . Maabath . . . Il matar . . . Inshaallah"

The last phrase is said several times and is something I remember from our conversational phrase book. It means *if God is willing*.

That's all I get down before Dad returns.

"Well, let's go eat," he says. "Dinner starts in five minutes."

When we get back to our room I want to try to translate what the soldiers were saying. It's slow going because I recorded the words as they sounded to me, not the way they're actually spelled.

Julia has asked a waiter for two large Styrofoam cups full of hot water and back in the room she makes us up some hot chocolate with the powder we bought at the souk. She joins me at the table with a magazine while Dad and Mom quietly do a Bible study on their bed.

Fel al massa turns out to be *tonight*. *Mafeesh mushkila* takes me a little bit longer but eventually I conclude that it means *no problem*. *Hona* is easy. It means *here*. I decide *kulna* has to be *all of us* and logically *maabath* is probably *together* since it sounds like they're planning something for tonight for all of them to do together. I already know that *Inshaallah* means *God willing* so I move on to the last phrase, *il matar*. I flip through the conversational Arabic book until I come across the most likely candidate. *The airport*. Weird. But that's the only thing that comes close to sounding like *il matar*. It sounds like for

some reason, the soldiers are all planning to go to the airport together, God willing.

I laugh to myself.

They were probably talking about soccer scores and my attempt to understand their Arabic has resulted in a completely different conversation.

Oh well. I put away my paper and my book and decide to go to bed.

A loud knock startles us as we're falling asleep.

Dad gets up to see who's at the door. Peeking through the peep-hole, he swings open the door for Thomas, one of the student leaders.

"Sorry to bother you Dr. Kent," he says as Dad ushers him into our room, making it kind of awkward since the rest of us are in bed. But Thomas doesn't seem to notice.

"That's alright," says Dad. "What's the problem, Thomas?"

"I'm worried about Henry. I woke up in the night and he wasn't in his bed. I waited fifteen minutes in case he just went out to buy a can of pop or some chips from the machine but he's not back yet . . ."

Dad immediately heads for the phone. Quickly, he dials a number.

"Abdullah?" he says. "It's Andy Kent. We have a problem. My right hand man has gone missing. You will? Good. OK . . . OK."

"He'll be right over," says Dad when he hangs up. "Now I'm going out and talking to those soldiers. Hopefully they'll understand my feeble Arabic . . ." He's throwing on his bathrobe as he speaks.

"Well, that's just it," says Thomas. "The soldiers don't know anything. I asked them and they say he never left our room."

"But that's baloney," says Dad. Dad goes over to the window and looks out. "He couldn't have gone out the window because there are no balconies and it's a sheer drop to the ground. . . ."

"Dad," I say suddenly. "What time do the soldiers rotate?"

“Nine, I think. The shifts are 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. and 9 p.m. to 9 a.m. Why?”

“So the guys who were on duty while we were having our meeting this afternoon just got off now . . .” I say out loud as I’m thinking this through. “Dad, I think those soldiers were planning something this afternoon. They were talking about going to the airport. I missed most of what they were saying . . .”

“Let’s go,” says Dad interrupting. He’s grabbed his wallet and his keys and he’s heading for the door, still in his bathrobe.

“Shouldn’t we get dressed?” asks Mom.

“We may not have a moment to spare,” says Dad grimly.

We grab our bathrobes on our way out. Thomas stands there looking kind of stunned.

“Tell Abdullah we went to the airport,” Dad calls over his shoulder. “And stay on your toes. I think it would be best if you wake everyone up and stay in one room until we get back.”

Dad ignores the soldiers. Flabbergasted, the soldiers stare at us in our pyjamas as Dad impatiently bypasses the slow elevator for the stairs. The night clerk in the lobby doesn’t seem to know what to say either as we march out into the cool night air and head for the van.

“Thanks for taking us with you,” I say as soon as we’re in the van and heading down a quiet road. “

Dad smiles grimly.

“I’m not letting you guys out of my sight. So where I go, you go. But if it gets dangerous, we all leave. I’m not risking your lives. But I feel a responsibility to try to get Henry back.”

Mom suggests we pray so Dad says a prayer while we’re driving. The airport is quiet when we arrive. I guess airlines don’t schedule flights to leave in the middle of the night. We park right outside of the main building and ignore the parking meters.

When we step out of the van I am very self-conscious of the fact that we are all still in our pyjamas. It’s like a bad dream except that I know I’m not going to wake up. But Dad is too busy striding towards the terminal for much reflection on the matter.

Inside the terminal, Dad ignores the very curious security guards scattered around the building.

“Of course, there are no official flights going out at this hour,” he says, almost to himself. “It’s possible though that they already managed to get him aboard a small plane and just took off in it regardless. But if they didn’t, I wonder where they might keep him in the meantime . . .”

“How do you think they’re going to persuade him to get on a plane?” asks Mom.

“I have no clue,” says Dad looking all around. “But I have a strong hunch that if Ginny heard them talking about the airport, he’s probably here somewhere.”

“I once heard about a guy who shipped himself from, like, Indiana to Texas,” offers Julia. “He did it in a wooden box . . .”

Dad snaps his fingers.

“You might have something there, Julia! Let’s check out the cargo section.”

“Andy, that might be off-limits,” says Mom.

“Not if we have Abdullah with us.” Dad grins as Abdullah hurries in through the sliding glass doors.

“Dr. Anderson! Dr. Anderson!” Abdullah is breathless and so flustered that he’s calling Dad by his first name. He looks as if he has a lot more to say except that Dad doesn’t let him.

“Abdullah! We’re glad to see you!” Dad gives him a hearty thump on the back. “We need access to the cargo section of the airport immediately.”

“Cargo section?” Abdullah sounds as if his English doesn’t cover this concept.

“Where they ship boxes instead of people,” explains Dad.

“Ah,” says Abdullah, enlightened. “Cargo section. But what is all this talk of someone going missing and why are all your students hiding in one hotel room too scared to come out even with soldiers to protect them?”

“Abdullah,” says Dad solemnly. “We have every reason to believe that it was the soldiers who took Henry and brought him here and if he isn’t already gone, I intend to get him back before any harm comes to him.”

Abdullah looks extremely distressed and begins to mutter to himself in Arabic.

“Now, my guess is that Henry has probably been confined to a box and is probably going to be shipped out in the morning.”

“I will talk to the guards,” says Abdullah. “First, I must see if anyone has been here.”

We watch as Abdullah goes over to one of the stony-faced guards and begins to talk. At first the man doesn't seem interested in sharing any information, but Abdullah pulls out a badge, presumably one that proves he's with the government, and the man begins to open up to him. He even gets animated, gesturing and pointing as he talks.

“He says no flights have gone out tonight. However, several men did come in with a large box that they said was supposed to go out on the early morning flight to Damascus.” Abdullah checks his watch. “This will be in two hours . . .”

“Where's the box?” Dad interrupts.

“Come,” says Abdullah as he begins to walk. “The guard said that all cargo is kept in a room over here.” Abdullah is heading for a door.

The door is not locked so with the guards all watching us from their posts, Abdullah opens it and we peer inside. The room is the size of a walk-in closet, with shelves on either side, but in the middle of it is a large wooden box that has been nailed shut.

“We need something to open the thing,” says Dad, rushing over to it.

Abdullah calls out something in Arabic and the guard he talked to hurries off. Soon he's back with a crowbar.

Eagerly Dad takes it and begins prying open the box.

Even though we're all expecting it, it's still quite a shock to see Henry curled up inside the box. He looks asleep, although when Dad leans into the box to gently sit him up, he's so limp it's clear that his sleep is not natural.

“Drugged,” says Dad grimly. “But at least he's still alive.”

Abdullah is rapidly talking to himself in Arabic and looking very upset. After awhile, he switches over to English.

“It is very distressing, Dr. Kent. Most distressing! That the men we chose to protect you have done this . . .”

“Well,” says Dad, who with Mom's help, is lifting Henry

out of the box and getting him out of the closet, “of course, you’ll want to investigate the whole thing. But they’re the strongest candidates for doing this. I doubt any of the students could have pulled this off . . .”

“Oh, it is without a doubt the soldiers who were supposed to be protecting you who did this,” says Abdullah, rubbing his hands together in anxiety. “I asked the guard here and he said although the men did not wear uniforms, they most certainly were Arab.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Steve is back!

The box that contained Henry in it had a Damascus address on it and when the police investigated the house that Henry was going to be sent to, they found Steve locked in an upstairs room.

Needless to say, his family is thrilled. Now the Linemans are back with the group here in Palmyra, although Dr. and Mrs. Lineman seem a little bit dazed by all the negative events that have plagued this dig. Steve, however, has bounced right back. He's telling stories about how he was waited on hand and foot by pretty Arab girls and how he's thinking of changing his religion to Islam since upon death, Muslim men are said to inherit a harem of young women in Paradise. Glen, however, has told Julia that the reality is that it was a grandmotherly-type of Arab woman who took care of Steve during his captivity.

After spending a night in the hospital recovering from the drugs his captors injected into him, Henry is back on the job as Dr. Lineman's assistant. Unlike Steve, he doesn't embellish his story. He left his room to go buy a pop from the vending machine and while he was dropping his coins in the machine

someone grabbed him from behind. After that, he doesn't remember anything until he woke up in a hospital bed.

It's been concluded that Henry wasn't a specific target. Any student would have done. Hearing this, all the students are terrified, naturally. Especially since nobody's actually been arrested. The house Steve was held in was, except for Steve, empty at the time of the raid. Even the grandmother must have been out at the market.

Not surprisingly, most of the soldiers assigned to protect us on that one shift have disappeared, although at least the government knows who to look for.

At first Dr. Lineman wanted to pack everything up and go home. But Abdullah, terrified no doubt of unwanted publicity, convinced him that this time around the soldiers assigned to protect us would be of a higher calibre, not just out of the general ranks and susceptible to their own whims and probably bribery.

So, for the moment, things are back to normal. We're at the dig site. Dad and Dr. Lineman are pondering how we can already be at the first-century level. Today, a small partial oil lamp was discovered, confirming that we're digging somewhere between 100 B.C. and 70 A.D.

Some wives of archaeologists are archaeologists themselves and wouldn't dream of doing domestic chores at a dig site, but Mrs. Lineman seems content to join us in the meal duties. She and Mom talk about how good it is to have Steve back and how we have to constantly be on our toes because nobody wants to lose their children. I have a feeling that Dr. and Mrs. Lineman suffered far more than Steve throughout this ordeal. (Although Steve claims that his captors would tie him to a chair and beat his feet with palm branches to try to get information out of him. Glen says, however, that the doctor, who examined Steve after he was rescued, said that he showed no signs of being abused by his captors.)

One thing has changed. The soldiers guarding us are not the relaxed, joking, smoking, guys from before. These ones are tight-lipped and unsmiling as they stand and grimly survey our site and the surrounding area. Unlike the other soldiers, they don't accept meals from us while on the job. They take shifts

in order to eat and they bring their own food. Dr. Lineman says they're more like the Marines, Syria's finest men.

Julia's decided that she has a crush on one of them although she's still keeping her options open with Glen. When Steve was missing it seemed improper to intrude on Liam and Glen's grief, but now that he's back, Glen and Julia are eating lunch together and laughing and talking as they work. Since they're the kids of the archaeologists, they've managed to swing it so they work together and Dr. Lineman just automatically put me and Steve in the locus beside them. Liam is back to hanging around with the university students.

Steve seems to think that it's important to justify his adventure with me.

"There's definitely a conspiracy here in Syria," he says as we're digging away. "Of course, I wouldn't have known this except that I allowed myself to fall into enemy hands in order to get an inside impression of what's going on."

I'm tempted to tell him that his parents were worried sick but I decide to bite my tongue. I figure that under all that bravado he feels pretty guilty about causing them so much grief.

"So what's going on?" I ask lightly. I have to admit, on the plane it crossed my mind that since he was the one guy close in age to me I might end up liking him by the end of the summer. But something's gone sour for me. Maybe it's his complete lack of humility or maybe it's just the presence of all those dark-haired, deeply tanned men in their crisp uniforms surrounding our dig site. In the presence of such men, guys like Steve seem kind of wimpy.

"Well, there's a definite anti-Western sentiment," he says as he somewhat recklessly digs through the dirt.

"Really?" I say trying to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

"Yeah. I think it's for religious reasons," he says. "See, there's your religion again. Look what it does to people . . ."

"My religion?" I can barely keep the irritation out of my voice as I stop digging. "My religion says to love everybody, even your enemy. Not to mention that I have a hard time believing that every religious person in this country goes around abducting Westerners."

“Yes but it’s that religious sense of always being right,” argues Steve. “People feel totally justified doing things in the name of their religion.”

“People feel totally justified doing things even when they have no religion,” I say, resuming my digging. “Our whole culture proves that.”

“Well maybe you should become a Muslim then,” says Steve grumpily. “You can go around kidnapping innocent Westerners just because they had the misfortune to be born into a free society.”

I sigh. I can’t be bothered with this conversation anymore. Maybe I’ll just ask if tomorrow I can go back with Mrs. Lineman and Mom.

When it becomes clear to Steve that I’m not going to reply, he apologizes.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I don’t know why I’m making it sound like you’re the problem.”

“I accept your apology,” I say. My eyes are still on the dirt.

If Julia and Glen have been listening to our conversation, they give no indication of it. They’re playing Twenty Questions and having a great time trying to stump each other.

“Hey!” says Julia to me when they wrap up their game. Let’s play Who Said It? You and Steve be a team and Glen and I will be a team.”

“Sure,” I say. It’s a great time-killer and time can go slowly when all you’re doing is digging in the dirt.

“What’s Who Said It?” asks Steve.

I have to resist telling him, “You probably wouldn’t be good at it.”

“Ginny and I made the game up,” says Julia. “You quote somebody from the Bible and the other person tries to guess who said it. Do you guys know much Bible?”

“I’ve read it a few time,” says Glen.

Steve looks at him in surprise.

“Well, at least I’ve got Ginny on my team,” says Steve. “That’ll be my only hope.”

With that comment, I warm up to him a bit.

“OK,” says Julia. “We’ll start.” She and Glen whisper amongst themselves.

“Give me children or I die,” says Julia dramatically.

“Do you know that one?” asks Steve.

“Sure,” I say, not bothering to tell him it’s relatively easy. “Rachel to Jacob. His reply was, Am I God?”

“OK, so do we get a point for that?” asks Steve.

“Oh, there are no points,” I say. “It’s just the fun of trying to stump the other person. Now we’ve got to come up with one that will stump then.” I think for a bit. “How about . . . ?” I whisper something to him. He shrugs.

“Go for it.”

“I didn’t laugh.”

Julia thinks for a moment.

“Sarah to God.”

“How do you know stuff like that?” asks Steve.

“It’s simple,” says Julia. “You just have to know the story where Sarah laughs because God tells her she’s going to have a baby.”

“Why did she say she didn’t laugh?”

“Because she was laughing because she didn’t believe it. She was really old at the time.”

“Did you know all that?” Steve asks Glen.

“I’m familiar with the story,” Glen says. “I just might have gotten the names mixed up.”

Steve shakes his head.

“Why do you bother reading the Bible?” he asks his brother. “To be able to talk to Dad?”

Glen shakes his head as he continues digging.

“To me, the Bible is the answer for why the world is the way it is. I just started reading Genesis because its good literature and it has some dramatic stories but then I realized that the whole Garden of Eden story explains how there can be an all-powerful, loving God but still be a suffering world.”

“How does it explain that?” Steve sounds as if he doubts such a thing is possible.

“Simple,” says Glen. “God made a perfect world. Man chose to sin. It’s sin that makes this world ugly.”

“That doesn’t explain natural disasters,” says Steve. “I can understand that it’s not God’s fault if someone stabs someone because if he didn’t let stuff like that happen there’d be no free

will. But I don't understand the impersonal stuff like hurricanes and tornadoes."

Glen thinks for a moment.

"There's a pretty powerful theme that I've noticed throughout the Bible and that's the idea that if you're not for me, you're against me. The people who are for God are protected. They can pray to him and expect him to hear and protect them. And when I say for him, I don't mean in an abstract, distant kind of way. I mean, people who really love him."

Steve makes a face.

"What kind of God demands that we love him before he'll take care of us?"

Glen shrugs.

"God is our father, our creator, according to the Bible. But some people even go so far as to deny his existence. It would be like me going to Dad and saying, I don't believe you're actually my father, and sometimes I don't even believe you exist. I certainly don't love you, but I expect you to buy me everything I need and want."

"OK, you've got me there," says Steve. "I can even see that if God is the creator of everything and we totally deny he's there, he's a pretty nice guy to let us keep living on his planet."

At that point we probably would have resumed our game except that there's a sudden shout from one of the students.

"I've found something! I think it's gold!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

The first thing I notice is the look of horror on Dad's face. I think he wishes that the student, a girl with long hair, a tie-die shirt and cut-off jeans, had been more discreet. Although the soldiers don't flinch, we'd have to be pretty naïve to think that just because they look like they aren't listening that they're deaf.

Dr. Lineman and Dad hurry over to check out the find.

There are some feeble attempts by the rest of the group to carry on digging, but eventually everyone kind of drifts over to the locus where the golden object is. Even Mom and Mrs. Lineman have temporarily stopped making lunch to check it out.

Because of the necessity of having to take measurements and photos along the way, removing the golden object takes a couple of hours. Dr. Lineman, Dad and Henry work right through lunch and Abdullah shows up after lunch which means that one of the soldiers must have called him when they took a break.

He's wringing his hands and looking so tense you'd think we'd lost another student instead of found something great.

"My guess is that it's a chalice of some sort," says Dr.

Lineman once half of the object is sticking out.

“It’s the Holy Grail!” yells Steve.

His dad gives him a serious look.

“Don’t get rumours going, son. My guess is that it either belonged to a rich man or perhaps it was used in a religious ceremony.”

“It is Israelite then?” asks Abdullah.

“Hard to say at this point,” says Dr. Lineman, as he carefully brushes away the dirt around the object. “One thing’s for sure, it’s not Solomonic. We’re at the wrong level. Oh, and incidently, Abdullah?”

“Yes?”

“I was under the impression that we were starting off in the early second-century. How come it turns out we are digging in the early first-century?”

Abdullah shrugs.

“Others have dug here, perhaps.”

Dr. Lineman sighs.

When the object is completely out of the ground everybody is impressed. It’s intact and appears to be a gold cup.

Dr. Lineman is examining it while Abdullah is hovering over his shoulder.

“My guess is that it’s Syrian and where we found it suggests it’s a first-century piece. Since I’m an expert in the Solomonic period, that’s really just my opinion. But I can tell you this, it’s not an Israelite piece. It’s an amazing find though.”

Dr. Lineman doesn’t say it but a lot of people must realize that this cup is worth a fortune. Abdullah seems nervous.

“It will be safe?”

“You and the soldiers can accompany us to the hotel safe,” says Dr. Lineman. “And if it would make you feel better, once we’ve thoroughly examined it and photographed it, I’ll turn it over to your government. You’ll want one of your own men, an expert in Syrian archaeology, to look it over and determine how it might have been used.”

“Ah, yes,” says Abdullah, who sounds as if he wishes the object were already hidden away in a government vault somewhere.

Abdullah comes back to the hotel with us and joins the

meeting in our room. Normally the meeting would probably be held in Dr. Lineman's room but since he was gone at the beginning of the dig, the habit of meeting in our room has just carried on. Abdullah orders from room service while he's restlessly waiting for the gold cup to be examined and photographed. Soon, a pot of coffee, a pot of tea, and a giant plate of pastries arrive at our door. I wish Abdullah would come to all of the meetings.

After the meeting, Dr. Lineman, Abdullah and a couple of the soldiers take the cup downstairs to the hotel safe with the understanding that someone from the Syrian government will pick it up tomorrow.

We're all still in our room working on the pastries when Dr. Lineman returns without Abdullah.

"Oh, I'm glad you're back," Dad says, pouring himself another tea. "One thing's been bothering me. Why did they tell us that we were starting at the second-century level?"

Dr. Lineman thinks for a moment.

"My impression is they wanted us doing the dig for them but thinking that we were one century later. It may not be politically correct to find a link between Solomon's Jewish kingdom and Syria."

"But in this case," says Dad, "we would be promoting a first-century find as a second-century find. A second-century treasure is interesting, of course, but not nearly as interesting as anything found around the time of Christ."

Dr. Lineman nods and rolls his eyes. "I know. Steve with his Holy Grail comment. Everybody will want to speculate that the object was somehow connected with Christ or his disciples. So it's a far more high-profile find than something from the century after he died."

"The cup might have coincided with the time of Christ," says Dad, sipping his tea. "But it probably never left Syria."

"Well, at this point it's not our concern anymore," says Dr. Lineman. "It belongs to the government of Syria so whether they want to publicize the find is their business. I'm really only interested in promoting anything related to the Bible."

"Someone thinks we came here looking for treasure," Dad points out.

Dr. Lineman nods.

“I think the whole treasure of Tadmor thing is a myth and when we were told to stay away from the treasure of Tadmor, it was a way of saying leave our country and its artifacts alone.”

A knock at the door interrupts the conversation.

It's Glen. He's slightly out of breath.

“Dad! Steve's gone again!”

CHAPTER NINE

Dr. Lineman looks pale.

Mom gasps and Dad looks grim.

Henry and the student leaders look at each other as if to say, *Uh-oh. Here we go again.*

“Are you sure?” Dad asks.

Glen nods.

“He left a note this time.” He holds a piece of paper out to his dad.

Dr. Lineman reaches for the note and as he reads it, he groans. The note drops onto our bed and I pick it up.

I've gone after the guys. Don't worry about me. They won't get me twice. Steve

Dad looks at it.

“Is it legitimate?”

Dr. Lineman nods.

“That's his handwriting and that's certainly his style.”

“Nonetheless, I think we should call Abdullah back.”

Dr. Lineman doesn't look as if he likes the idea but he does nod reluctantly. Dad picks up the phone.

“How'd he slip out?” asks Dr. Lineman to Glen.

“Mom was in the shower. Liam's visiting Cherie and Don

and that other guy, I forget his name . . .”

Dr. Lineman nods.

“I fell asleep on the bed but I woke up when the door shut. He’s only been gone two minutes.”

“Then let’s go after him!” cries Dr. Lineman as Dad’s hanging up the phone. Quickly the whole room is mobilised and we follow Dr. Lineman out the door.

Dr. Lineman pauses to ask a soldier something in Arabic. The soldier points to the end of the hallway and Dr. Lineman hurries toward the small room that holds the ice machine and a few vending machines. It’s at this moment that Mrs. Lineman comes bursting out of the room wearing only a bathrobe and fuzzy slippers. Wordlessly, Dr. Lineman grabs her hand.

“What’s going on?” she demands. Of course, the note Steve left is still back on our bed so she only knows that when she came out of the shower none of her sons were there.

“Steve,” is all her husband says and Mrs. Lineman looks as if she is going to cry.

The room with the vending machines is empty, but a small window is open. Dr. Lineman rushes over and looks out it.

“There he is!” he shouts.

We’re on the third floor but this window is joined to a fire escape.

Next thing I know, we’re all following Dr. Lineman through the window and down the fire escape. I wouldn’t be surprised if someone phones the fire department with all these people escaping through a window. We certainly do get a lot of stares from the people on the road.

Dr. Lineman is running in the direction that he saw Steve. Steve must be quite a distance ahead of us since I can’t even see him at ground level. I think it would be more effective if we were to grab a taxi. But Dr. Lineman is in too much of a hurry to think it all through.

After about five minutes, Dr. Lineman stops in front of a falafel restaurant, huffing and puffing, and says, “This is where I saw him. But who knows where he went from here.”

“Well, my family and I will go back and wait for Abdullah,” says Dad. “You guys keep searching and if you get a chance, phone us.”

Dr. Lineman nods as he scans the crowds. Mrs. Lineman doesn't seem to care that she's just wearing a bathrobe.

Our family turns to head back while Henry and the student leaders stay with the Linemans.

We rush back to the hotel, though not running since we're all a little tired. Abdullah is pulling up to the front of the hotel just as we arrive.

"What is this, Dr. Kent?" he cries out as he jumps out of his van. "Not again? This is terrible!"

"At least this time he went voluntarily," says Dad, looking embarrassed. "Although come to think of it, he went voluntarily the last time too. He must have gotten it into his head that he's going to be the hero and capture himself some bad guys."

Abdullah groans as we head into the hotel lobby.

"Why can he not leave that to the police? They are not completely inefficient, you know."

We go back to our room while Abdullah talks to some of the soldiers. Then he comes into our room and asks Dad to show him where we left the Linemans. Rather than go out onto the street again, Dad takes him to the window by the vending machines and points out where we parted. A few minutes later, some of the soldiers have hopped into a jeep and joined the Linemans in their search.

Abdullah comes back to our room.

"They will check out the airport and the bus station. He cannot get too far."

"I bet Dr. Lineman ties him to his bed after this," says Julia.

"He would certainly deserve it," agrees Mom.

"Is this what is done to children when they are bad in Canada?" asks Abdullah.

Dad laughs as the phone rings.

But it is not Dr. and Mrs. Lineman, just Liam asking where his parents are. Dad updates him. He wants to rush out and start looking for his brother, but Dad persuades him to come wait in our room until we know what's going on.

"It's hard to sit and wait," complains Liam, a few minutes later as he paces back and forth in our room.

Mom agrees.

“If anything happened to Ginny or Julia, I wouldn’t be able to sit still.”

Abdullah pours himself a cup of coffee from the pot that was delivered earlier.

Dad glances at his watch.

“It’s dinner-time. If I don’t go down there the students might get concerned . . .”

“Don’t worry about it,” says Liam, staring out our window. “I told Cherie about Steve. By now the whole group, not to mention the hotel staff and half of Palmyra, knows.”

Dad sighs.

“Well, that’s that then. I guess its room service.”

Abdullah goes ahead and orders a lavish Arab feast. I really like having Abdullah around. Otherwise, we’d all feel too guilty to have a good meal, but he’s not going to let tragedy interfere with his eating.

We’re halfway through our lamb kabobs when a phone call comes.

It’s Dr. Lineman.

Steve has been intercepted on a bus heading for Damascus. After determining that a young white male had boarded the bus, the soldiers had to race after it, stopping it on a highway. Despite his vehement resistance and his pleas to fellow passengers for help, they had bodily removed Steve from the bus.

They were all heading back to the hotel now and Dr. Lineman believed that Steve would probably be put under some sort of house arrest where he wouldn’t be able to leave his hotel room except to assist at the dig and even there he would be closely watched by the soldiers.

Abdullah is relieved and excuses himself. We don’t know whether it’s to go home or to go out and talk with the soldiers or Dr. Lineman, or what. Liam leaves with him and we decide as a family that it’s been a stressful day and that we’re going to make it an early night.

Steve looks a bit embarrassed the next day.

Everybody knows what’s happened so there’s lots of discussion and snickering about him.

Julia, however, couldn't be more thrilled. The soldier assigned to making sure Steve doesn't go anywhere is the one she has a crush on and that means he's standing right beside our locus when we dig.

"I could reach out and touch his foot if I wanted to," she whispers to me at lunch.

"Would you want to do that?" I ask, biting into my pita.

"Do you have a heart of stone?" Julia demands. "Can't you see the man is gorgeous?" She forgets to whisper. Thankfully the only people who hear are our parents. Of course, they're used to Julia's crushes.

I shrug.

"He doesn't speak English. In fact, he doesn't speak at all. He's probably a different religion than you, not to mention that he's ten years older and could be married for all you know."

Julia sighs at my lack of sympathy as she reaches for another cucumber slice.

Despite the gorgeous soldier, Julia and Glen spend the time telling each other their life stories.

Steve doesn't seem interested in talking which is fine by me.

Finally, near the end of the day he says, "The police around here are so slow about doing anything. In countries like this it falls upon the citizens to take revenge for crimes and injustices." I think he's trying to justify his behaviour and I don't bother to remark that Syria seems quite progressive and modern to me. Instead, I make an "umm" noise to indicate I've heard him. If he wants to take it to mean that I agree with him, well, that's his business.

It's only by a quirk of fate that Steve gets to be the centre of attention again.

That evening, at dinner in the hotel dining room, we're enjoying a delicious meal of eggplant parmigiana, roasted sweet potatoes, rice and salad. There's a small table set-up where you can help yourself to more coffee, tea, water or cola. Steve is refilling his glass with cola, the rest of us are seated at our tables.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, men with their heads covered in keffiyahs burst into the room.

The soldiers are guarding the main entrance to the dining

room but these men came through the door that leads to the kitchen.

Quickly, they survey the room and since Steve is the only one standing, they grab him and point a gun to his head.

By this time the soldiers are in the room, pointing their guns at the men and barking out orders in Arabic. Many of the men drop their weapons but the man that has Steve continues to hold him as a human shield with the gun still pointing to his head.

Steve's mom is in hysterics and Dr. Lineman looks furious.

The man that has Steve yells something in Arabic. One of the soldiers translates.

"He says he wants the treasure you find."

Dr. Lineman groans.

"He says you have no right to take our nation's antiquities."

Dr. Lineman stands up.

"Please tell him we are not interested in taking Syria's national treasures. In fact, the gold cup he is no doubt referring to was turned over to a member of the Syrian government today."

When the soldier translates, the man holding Steve looks surprised. It kind of takes the wind out of his sails. But he valiantly rallies himself and starts talking again.

"He says, go home and leave our history alone," translates the soldier.

"You have a history that is intriguing, not just for you, but for students all around the world. What we do, we don't do just for ourselves, but for all Syrians and all who love Syria."

The soldier translates and the man doesn't have much to say to this. Continuing to use Steve as a shield, he makes his way back to the entrance to the kitchen where he suddenly pushes Steve away and runs for it. The other men with him have already been making their way slowly over to the kitchen and this is their cue to run for their lives.

The soldiers pursue them, clearly reluctant to just gun them down.

Mrs. Lineman leaps to her feet to embrace Steve. From outside in the parking lot we can hear gunfire and shouts so it sounds as if there are going to be some arrests.

“All a misunderstanding,” says Dr. Lineman, groaning as he sinks back into his chair. Mrs. Lineman is clutching Steve’s arm and I have a feeling that she won’t be letting go of him until we’re all safely back in Canada. “No doubt their leaders have told them that we Westerners are here to pillage all their national treasures and then send them out to do the dirty work of scaring us into going back home.”

Naturally, Abdullah shows up at the hotel in the evening and there is an informal meeting in our room.

“Good news. Good news,” he says beaming and rubbing his hands. “Those trouble-makers are in prison. They will bother you no longer.”

“Are they the ones who abducted Steve?” Mrs. Lineman asks.

“Oh yes,” Abdullah assures her. “They are also the ones responsible for Henry going missing. The soldiers assigned to protect you did not take him, but the cousins of one of the soldiers. The soldiers pretended to be blind when he was taken away. Then they were afraid of being implicated and ran away themselves.”

“So we should be able to dig in peace now?” asks Mrs. Lineman hopefully.

“Oh yes,” Abdullah assures her. “Now that the treasure of Tadmor is safely in the government’s hands you will be fine.”

“The treasure of Tadmor?” says Dad. “You believe that cup to be the treasure of Tadmor?”

“Oh yes,” says Abdullah nodding. “But of course. There have always been rumours of a fabulous treasure from the first-century. It is with some embarrassment I confess that part of the reason I was assigned to be your liaison was to keep an eye on you in case you found it. But that is all behind us now, yes?” He beams. “I am still here to help you if you need it and tomorrow you will be able to peacefully resume your digging. You will still have soldiers guarding you but, of course, it is just a precaution. No further harm will come to you.” He gives a little bow and exits the room.

“They knew we’d be digging in the first-century,” says Dr. Lineman. “So just in case the treasure happened to be there, they told us it was the second-century and assigned Abdullah

to keep an eye on things.” He sighs and rubs his head with his fingers. “All because they didn’t trust the Westerners. Oh well. I guess I might do the same under the circumstances. Let’s call it a night.”

The next day there’s sort of a feeling around the site that the excitement is over, we can all get down to the work of proving that there was a link between Solomon and Tadmor. We have six weeks of digging left and Dr. Lineman figures, at the rate we’re going, that in the last two weeks we should hit the Solomonic period.

There are still soldiers guarding us but the numbers are way down. There used to be about twenty. Now there are five. Much to Julia’s disappointment, her favourite one is gone. But at least it frees her up to be with Glen.

While Glen and Julia talk about every book they’ve ever read, every song they’ve ever liked, and every place they’ve ever been, Steve tells me all his reasons for rejecting his father’s religion.

“I mean, you look at history. How much bloodshed has there been over Christianity?” he says. “I can’t follow a religion that led to the Crusades or the Inquisition or even what’s going on in Northern Ireland.”

I laugh and he looks at me strangely.

“Jesus said to love your enemies,” I say. “Anyone who decides to kill their enemies can hardly be following Jesus. They might use his name but they’re not practising his teachings.”

“OK, you might have something there. But why are there so few people who actually do what Jesus says?”

“Because it’s hard,” I say.

“No it isn’t,” says Steve. “All you have to do is say a little prayer and you’re in.”

“He told one man to sell all that he had and give it to the poor and then come follow him,” I say. “The man was rich and he went away sad because he had wanted it to be a little easier. Jesus said things like, blessed are the meek. I mean, who wants to be meek?”

I look over at my mom and Mrs. Lineman. They could both

be beautiful if they tried. But neither of them dress to be noticed and they both don't mind doing all the work that isn't usually appreciated.

"People don't want to go around being humble and serving other people," I say.

"Is that what Jesus taught?"

"Sure," I say, pausing from my work. "Dad says it's radically contrary to what we want to do but it takes us to a higher dimension. When you start practising love and mercy and patience and all that, you get to see things more from God's perspective."

"Well, I didn't think about it that way," says Steve. He's completely stopped working. "But one thing that bugs me is that you've got all these people around the world, like Hindus and stuff, and because they aren't Christian, they're going to go to hell."

"Well," I say, glad that Dad and I have talked about some of these very things. "Jesus told the Jewish people of his time that it would be harder for them in the judgement day than it would be for the people of Tyre and Sidon, who were Gentiles. The Jewish people had heard his message and rejected it. He said the people of Sodom and Gomorrah would have repented if they had heard his message. It's too simplistic to say that because some Hindu never accepted Jesus, or even heard about Jesus, that he's going into a lake of fire. It sounds more like he'll be judged for how he would have received the message about Jesus dying on the cross for his sins."

"Yeah but everybody just says if you're not a Christian, you're going to hell. And then some flood comes along and wipes out an entire village in Peru and I think, is that really fair? All those people just dying and going to hell and they didn't even have a chance to live long enough to decide if they wanted to be a Christian. And, like, that's another thing. Why does God let people die in natural disasters like floods and tornadoes and stuff like that?"

I sigh.

"Steve, that's a bit of a cliché. You don't even believe it yourself."

"Sure I do." He actually looks as if he's enjoying this whole

exchange.

“Who’s your neighbour back home?”

“I dunno. Some old guy. I think his name is Simpson. Or it might be his cat whose name is Simpson.”

“OK, so Jesus said love your neighbour as yourself. What have you done to love your neighbour?”

“Well, pretty much nothing except to leave him alone.”

“Do you love him?”

“Not really.”

“So why do you care what happens to some village in Peru? You won’t even lift a finger to help your neighbour in Canada. The thing is, God loves everyone. We can’t pretend we love everyone more than God. Most of us don’t even do much to help the people around us, but then when we hear about a hurricane wiping out a trailer park, we act like we’re more loving and caring than God and that it’s so unfair that something happened to these poor people. I could accept you being upset with God if you spent your life running around trying to help people who were flood victims, or hurricane victims, or whatever. Then I would say you have a right to ask God why he lets these things happen.”

Steve laughs.

“OK, so I’m a hypocrite. Besides, I kind of know why God doesn’t interfere all the time. We don’t want him to. I can’t expect God to save me from a hurricane if I won’t give him the time of day when everything’s going great.”

Mercifully, Steve leaves it at that.

With the exception of Steve bugging me, things have relaxed for everyone. When we get back to the hotel we’re allowed to go out in small groups to go swimming or to explore the area surrounding the hotel. A lot of the students go back to the ruins of Palmyra to enjoy the spectacular ancient city. Dr. Lineman asks the hotel if we can have a late dinner to accommodate the excursions.

Of course, Henry is planning all sorts of expeditions around the area for all who are interested. Dad informs our family that we’ll be required to attend them all. Normally, Julia would be rolling her eyes about this but the Linemans have informed their sons that attendance is mandatory for them as well, so

Julia will have Glen to keep her company. I think Glen would have gone anyhow.

The next day, after the dig and the post-dig meeting, we set out on foot with our two families and about ten students to see more of the ancient city. It's six square kilometres so there's lots we haven't seen.

As we're walking to the site Steve calls out to Henry, "So, what's the entire history of Tadmor, Henry?"

If Henry realizes that Steve is having fun with him, he doesn't let on.

"I'm glad you asked, Steve," he says, as he wipes the sweat of his brow. When we're digging we're underneath a tarp but now we're out in the open with the late afternoon sun beating down on us. "Of course, you know that Tadmor was part of Solomon's territory. It's also mentioned in one of the Mari tablets, which as you also probably know was in Assyria. Tadmor rose in prominence because of its location between China and the Mediterranean, making it a natural rest spot along the Silk Road. It was also located between the two empires of Rome and Persia. For the sake of trading, it was in Tadmor's interest to ally herself with Rome. Under Tiberius, Tadmor was integrated into the province of Syria. This happened between 14 and 37 C.E."

"During the life of Christ," remarks Dr. Lineman.

Henry carries on.

"It was around this time Tadmor became known as the City of Palm Trees and when the emperor Adrian visited, he declared Tadmor a free city. In return the people named their city Adriana Palmyra. In 212 C.E. Palmyra was declared a Roman colony, something which pleased the people since up til then high taxes had been imposed on the luxury goods that passed through the city. Now they were exempt from paying these taxes and the money freed the people to build up the city, making it one of the most beautiful in the Roman Empire."

I have to admit, this history does make the ruins more interesting. As we arrive at the ruins, Henry is pointing out certain archaeological facts as we walk down the main street. He's talking about things like tetrapylons and funerary towers. I don't take it all in. He announces that we'll go have a good

look at the Temple of Bel and then resumes his history.

“The conflict between Persia and Rome continued and Rome appealed to Palmyra for help. Odeinat, the leader at the time, was cooperative. When he was murdered, his wife Zenobia took over and she wasn’t so cooperative. She was said to be exceptionally attractive and intelligent, gifted in speaking many languages and a patron to the scholars, philosophers and theologians. During the reign of Emperor Aurelian, in around 268, I believe, Zenobia decided to take on Rome. Because Aurelian was already busy with many civil and external conflicts, Zenobia’s army took over all of Syria. While she was working on taking Egypt and Asia Minor, Aurelian formed a new army for the purpose of taking his revenge and this new force conquered Zenobia’s army in Homs and then moved against Palmyra until it fell in 274. Zenobia was taken to Rome in chains, but at least they were gold chains. Ah, here we are, the Temple of Bel.”

We stop in front of an impressive arrangement of columns and walls still intact. It’s enormous.

Before Henry can launch into any discussion about the temple, Steve is dashing off towards it, his parents right behind him so as not to lose him again. The rest of us follow at a more leisurely pace. Dad has a close look at the carvings on the walls while Julia, Glen, Mom and I find a large stone to sit on and watch the late afternoon tourists as they drift from one ruin to the next. The sun is getting low in the sky which increases the dramatic effect of the whole site.

We can’t stay long or else we’ll miss our dinner but Henry promises us that sometime we’ll take the bus and go up the hill to the Arab Castle of Fakhredin Al Maany, a later addition to the site. On the walk back he resumes his history.

“After Queen Zenobia was taken to Rome, the city was looted and destroyed. The Romans destroyed Zenobia’s palace and replaced it with a military camp. The city remained, in much part, ruined, although a few churches were built in the Byzantine era. Then the Arabs took control of the city and built the castle we’ll hopefully have a chance to visit. I’ll stop there, for now.”

Steve claps and Henry takes a bow.

I suspect that Henry knew that Steve was being sarcastic when he asked for the entire history of Palmyra but that he decided to take advantage of the opportunity anyhow.

When we get back to the hotel we have falafels for dinner, which is basically chick peas and spices mashed into a ball and deep-fried, stuffed into a pita with sauce and tomatoes and cucumbers. It's really good. It's the Arab equivalent of fast food. After that, bed-time.

While Julia and Glen have an animated discussion about their favourite Bible characters, Steve decides to blame me for all the problems he has with the Bible.

"Like all that stuff about Creation," he's saying as we poke away at the dirt. I'm playing with a tiny piece of fabric I found in the corner of our locus -- probably something that came off of some tourist and blew over here. Not worth bothering Dad about. "You don't seriously believe with all of our information about evolution that God actually created the earth in six days six thousand years ago."

"Well, Steve, I actually do." I continue to poke away in the corner. More of that fabric. I hope it's not something gross like a used handkerchief.

Steve is disappointed that I don't defend my position so he pushes further.

"C'mon! Carbon dating proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that the earth is millions of years old!"

I'm glad that Glen jumps in at this point.

"Then why is it that when Christian scientists submit some volcanic material from a volcano that they know erupted thirty years ago that it comes back as being thousands of years old?" he asks his brother.

"So they make mistakes sometimes! Big deal!"

He turns back to me, but I just shrug. Steve is in an antagonistic mood, not one conducive to any real discussion.

"And dinosaurs!" he goes on. "They lived millions of years before man!"

"Then why are there cave drawings of them?" Glen asks. "Why is it that men who lived supposedly millions of years after they died out knew what they looked like?"

Steve groans.

“And why is it that there are all those dragon legends?” Glen continues. “Do you think people all over the world just all made up these stories about these mythical creatures?”

“They can tell by the bones how old they are,” says Steve confidently.

“That’s pretty weird coming from an archaeologist’s son,” Glen says. “How many artifacts has Dad dug up that came with a date stamped on it? It’s pure guesswork.”

“It’s an educated guess,” argues Steve.

I’m glad the brothers are arguing now. Glen is enjoying himself. It’s obvious he does even more reading than me.

“It’s a guess based on presuppositions,” Glen says. “Some dinosaur bones have even been found with red blood cells still in them. That hardly bodes well for the millions-of-years theory.”

“I can’t believe that all those scientists are wrong!” says Steve. “And I think that you Christians are pretty ignorant for thinking you’re smarter than them all!”

I sigh but Glen grins as he shakes his head.

“Steve, if you want to explain to me how this incredibly complex world of plants, animals, people . . .” Glen starts looking around, “. . . sky, grass, sand, and trees all evolved from a single cell, without even getting into the issue of how complex a single cell is and how impossible it would be for one to just suddenly appear, well, go ahead.”

Steve turns to me.

“Ginny!” He almost sounds like he’s pleading with me. “Please tell me you’re not one of those losers who goes around saying that the Bible knows more than science.”

“There’s very little you could say that would cause me to doubt my faith,” I say. “And clearly there’s nothing I could say that would cause you to want to accept mine.” I’m still digging away in the corner. There seems to be some more of that fabric caught in the sand and now I’m getting curious.

After lunch, Steve launches on another grievance.

“The church is full of hypocrites.”

I sigh as he carries on. Julia and Glen aren’t even listening. They’re laughing and playing twenty questions.

“Why would I want to be a Christian and go around pretending to be all pious and then when nobody’s looking, do my own thing?”

“Steve, I don’t know why you would want to do that. I certainly wouldn’t want to do that.”

“You know what I mean. There are all these people pretending to be holy who are really just as bad as the rest of us.”

“Well Steve, you’d have to be specific because I haven’t met too many people like that.”

“That’s because you only see the holy side of them. You don’t know what they do when they’re alone.”

“Steve, if you want to write off all of Christianity because of some hypothetical people who do some hypothetical things when nobody else is around, go ahead. You’re looking for an excuse not to believe.”

“I’m not looking for an excuse. I’m just demonstrating how Christianity is for losers.”

Dad is passing by and he smiles.

“Christianity *is* for losers,” he says to Steve. “It’s for people who need Christ in order to have eternal life.”

I was going to mention to Dad that I think I’ve found part of an old t-shirt but he moves right along.

“So if you think you can do it on your own, go right ahead,” I can’t resist adding to Steve.

“What am I going to do with eternal life?” demands Steve. I don’t think he’s done any digging all day, he’s been so busy harassing me.

I shrug.

“So die instead. The Bible says the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life.”

“Sin, sin, sin! It’s all this talk about sin that makes me sick! What’s the big deal about sin?”

“It’s no big deal until you face God in the judgement day. Then you might find it’s somewhat of a big deal.”

“What kind of God has a judgement day where everyone has to come in front of him and get into trouble for all the bad things he’s ever done?”

“A holy God,” Glen calls out. “A just God.”

“What’s the big deal about justice?” says Steve.

“Don’t tell me you don’t like justice, Steve,” I say. “You want your kidnappers to get justice. You want there to be justice for anyone who does something nasty to you, but if you’re the one sinning you want to be left alone about it.”

“My sins don’t hurt anyone,” says Steve triumphantly.

“If you think that one through long enough, you’ll figure out it isn’t true,” I mutter. I don’t have the nerve to point out that his leaving the group that day he was abducted caused his parents unspeakable grief and anxiety.

“All sin directly or indirectly hurts someone,” says Glen. “Take away sin and we’d have paradise.”

“No, we’d still have cancer and heart disease and . . .”

“Probably not,” Glen says. “If big corporations didn’t dump their toxic waste into the environment, if food companies didn’t make products that clog up the arteries, if people did everything they could to look after each other, I doubt very much we’d die of anything but old age.”

“Would you stay out of this?” says Steve to Glen. He turns back to me. “OK, you might have a point, but still . . .”

But still . . . It drives me bonkers. I’m digging away at the t-shirt. It’s probably one of those tacky tourist ones, ‘I Survived Palmyra’.

Henry is coming around to each locus to tell us that there will be a tour of the local museum leaving about half an hour after we get back to the hotel. There’s no need to tell us archaeologists’ kids that it will be a mandatory field trip.

Obviously, the museum has a lot of artifacts from Palmyra, but when Steve hears that they have some mummies it’s only both his parents keeping a grip on his arms that prevents him from going off by himself.

The museum has other stuff too and with Henry leading us we cover a sculpture exhibit, multitudinous pottery displays, mosaics, gold and bronze artifacts, plus an extensive display on Syrian folklore. Steve is happy when we visit the mummies, but spends the rest of the tour asking Henry pseudo-intelligent questions that are subtly making fun of the whole experience.

“Henry, what sort of food did they eat off of these platters?”

“Henry, does this piece of pottery show a Canaanite

influence?”

“Henry, does this mosaic contain any warrior themes in its bold perimeter patterns?”

“Henry, what carat gold is this plate?”

“Henry, would this bowl have been used in ritual purification?”

OK, I’ll admit that coming from an archaeology family, we get to see a lot of museums, but Steve sounds as if he resents it. Liam endures it, but Glen seems to enjoy it. The funny thing is, because Glen is enjoying the museum, Julia has to pretend to too.

After the full tour, we head back to the hotel to a dinner of shish kabobs, rice and vegetables.

“What do you have over here?” Dr. Lineman asks, as he peers down into our hole. Because of Steve’s tendency to run away, Dr. Lineman is personally supervising our locus.

“I dunno,” I say. “Just a piece of old t-shirt, I guess.”

“Let me have a look,” he says, hopping down with us. He takes over my tool and begins to poke around.

“Hey, Anderson!” he calls out to my dad. “Come here for a sec!”

His voice is casual so no one is distracted from their work.

My dad finishes what he’s saying to one of the student leaders and then ambles over.

Dad hops down into the locus with us.

“I think we might have something here,” says Dr. Lineman, quietly. Dad crouches down and takes a careful look.

“Could anything that delicate have survived for so long?” he asks.

“Well, like Ginny says, it looks like a t-shirt now, but my guess is that it was a far sturdier material two thousand years ago.”

Very carefully, Dad touches the fabric.

“You’re probably right.”

Even Julia and Glen are watching the exchange between their fathers.

“I’ll get the brushes,” says Dad standing up and hopping out of the hole. It must be important if they’re going to lay aside

the rougher tools for the delicate brushes.

When Dr. Lineman skips lunch in order to continue working in our locus, the whole dig site notices and a buzz starts going around. Soon there are some students standing watching although the fact that it is just a piece of cloth sends a few of them back to their own locus.

This time Abdullah doesn't show up so obviously none of the soldiers have instructions about calling him.

"OK, this is it," says Dr. Lineman softly. Henry has been taking photos and measurements and the time has come to pull it out of the ground. At this point Dr. Lineman has put on gloves to handle whatever it is. When it's pulled out of the ground, it's obvious that the cloth is wrapped around something. Whatever it is, it's fairly small, maybe the size of a jar of peanut butter. Dad has some bubble wrap and a plastic bag ready to put it in. The find will be examined back in the hotel room. I can hardly wait.

Dr. Lineman packs the find up in one of the cases and by this time the dig day is over and we're gathering up all our stuff and getting on the bus.

There was a trip scheduled to go back to the ruins of Palmyra to see the ancient theatre, market place and banqueting hall but this gets postponed in order to examine the find.

The Linemans and the students leaders, including Henry, and of course, our family, are all gathered around the table where the artifact has been laid. Slowly and carefully, Dr. Lineman peels the fabric off of whatever's underneath. It turns out to be a small clay jar.

"It puts me in mind of the Qumran pieces," says Dad. "Though a lot smaller." Qumran is a series of caves in Israel where a bunch of first-century manuscripts were found in pots.

"You might have something there, Anderson," says Dr. Lineman as he examines the pot and then glances inside it. "I think there's something inside this . . ."

We wait as Henry hands him a slim flashlight.

"It's a scroll!" says Dr. Lineman excitedly.

CHAPTER TEN

I don't dare try to remove it, it's too delicate," says Dr. Lineman. "But we'll have to get it to a laboratory."
"I'll phone Abdullah," says Dad. "We'll probably have to take it to the university in Damascus."

By the time dinner rolls around, it's been decided that our family will be taking the scroll to Damascus tomorrow while Dr. Lineman will stay and supervise the dig. Glen begs his Dad to let him accompany us and the way his dad looks so pleased, I don't think he realizes it's as much to be with Julia as it is to be close to the scroll.

That night, after dinner, Dad is online sending a lengthy message to Uncle Ken. He's really excited about this scroll thing. I think, for an archaeologist, this is one of the most amazing things you can discover. A pot or a piece of jewellery is cool but a scroll is the best because it actually has information. With a pot, you just have to do a lot of guessing as to what it might have been used for. After he sends his email, he orders us all to bed saying we have a big day ahead of us.

We have breakfast with the students in the dining room as

usual. Then our family, along with Glen, board the mini-van for the long drive to Damascus. Julia and Glen take the back seat and immediately begin chattering about something. I'm in the middle and Dad and Mom are in the front.

Just as we're pulling out of the parking lot, Abdullah pulls in and signals Dad to roll down his window. He dramatically announces that he will be our escort to Damascus. Dad doesn't oppose the idea and Abdullah announces that he will lead since he doesn't need a map to get to Damascus.

Once we get out of town, we're on a main highway that doesn't seem designed to be scenic, although we do see a shepherd with his herd of sheep -- a very Biblical-looking scene. Dad tells us that chickens and cows are also popular to raise. We pass by some wheat fields and Dad tells us to keep our eyes open because we'll see many different kinds of crops - - fruits, vegetables, barley, cotton and tobacco.

Abdullah does pull off the main highway into a small village to pick up some steaming Arabic coffee to go. The dirt roads are rustic but the villagers are pleasant, smiling, and calling out to us in friendly Arabic as we drive through the quiet street. Abdullah stops in front of the only building that is full of life, an open-air restaurant that is packed with Arab men drinking their morning coffee. Dad doesn't get out because he doesn't want to leave the scroll, or us, unattended. But Abdullah goes ahead and buys coffee for Dad and Mom and a bag of sweets for "the children."

Once back on the highway, we pass several factories. Glen asks Dad what they might be making.

"As far as I know, Syria mainly manufactures refined petroleum, chemicals, textiles and processed foods," Dad calls back. "Oh, and precision-engineered products."

"What are precision-engineered products?" demands Julia.

Before Dad can answer, Glen launches into a detailed answer. Dad and Mom exchange an amused glance. Maybe this is preparing them for what it's going to be like to have a son-in-law.

We pass by a building that looks like a church instead of a mosque.

"Is that a church?" I ask. "I thought everyone here is

Muslim.”

“About 10% of the population is Christian,” says Dad. “The numbers are larger in the areas that have a Christian association. You know how it is in Jerusalem, all divided up into quarters and one of the quarters is Arab Christian. Your mother and I have many Arab Christian friends in Israel from the digs we worked on when you were younger.”

Mom agrees.

With Glen explaining precision-engineered products behind me and Dad and Mom reminiscing about some of their Arab Christian friends in Israel in front of me, I drift off to sleep and don't wake up until we're in the crowded streets of Damascus. The streets are bustling, shops are doing a brisk business, women in their long dresses are moving along the streets with purpose, men in their dress shirts and western-style pants are milling about, some shopping, some just standing around talking.

“I'm grateful for Abdullah,” says Dad. “Reading a map and manoeuvring through this traffic would have been a nightmare. It's enough of a challenge just to keep him in front of me.”

Abdullah takes us to the old city, winding down several side-streets until we stop in front of a large stone home with a black iron fence around it.

“This doesn't look like part of the university,” says Dad as we follow Abdullah. Abdullah has gotten out of his car to swing the gate open and we follow him up the driveway after a pause to shut the gate.

“Welcome! Welcome!” he says as we get out of the van. “I bring you to the house of my friend Dr. Sabina Mansoor. She is an archaeology professor at the university and is an expert on Palmyra.”

“I think we may need a lab to remove the scroll from the pot,” says Dad.

“She does much work here at home,” says Abdullah. “In fact, several of her students live here as well and assist her. Be assured, Dr. Kent, she has the proper facilities.”

We are heading for the large wood door at the centre of the house. Abdullah reaches it first and rings a doorbell.

The door is opened by a young Arabic man wearing a casual

white shirt and jeans.

“Sabbaah al-khayr!” Abdullah greets him. “Dr. Mansoor is expecting us.”

“Sabaah an-nuur,” the young man nods. “Ahlan wa sahan.”

“Hello and welcome,” Abdullah translates for us.

“Ta’al,” the man says. “Come.”

We follow him into the house. From the outside I would have expected a rich interior with plush carpets and expensive furniture, but the house is decorated modestly. We are in a foyer but I can see into the living room and the dining room. The floors are bare and the furniture is a simple white wood. The living room is carpeted and several large cushions are scattered around the room. The walls are a pale green with framed black and white photos of archaeological digs neatly arranged in a line in each room.

At the dining room table sit several young Arab men drinking coffee with books and papers spread out in front of them. Down the hallway I can see an older Arab woman working in what looks like a kitchen.

The young man directs us to the living room where Dad, Mom and Abdullah take the long couch up against one wall and we younger people take the cushions on the floor.

Dr. Mansoor doesn't keep us waiting.

She comes in smiling.

She is modestly dressed in a long skirt and a dark blouse with hair pulled back into a bun. She looks about the same age as Dad and Mom.

“Hello there!” she says, shaking Dad and Mom's hand and smiling at Abdullah before sitting down. “Abdullah has told me much about you and I am privileged to be the one to examine your finding.”

“Dr. Mansoor has studied at Oxford,” says Abdullah proudly. “She is one of our finest archaeologists.”

“I have worked for many years at Palmyra,” says Dr. Mansoor. “I have heard all about your escapades with the treasure of Tadmor.”

“Dr. Mansoor,” Dad says, leaning forward. “Do you believe that we found the treasure of Tadmor?”

Dr. Mansoor laughs.

“My students have been debating that for several days now. We are the ones who examined the cup. I will say this, it *is* a treasure.”

“I think this may be a greater treasure,” says Dad, handing her the box that contains the pot with the scroll. “From an archaeological standpoint, that is.”

Carefully Dr. Mansoor takes the box.

“Come,” she says standing up. “We will go downstairs to the lab. You are, no doubt, very eager to examine your find.”

We all head downstairs, along with a few of the students.

The lab takes up the entire basement and while it sort of resembles a medical laboratory in its layout, the furniture is all wood and the walls are covered in photos and charts. There is a big comfy couch at the end of the room, which Julia, Glen and I sit on while the others gather around one of the tables.

Dr. Mansoor puts on gloves to handle the small pot. One of her students opens a drawer and gets out something that looks like a pair of tweezers and hands them to Dr. Mansoor. Carefully, she begins to pull out the scroll. She's doing it with such care that the whole procedure takes about ten minutes.

When it's finally out, another student gets something that looks like a Ziploc bag, except that it's long and rectangular. Using the tweezers and a finger, the delicate scroll is unrolled and then quickly inserted into the bag and sealed.

All the adults breathe a sigh of relief.

“It's beautiful,” says Dr. Mansoor. “Perfectly intact. My guess is that it's written in first-century koine Greek. I'm not an expert in the language but one of my students is.” She turns to one of the students.

“Ahmed, please go get Youssef.”

After Ahmed goes upstairs, she turns to Dad and Mom.

“Youssef is a Christian, like me. You are also Christian?”

Dad and Mom look thrilled as they nod. She smiles.

Youssef is already hurrying down the stairs.

Dr. Mansoor waves him over.

“First-century Greek, Youssef. Can you read it?”

Eagerly Youssef leans down on the table to examine the scroll.

He says something to Dr. Mansoor.

“It is written with marvellous clarity,” she translates. Youssef begins to read out loud in Greek.

A strange look passes across his face.

“In English, if possible, please,” says Abdullah.

“What is it?” asks Dr. Mansoor, who has noticed the expression on Youssef's face.

He begins to talk rapidly in Arabic. Dr. Mansoor's eyes widen.

“You must tell them!” she interrupts.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I will read and translate,” says Youssef, in a thick accent. He begins to read slowly. “There was a man who had two sons. The one who was younger said to his father, Father give me my part of the estate. So he divided his property between them . . .”

Mom gasps.

She and Dad look at each other in amazement.

“It’s the story of the prodigal son!” exclaims Dad looking stunned.

“This is remarkable, yes?!” says Dr. Mansoor.

“What is the prodigal son?” asks Abdullah.

“It’s a parable told by Jesus,” says Dad turning towards him. “This is a first-century copy of a parable told by Jesus. The scroll itself is priceless. But it also gives us a hint as to how the stories were spread and it’s proof of how early and how far they were spread.”

“Shall I read more?” asks Youssef. He looks eager.

“Of course, of course,” says Dr. Mansoor, waving him on to continue.

“Not long after that the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there wasted his wealth in wild

living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, how many of my father's hired servants have food to spare and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired men.”

“This is remarkably accurate,” says Dad. “It's a fantastic testimony to the preservation of Scripture.

Dr. Mansoor nods.

“So he got up and went to his father,” continues Youssef. “But while he was still a long way off his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”

“This is a very interesting story,” says Abdullah. “You say Jesus told it?”

Dad nods.

“The son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.”

“I think he will be jealous,” predicts Abdullah.

Abdullah seems to really be enjoying this story. This is the first time he's heard it and for a tiny moment it gives me an idea of what it must have been like to hear Jesus's stories as he told them. I guess I take the Bible for granted but the way Abdullah is listening to Youssef, it makes me think the people were probably gathered around Jesus, getting into the story, not wanting to miss a single detail, some even scribbling down

notes to take home to their families.

“Your brother has come, he replied. And your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound. The older brother became angry and refused to go in.”

Abdullah nods his agreement to this.

“So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, Look! All these years I have been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders! Yet, you never even gave me a young goat so that I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him! My son, the father said. You are always with me and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.”

Youssef looks up to signify the end of the story.

Abdullah nods enthusiastically.

“It is very good, yes? The younger brother, he is foolish but he is smart enough to go home to his father. The older brother has been with his father all along but never knew how good it was in his father’s home. There is much to think about in this,” says Abdullah. “So this is a story your Jesus told? Maybe I should read more of his stories?”

Dr. Mansoor smiles.

“They are all very special,” she says.

I guess I just took the stories of Jesus for granted. I've never met anyone who didn't already know them backwards and forwards so it's fascinating to see someone hear one for the first time. I never knew they were this powerful.

Someone upstairs calls down something in Arabic

“Lunch-time,” says Dr. Mansoor. “Life does not stop, even for priceless artifacts. Please stay and be my guests.”

We agree and after packing up the scroll and locking it in a safe, we go upstairs to join the other students at the long dining room table.

Abdullah tells us that we are eating one of the national dishes called kubbeh which is minced semolina and meat shaped into balls with lots of onions and nuts in them. There is also yabrak, leaves filled with minced meat and rice. I think the

leaves are grape leaves. It's all quite tasty. For dessert, there is a large bowl of fruit and many cups of Turkish coffee.

Over the coffee the adults are discussing the impact that the scroll is going to have on the archaeological world as well as the Christian world. Even Julia and Glen are talking to each other about it.

Dad doesn't mention it but this find is going to make him and Dr. Lineman famous. He'll get to write articles for everything from scholarly archaeology reviews to evangelical magazines, not to mention the lectures at all the universities. But then Dr. Mansoor says something that raises the level of importance of this find to one beyond all expectation.

"It is just a theory . . ." says Dr. Mansoor, slowly, allowing herself time to think. "That perhaps this is the treasure of Tadmor . . . Could this be what the Greek merchant was bringing home to his wife?"

"Of course!" says Mom, her eyes bright. "The teachings of Jesus would be life-transforming! The man would be very excited at what he was bringing home to his wife!"

Dad is more cautious. But he agrees that the legend of the treasure of Tadmor certainly merits closer study in relationship to this find.

Now that we know what we have, Dad doesn't want to travel around Syria with a priceless artifact in his position. We wait in Dr. Mansoor's living room until the time when Dr. Lineman is back at the hotel, then Dad phones. Abdullah has already rushed off to tell whoever he tells in his government about the find. Dr. Lineman, however, wants to see the scroll before it gets turned over to the government so he says that he will be leaving immediately to come examine it, bringing his wife and Steve with him. Henry and Liam will be left in charge.

Dr. Lineman suggests we rent a hotel in Damascus but Dr. Mansoor won't hear of it and says there is plenty of room for all of us, not to mention facilities for examining the scroll.

While Dr. Lineman is hiring a car and hurrying to Damascus, I wonder what we're going to do since none of us have even packed a toothbrush. Turns out Mom thought ahead and threw together a bag with a change of clothes for all of us.

She assures Glen that his parents will bring something for him. He doesn't seem too concerned.

The day is getting late and it's time for another meal. This one is a lot lighter. It consists of some salads and pita bread.

The dining room table is full and everyone seems to know about the scroll so Dad is bombarded with questions about where the scroll was found, how old it is, the condition of it. Abdullah shows up around coffee time and wiggles in beside Dad. Since I had been the one beside him before Abdullah showed up, I can hear Abdullah tell Dad that someone from some Syrian museum will be here in the morning, a friend of his. Something tells me that Dad and Dr. Lineman will be getting no sleep tonight. With Dr. Mansoor's help, they will probably want to photograph the scroll thoroughly in order to do more studying back home.

The adults go back downstairs after dinner, including many of the students. Glen, Julia and I go into Dr. Mansoor's large living room and lounge around on the cushions. I wish I'd brought a book because when we turn the TV on, it's all Arabic and it all looks like news. One station has an outdoor concert with a full orchestra and a man singing catchy Arabic songs. Julia and Glen get into that and watch it until a news show comes on. Then they get back to their discussion of the story of their lives. Glen notices I'm bored and offers me something from his knapsack -- a thick book about life in Roman times.

I read until I'm drowsy and next thing I know I'm being woken up by loud knocking on the front door. The windows that used to brighten up the room are now pitch black and the only reason I can see anything is because someone has turned a lamp on. Even Julia and Glen had fallen asleep.

"I'll see who it is," says Glen, getting up. "It's probably my dad."

He's right.

Dr. Lineman says a brief hello and then he and his wife rush downstairs after Glen tells him where everyone is.

Steve joins us in the living room.

"Hey!" He says sitting down beside me. "Miss me?"

"Truthfully? No."

“Ah, don’t tell me you’ve been having fun all by yourself with these two lovebirds here in front of you,” he says nodding towards Julia and Glen. They blush, but they don’t get mad and just decide to ignore him. With Steve, that’s probably the best strategy.

“Actually, I was sleeping,” I say. “And it’s my plan to carry on.”

The room is cool now, but someone has left us a pile of blankets on one of the cushions, so I grab one, pull it over me and stretch back out on the floor.

“I can’t believe I came all the way to Damascus to *sleep*,” says Steve.

“Like you had any choice in the matter,” I mumble. “Your parents made you come.”

Steve sighs and grabs a blanket and a cushion.

“Sleep it is.”

We wake up when the light starts coming into the room. I don’t think the adults have gotten any sleep because now I can hear them all talking in the dining room.

For breakfast there is a platter of fresh cucumbers and tomatoes, some pita bread and a big bowl of fruit yoghurt. I take a bit of everything and also try some of the mint tea in a large pot.

Mom gives us a big smile and I take a seat beside her.

After breakfast, everybody gets a chance to change into a fresh set of clothes because the representative from the Syrian museum is going to be here, as well as a reporter from the national newspaper.

“How do we know the guy is from the museum?” Steve is saying to anyone who will listen. “I mean, some guy could have heard about the scroll, decides he’s going to have it for himself, bumps off the museum guy and comes impersonating him. And we like dummies, hand it over.”

Some of the students think he’s funny, others seem kind of scared by him.

Dr. Mansoor puts an end to all of Steve’s speculation.

“Dr. Hasan is an old friend of mine. He’s been in charge of antiquities at the museum for more than twenty years. As you

will see, he would be very difficult to impersonate.”

Dr. Hasan comes shortly after breakfast and Dr. Mansoor is right. He’s quite a character.

He’s 5’4”, about sixty years old, with wild bushy grey hair and a lively personality. Even Steve seems subdued in his presence.

“Yes?! It is a big find, yes?!” He shakes Dr. Lineman’s and Dad’s hands. All the ladies receive a theatrical bow as they are introduced. He turns back to Dad and Dr. Lineman. “Yes! You are now big archaeologist, yes?! How you say, household name? You will be famous here in Syria, yes? TV interviews? Yes? Well now, let me see! Let me see this wonderful scroll I have heard so much about! Perhaps I will become a Christian too after hearing all about it.”

Christian *too*? It takes me a few moments to realize what he means. Then it dawns on me. Abdullah is also a friend of Dr. Hasan. He’s the one who contacted Dr. Hasan. Abdullah must have become a Christian!

Once again, the adults are back downstairs with the scroll. I wonder how little Dr. Hasan is expected to take care of such an important find. I mean, maybe Steve’s right. Maybe someone will try to bump him off . . .

But then I look out the front window and I see the car that Dr. Hasan came in. It’s not big, but the chauffeur who drove it is. He’s about 6’6” with some serious bulging muscles. Of course, Steve comes up with some elaborate story about the guy only being employed by Dr. Hasan about two months and he’s really a member of the Mossad who’s going to take off with the scroll as soon as they’re out of our sight. Never mind that the Mossad has no reason to be interested in a scroll that records one of the stories of Jesus.

I sigh and return to the floor with the book I’ve borrowed from Glen. Julia and Glen have turned on the TV and are watching an Arabic kid’s show with puppets and singing. Steve makes fun of the show, then he makes fun of Julia and Glen for watching the show, then he sits down and watches it with them.

At ten o’clock the reporter arrives and goes downstairs to take pictures. After talking with Dr. Mansoor and our dads,

there is a group photo in the living room. Dr. Hasan and the scroll leave shortly after that. Then it is time for us to say our good-byes to Dr. Mansoor and head back to Tadmor.

Steve seems immensely disappointed that nothing traumatic has happened.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Well, the archaeological dig is over for us. It carries on for another month for Dr. Lineman and the students but Dad has been asked to begin promoting the scroll. As if it needs any promotion!

The Syrian national newspaper got an exclusive, but after that, the scroll made headlines all over the world. Now scholars and Christians are demanding more information and since Dr. Lineman has to carry on with the dig, Dad is the one who's going back to North America to discuss the scroll in about a million interviews.

As we pack our bags in our hotel room, I'm relieved that I'll never see Steve again. Julia and Glen aren't so thrilled but they're bravely promising each other that they'll write and keep in touch.

Abdullah drives us to the airport in Damascus. It's an exaggeration to say that he has become a Christian. But he's very interested in learning more.

On the long drive, he's telling Dad and Mom that he's going to read more of Jesus's stories and then maybe read some books about the history of Christianity in Syria. Dad and Mom answer a lot of his questions about Christianity and the Bible.

“But this resurrection I’ve heard about, it is a myth, yes?”

“No, Abdullah, it’s not. It’s a historical fact. The Jewish leaders at that time tried to cover it up and say that the disciples stole the body, but that would have been impossible. Jesus was in a sealed tomb, guarded by Roman soldiers and at that time the disciples were hiding out in fear after being associated with a leader who was crucified,” Dad says. He loves this topic. “After his resurrection, Mary Magdalene met Jesus outside the tomb and told her to go tell the disciples what had happened. When they returned, they found the tomb empty.”

“What happened to the soldiers guarding the tomb?” asks Abdullah.

“The Jewish leaders paid them to say they fell asleep. A bunch of nonsense. Any Roman soldier caught sleeping on the job would have been executed. When Jesus rose from the dead there was a great earthquake and a couple of angels rolled away the stone in front of the tomb. The soldiers fled in terror. In fact, that’s just one of the many humorous things about the story. The ladies came to the tomb thinking that they could anoint Jesus’s body with spices. Instead, they encounter an angel sitting on the stone that had been rolled away telling them he’s not here, he’s risen.”

“Very interesting,” says Abdullah. “I must read more about this too.”

Dad agrees. “It was the greatest day in history.”

When we get to the airport, Abdullah waits with us while we check in our baggage. When it is clear that our flight is going to leave on time, he hugs Dad, shakes Mom’s hand and kind of grins at me and Julia. Then he leaves with promises to email.

We board our plane and settle in for the long flight. The scroll stays in Syria but we’re taking back so many memories.

I open up my knapsack.

A note falls out.

“Your assignment, should you choose to accept it, is to make contact with an antiquities dealer in North America and negotiate a more than fair price for the scroll. (Enough to afford a small surfing hut somewhere in Caribbean with

enough left over to live on until I'm old enough to join the Canadian Central Intelligence Services.) I will work on this end to re-acquire the scroll and smuggle it out at the earliest possible time. Together we can fight against the forces of tyranny and injustice. Yours in espionage, Steve.”

THE END

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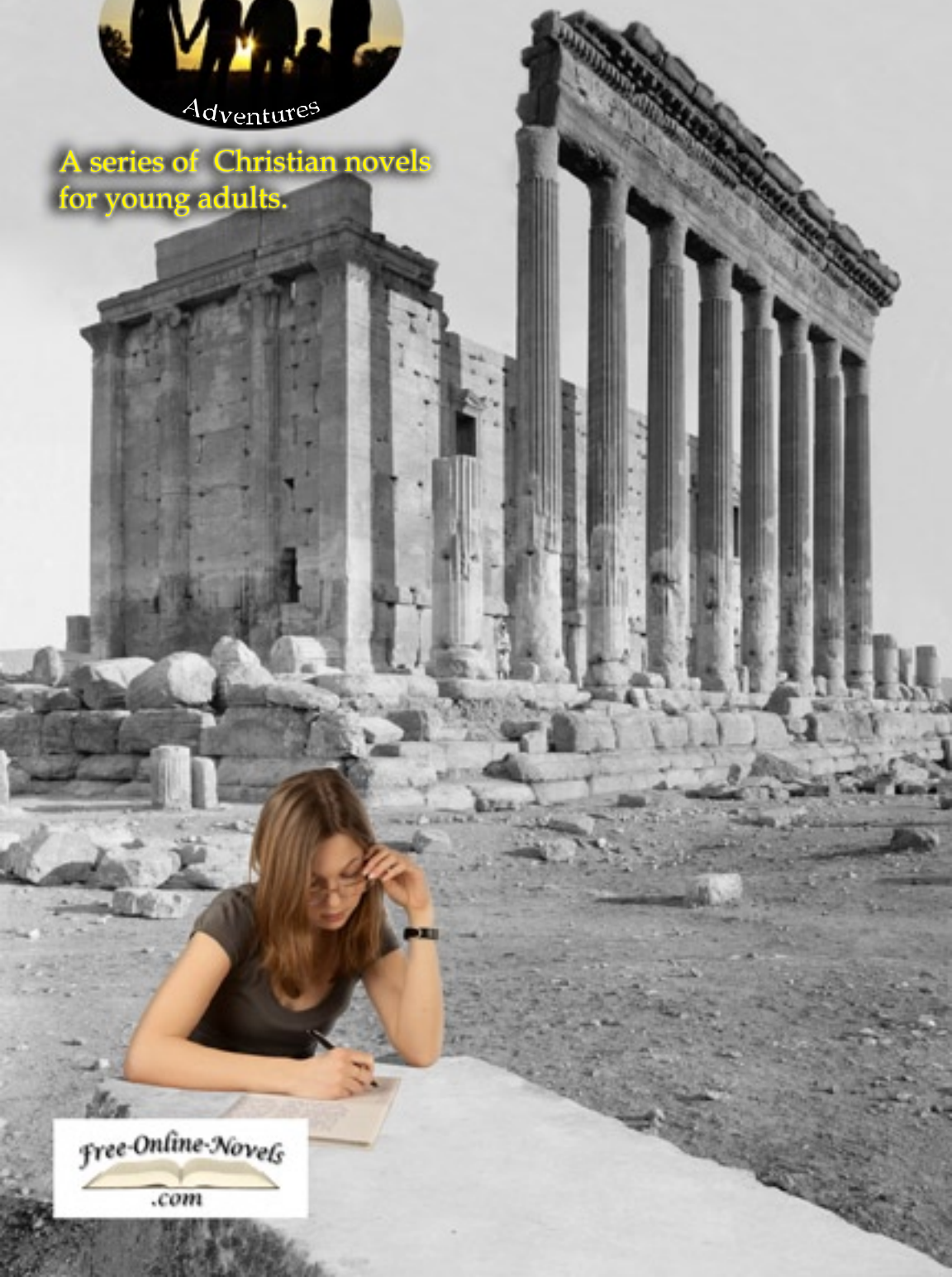
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