

The Cache of Baghdad

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a kent family adventure

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~ CHAPTER ONE ~

“Yes...yes, I agree. Yes, it would be good to have some archaeological evidence of the Christian presence there...I'd be absolutely delighted...!”

My dad is on the phone. Usually he's pretty calm so this outburst gets all of our attention. My sister, Julia, and I exchange glances. Mom looks up from where she's giving David a diaper change on the couch.

“Yes, I agree! Uh-huh... Uh-huh.... Well... Yes, yes, you can definitely count me in. Yes, definitely. Ummmm....” Dad glances around the living room and his eyes end up on me and Julia. “OK, put me down for two assistants. Ginny and Julia Kent. Yes, they're my daughters. Ages 16 and 14 but very experienced...”

Julia and I look at each other, this time with excitement. Something is up!

Dad's Dr. Anderson Kent, world-renowned archaeologist, and when he goes on a dig, it's usually somewhere exotic. His specialty is Bible artifacts but we've also been to the Czech Republic to explore a cave with dinosaur pictures and to England to discover the truth about an ancient sketch of Jesus. Our latest adventure was in Israel, when we went on a search for the sword of Goliath.

But since Mom gave birth to David in January, things have been quiet. We've kept our passports up-to-date, but it's autumn now and I honestly didn't believe we'd use them this year.

“So, dear, what was that all about?” Mom sounds concerned as Dad hangs up the phone.

“Well,” he says slowly. “I hope this won't be upsetting, but you have to keep in mind that this is an opportunity of a lifetime...”

“You had an offer...?” Mom looks half-pleased..

“Yes, dear, I did.” Dad turns to us. “Girls, better brush up on your Arabic! We're going to Jordan!”

“Jordan!” I gasp. “That's great!”

I love the Middle East with it's exotic food and souks and friendly people.

“Uncle Ken has gotten it all in motion. There will be a small team of Canadian archaeologists – myself and the girls, some U. of T. students, and headed up by Dr. Ali Afak and his assistants. Dr. Afak is a colleague of Uncle Ken's and a specialist in Iraqi archeology. But he's also extremely knowledgeable about Jordanian archeology because there's so much overlap in the area.”

My uncle, Dr. Nathaniel Kent, teaches at University of Toronto. In high school, everyone just called him Kent and gradually that got shortened to Ken. He and my dad are partners, but Uncle Ken rarely travels, instead, providing support while we're out in the field.

"That was Dr. Afak on the phone," continues Dad. "He's just finalizing that we're going to be part of the team. Obviously, I don't think we should take an eight month old baby along, but the girls will be fine."

"Oh, I don't know, Anderson," says Mom. We know she's getting serious when she calls him Anderson. Normally she calls him Andy or dear. "The Middle East isn't exactly calm these days..."

"Helena," says my dad, slowly. "I wouldn't take the girls along unless I thought that this was going to be the experience of a lifetime. Besides, we're going to Pella. It's about 80 kilometres north of Amman. It should be very quiet. I'm thrilled to be part of this expedition. In proportion to the size of the ancient city, very little archaeological work has been done in that area."

"I've never heard of Pella," Julia says. "I thought you only do Bible stuff."

"Pella is indirectly part of Christian history," explains Dad. "It was one of the cities of the Decapolis on the east side of the Jordan. Jesus told his followers that when they saw Jerusalem surrounded by armies that they should flee to the mountains. According to Eusebius, in the late 60's, that's exactly what the Christians did. Specifically, they went to Pella. That's why they were spared from the horrors of Jerusalem falling to the Romans in 70 A.D."

"Has anything Christian been found in Pella?" I ask.

"Good question, Ginny," says Dad. "No, it hasn't. So that's why I'm eager to go. I don't expect to find anything in one season, but if the dig gets extended to a few more seasons we may actually find some proof of a Christian presence there. Oh, and to add to the excitement..." Dad's eyes sparkle.

"Uh-huh?" I ask eagerly.

"After the dig is over, we can take a few weeks to follow the tracks of my favourite archaeologist-turned-adventurer, T.E. Lawrence!"

"Lawrence of Arabia?" I ask.

"That's right. A lot of his rides during the Arab revolt took place in Jordan. Maybe we can rent some camels..."

"I'm not going to ride across some desert to take Aqaba," interrupts Julia.

Dad laughs.

"Well, even I want to avoid the Great Nafud Desert."

"When do we leave?" asks Julia.

"Well, we're going on Monday."

"Monday!" gasps Mom. "That's six days from now!"

"I know, but Dr. Afak has already received the permission to excavate so he's eager to get over there."

"Well..." says Mom, slowly. "I'll miss you all terribly, but you're probably right. It will be an experience the girls will never forget and I don't want to deny them it."

“Oh, Helena!” says Dad, sounding grateful as he leans down to kiss her cheek. “You’re an angel!”

“No, dear,” says Mom, ruefully getting up to put David’s diaper in the nearby garbage pail. “I’m not an angel. But I’ll be praying that the angels are watching over you every second you’re there.”

Six days later, we’re on a plane to Amman, Jordan.

Dad and Dr. Afak, who are sitting across the aisle from me and Julia, haven’t stopped talking since we took off from the Pearson International Airport in Toronto. It’s pretty heavy archaeological stuff, the early history of Mesopotamia going right back to the time of the Sumerians and Akkadians and seeming to cover everything from Abraham to the Hittites to the Babylonians to the Assyrians. Right now they’re talking about Nineveh and the bronze head of King Sargon discovered there.

Usually I enjoy historical stuff, but my head is starting to swim and I’m easily distracted by the lady sitting beside Julia in the window seat. Her name is Kelly McHammond and she works for the U.N. She’s going onto Baghdad, as an Arabologist, to do some kind of negotiation work. I guess her job prevents her from being too specific. She’s in her late 20’s or early 30’s and is wearing a long plain dark blue skirt and a white blouse. Her brown hair is pulled back in pony-tail. Her face isn’t beautiful but she gets very animated when she talks about Arab things and that makes her attractive. Right now she and Julia are talking about how good-looking Arab men are.

“I know,” says my sister. “I totally noticed that when we were in Syria. There were these really hot-looking guards assigned to protect us at the dig. I wished that I knew a little Arabic so I could actually talk to them.”

“Well, most Arabs learn English in school, but it’s easy to learn a few phrases. Try this, someone may wish peace upon you. He might say, *as-salam alaykum*. You can reply by saying, *wa-alaykum, as-salam*.”

“*Wa-alaykum as-salam*,” repeats Julia.

“Great,” says Kelly, twisting in her seat to face Julia. “OK. Someone might greet you with a good morning. He’ll say *sabah al-hair*. You reply by saying *sabah al-noor*. It basically means, morning the light. It’s the traditional reply.”

“*Sabah al-noor*,” says Julia.

Kelly and Julia practice a few more times before moving on to yes (*na-am*), no (*la*), please (*min fadlak*) and thank you (*shukran*).

When our meals arrive, Julia says *shukran* to the flight attendant and she and Kelly exchange pleased glances at her progress.

“So,” says Julia, conversationally, after our meal is finished. “How did you become an Arabologist?”

Kelly obviously likes the question and takes a sip of coffee before answering.

“Well, it all started with a book I read about Gertrude Bell when I was in my teens. I guess nowadays most people haven’t heard of Gertrude Bell. Which is kind of strange because she had a lot to do with the making of Iraq. She left her comfortable life in England and traveled all through the Middle East in the late 1800’s, early 1900’s. She learned Arabic, Turkish and Persian and did a lot of archaeological work in the course of

her travels and explorations. During World War I she ended up working for the British and staying on in Iraq after it was created by the British.”

“What do you mean, created by the British?” asks Julia.

“Well, Julia,” says Kelly, slowly stirring her cup of coffee as she adds more sugar. “How it worked was the European powers divided up the Middle East after World War I. Although the Arabs had been promised their independence in exchange for fighting the Turks, Britain and France still wanted to be there controlling things. Before that, Iraq was called Mesopotamia but the British drew up borders and created Iraq. They also created Palestine and Jordan.”

“I didn’t know that,” says Julia politely.

“Here,” says Kelly, “I’ll teach you some more Arabic.”

The in-flight movie interrupts Julia and Kelly’s Arabic lessons and after that we all try to get some sleep. It’s not easy and after wiggling around and thinking I’m never going to get some rest, I’m surprised when the flight attendant comes around with a “good morning” and a pot of Turkish coffee.

After that, it’s a quick breakfast and we’re folding up our trays and putting our seats in the upright position for the descent into Amman, Jordan.

Just as everyone starts unbuckling their seat-belts, there is a commotion at the front of the plane. Suddenly, there are about ten men, all with keffiyahs covering most of their faces, swarming throughout the plane. They’re armed with guns.

I don’t know if I scream, but some people do.

Julia clutches my hand. Suddenly, I wish I didn’t have the aisle seat.

The men are moving throughout the plane, until they all seem to reach predesignated positions. When they stop, one of the men who has stayed up at the front calls out in accented English, “Sit still and no one will hurt you. We are telling the pilot that after he refuels, he will take us to Baghdad.”

There is a gasp throughout the plane and people begin to mutter.

I gather that nobody else, except for Kelly, wants to go to Baghdad.

Since the men don’t seem to care whether anyone talks, the talking continues. Dad reaches across the aisle to give my hand a squeeze. It helps me come back to earth. For the last few minutes I’ve been paralyzed, holding my breath.

“How did they get on board?” Dad asks softly.

“Probably with the help of a flight attendant,” replies Dr. Afak. “Plus, I imagine security is a bit of a problem in Amman now. They’re swamped with Iraqi refugees. Jordan and Syria are the only two countries allowing Iraqi refugees right now.”

After the initial burst of talking, most people settle down. I see people with prayer beads and other people have pulled out small books to read, probably Bibles and Qurans.

I close my eyes and just pray. My brain is so cloudy I don’t even know what I pray, but I think it’s mostly about God keeping us safe.

I’m not sure how much time passes, but suddenly the plane is taxiing out again and we’re taking off.

The flight to Baghdad is only an hour, but it passes slowly. The men sat down for the take-off, but they’re back in the aisles with their guns for the flight. I imagine that the

flight usually provides a drink and bag of peanuts, but for this one, the flight attendants stay in their seats like everyone else.

From what little I can see out of the window, all that we pass over is desert.

When the men take seats and buckle their seat-belts, I know that we're getting close.

Dad is leaning over Dr. Afak to look out the window.

"I don't understand," he says. "Shouldn't we be descending? Isn't that Baghdad below us? We're still at about 30,000 feet..."

Dr. Afak looks nervous.

"I haven't been back to Iraq for awhile," he says. "But I've read about it..."

Suddenly, the plane seems to tilt forward and I feel my stomach hit my throat.

It's as if we're not flying horizontal but have suddenly gone vertical. Even a roller-coaster isn't as intense.

People are screaming. Some are calling for Allah, some for Jesus. I'm probably screaming. I really don't know. I feel sick. I've never moved so fast and with such sickening intensity.

Julia grabs my hand.

The plane is free-falling straight to the ground!

~ CHAPTER TWO ~

At the last minute, the pilot pulls up and straightens out the plane. I wouldn't have thought it possible if I hadn't lived it.

"What was *that*?" gasps Dad. "Are you girls OK?" He turns to look at us.

"I think so," I say weakly.

Julia nods. She looks like she might vomit.

"*That* was what I was trying to explain," says Dr. Afak. He pulls a handkerchief out of his pocket and wipes the perspiration off of his forehead. "It's a little trick the pilots flying into Baghdad pull in order not to get shot down by Iraqi insurgents."

"*Shot down*?" says Dad. "But we're on a plane that's been hijacked!"

"Not all factions are on the same side, Dr. Kent," says Dr. Afak. "This is a civil war."

Dad nods and leans back in his chair, looking exhausted.

After braking on the tarmac, the plane is now calmly heading for one of the large buildings of the Baghdad International Airport.

Nobody has to ask us to stay in our seats.

The men get out into the aisle and after about half an hour, we're being hustled off the plane.

"This could be tricky," mutters Dr. Afak. "Camp Victory is right beside the airport. I hope we don't all get gunned down in the cross-fire."

Dad looks grim, but he takes mine and Julia's hands, and even though that's something we haven't done since we were little girls, I grip him tightly.

Now that we're off the plane, I can see that we're about two hundred people.

We're standing in a quiet airport. I don't know if it's like that all the time or if the airport has just been cleared because of this hijacking.

"Passports!" calls out the lead hijacker.

Nervously, people shuffle through their pockets and purses and pull out passports. The hijackers pass through the small groups of people, glancing quickly at the documents.

"Jordanian, go! You, stay. You, stay. Iraqi, go!..."

The people who are told to go, look up with disbelief, but then their terrified eyes begin to shine as they realize that they've been released. Individuals and whole families begin to hurry towards the glass doors that lead to bright daylight, almost as if they're

afraid the hijackers will change their minds before they can reach the sanctuary of the outdoors.

“The Iraqis and Jordanians are being released,” says Dr. Afak, urgency in his voice. “That means I’ll be told to go. But I’ll be doing everything I can for you. God be with you, Dr. Kent!”

He barely finishes speaking before the hijackers come to us.

“Iraqi, go! Iraqi go!”

Dr. Afak and one of the University of Toronto students are pointed toward the glass doors.

“Stay, stay, stay,” is the quick verdict for the Kent family passports.

When the hijackers are done, only about 25 people are left, including Kelly.

The rest of us are led away from the glass door and, surrounded by the men with guns, are escorted down a series of hallways until we come to an unobtrusive dark doorway. It leads outside.

For one moment, the light is dazzling.

I’m blinded.

But then the heat hits me.

It’s such a cliché to say that it feels like an oven, but that’s the only way to describe it. It’s like opening up an oven to pull out a tray of cookies, except that instead of closing the door again, we have to walk out into it.

It’s a small parking lot and there are two battered white vans that are waiting for us. Quickly, the hijackers hustle us into the vans and then one man hops into the passenger seat and turns the gun around to face us.

The vans don’t have seats which is why about thirteen people can fit in the back just sitting on the floor. All we have is our carry-on luggage which has to go on our laps. Thankfully, when the engine comes on, so does air-conditioning, even if it will take a while to kick in.

The vans take off at a high speed.

“Greetings, everyone!” says the man from the passenger seat. “My name is Imad. I’ll be your guide today. Since you are all foreign to Iraq, I would like to first point out to you Camp Victory.” He waves his hand in a general direction. It’s kind of hard for us to see anything from the back of a van that doesn’t have windows. “A symbol of my country’s occupation. We will be taking you down the Highway of Death, where nine of my fellow freedom fighters have given their lives in fighting the occupiers. The first checkpoint we will pass through is coming up, known as Checkpoint 1.”

The driver begins to accelerate.

“Of course, we will not be stopping. We have informed the Americans that we have two vehicles full of foreigners, so hopefully they will not blow us to bits.”

At this point, we are going about as fast as a van can go and even Imad turns around in his seat to watch the road ahead.

I think we must hit a barrier of some sort because suddenly something flies up in front of the windshield, but it doesn’t break the window and we keep going.

“You will be perfectly safe as long as you stay with us,” says Imad, turning around again. “If you act up, however, there will be one simple punishment. We will simply open the door and leave you in the street.”

A few people exchange glances with one another.

“You think maybe that would be a good thing? Your freedom? I assure you, in Iraq it would be your death sentence. Foreigners are not safe. Women not wearing the hijab are not safe.”

Imad glances at the few women in the van who thought they were going to Jordan where the clothing style is relaxed and women aren’t required to wear the traditional head-covering. His eyes seem to linger on me and Julia.

“We have a special place for you to stay while we work out the details of your release with the Americans. It’s very simple. We want our brothers and sisters released. Their only crime has been that they do not like to live under foreign occupation. Hopefully, for your sake, the Americans will be reasonable.”

Imad turns back to the front and he and the driver begin talking in Arabic.

If Kelly were here she’d know what they were saying, but she’s in the other van.

“Dad...” Julia says softly, leaning forward. “What are we going to do?”

“Nothing. Just sit still. And don’t worry.”

“*Don’t worry?*”

Dad grins at her reaction and it’s reassuring to see him smile.

“Yes, don’t worry. It wouldn’t do any good anyway, would it?”

Julia thinks about this and then shakes her head.

“I guess not.”

The ride in the van seems long and despite the air-conditioning, hot.

Mostly our fellow passengers are quiet, though occasionally there is a whisper exchanged. Imad glances back now and then but seems to think we’re not plotting anything.

There are a lot of checkpoints but at each one, Imad leans out the window and yells something, and then we are waved on through by Iraqi soldiers.

“I think we’re part of something bigger than we realize,” says Dad softly. “No one’s trying to stop us. Obviously this has been well-planned.”

Another man sitting on the floor across from us nods.

“This is unusual, even for Iraq,” he says. He’s a middle-aged man, dressed well in a dark suit and a white shirt and he has an Arabic accent. “It’s pretty lawless here. Each checkpoint is manned by different factions and yet these guys have successfully passed though each one, even the American ones.”

“Life is cheap in Iraq,” says an older woman in a pantsuit with a European accent, sounding fearful. “We will not survive this. We are hostages. The Americans don’t want hostages dictating their policy. Someone will gun us down before we become a political nuisance.”

“Have a little faith,” says the man in the dark suit.

“We’re not dead yet,” agrees another young man, wearing a white shirt and white pants who looks Indian.

When we reach our destination, Imad hops out of the van and comes around to open the back doors.

“Welcome to your new home!” he says. “It’s not the Green Zone so it might be hard at first for you foreigners.”

There’s a lot of muttering as people step out into the oppressive heat. Within a minute I feel like a carrot being steamed, I’m so moist.

We are directed towards an elegant, yet dilapidated looking building. It has obviously survived a few direct hits from some explosives, but it still looks structurally sound, at least parts of it.

I see roadblocks. At the entrance to many roads are piles of rocks or wooden barriers or big oil drums, anything to make it impossible for a car to enter.

“Everybody’s just trying to survive,” explains Imad. I think he actually sees me looking around and knows what I’m looking at. “It means we try to keep strangers out of our neighbourhoods and off our roads. Nobody has anything worth stealing anymore, but some of us cling to the idea that someday this may be all over and we can start rebuilding our lives. I’m driving around this beat up old van hoping that I won’t get hijacked. I sold my car to a family who was planning on going back to Kuwait. I hope they made it. Nobody can be sure about anything, anymore.”

He sounds human. Not like a fanatical terrorist. I think it’s at that moment that I start to feel OK about things. These men may be desperate but God didn’t let us fall into the hands of evil.

“Is it possible...?” Dad is looking around at the building. “Is this a *palace*?”

I look more carefully at the outside of the building. It *is* large.

“It’s not Baghdad Palace, if that’s what you mean,” says Imad. “Baghdad Palace is over there.”

He jerks a finger in a direction just behind the building we’re standing in front of.

“But it is a palace,” continues Imad. “The Ba’ath called it the Palace of the End.”

“The Palace of the End?” One of the men sounds concerned. “But wasn’t that...?”

“A place of torture?” Imad nods. “And a detention centre. But the Americans cleaned it all out for us. But it is not in the Green Zone and it has been hit too many times to be interesting to them now.”

The inside of the building is as run-down as the outside, but it’s obvious that this was once a grand place. A few men are scattered around the large room that was once an entrance hall. They’re armed and alert, but relax when they see Imad and the other men. They glance briefly at us before we’re moved into a larger room, kind of like a big ballroom or meeting hall. There’s no furniture, just a few wooden crates and the occasional mattress.

“Your new home,” says Imad, briefly, now absent-minded. “Don’t bother running away. There are guards out everywhere.”

He hurries back into the entrance hall, obviously eager to be with his men. As an afterthought, he turns back and calls out, “Toilets over there.” He points.

Over there seems to be a curtained off area.

Since we've been reunited with the other van, Kelly has rejoined Julia. She's nervous. I can tell because she and Julia are tightly holding hands.

"No air-conditioning," mutters the European lady in the pant-suit.

"Better get used to it," says the Indian man in white. "I don't think the electricity is up and running these days and it's hard to get fuel for the generators."

"But it must be 100 degrees in here," moans the lady.

"Let's hope it stays this way," replies the man. "It can go up to 120 on hot days."

The adults all confer with one another as to who stays where. The room is big enough that we all have a substantial portion to ourselves, but it's a little harder to divide up the "furniture".

After a bit of discussion, it's agreed that the women can have the mattresses. That means that Julia and I get to share a mattress, Kelly has her own, the European woman who's name is Ruella gets one and another lady and her daughter who are Egyptian share the final one.

One of the wooden crates goes to a man who has a deck of playing cards. A game of poker starts up practically right away.

The Indian man in white, who's name is Vikram, pulls a bag of sunflower seeds out of woven bag he's carrying and asks if anyone wants any. Since most of the other men are either playing poker or watching the poker game, he ends up sitting with us and talking while he eats sunflower seeds. He's very relaxed considering our situation. Dad comments on this.

"Well," he says, as he munches, "I'm working on my PhD and my subject is Western Imperialism and the effect it's had on global terrorism. This might give me some first-hand insight into the problem. You have to admit, a first hand account of being held captive in a country currently under American occupation will probably give my dissertation a touch of authority."

"It certainly can't hurt," agrees Dad.

"How about you?" asks Vikram. "You are unusual travelers for this part of the world." He glances at Julia and I as he says it.

"We were on our way to Pella," explains Dad. "In Jordan. I'm an archaeologist and I usually bring my daughters along."

Vikram nods.

Kelly looks suddenly alert.

"An archaeologist?" she says. "Julia said she was Julia Kent. Does that mean you're Dr. Anderson Kent?"

"Yes," says Dad nodding. "I'm surprised you've heard of me. Archaeologists aren't household names these days."

"Well, I study everything I can related to the Arab world and you've done work in the Arab world, so it's not surprising really."

Dad nods.

"Actually," he says. "I've been wondering something ever since we got here. I've done some reading about the Arab Revolt and the subsequent removal of King Feisal from Syria."

Kelly nods her head vigorously.

“Yes, and then he ended up King of Iraq.”

“Exactly,” says Dad. “I’m no expert on architecture, but this building...” He looks around the room we’re sitting in. “It appears to me to be built at around the time that Feisal would have been king...”

“And building his palace!” Kelly interrupts him. “I’ve been thinking the same thing! I’ve read more about Iraq during the time of the British occupation than I have about the present situation. And God knows I’ve read enough about *that*.”

“So, do you know the layout of Baghdad at that time?”

Kelly nods.

“This is about the right location. When we were outside, did you notice how we’re right beside the Tigris? Feisal’s palace was built right beside the Tigris. And from what few pictures I’ve seen, this is the building...”

“But when we first got here, Imad told us that this isn’t Baghdad Palace,” says Dad.

“If this is Feisal’s palace, it wouldn’t be Baghdad Palace,” says Kelly. “Baghdad Palace was built in the 1930’s for his son Ghazi. It was called Al Zuhoor which means the Palace of Roses. But Feisal’s palace was Al-Rihab, the Palace of Welcome.”

“So, who is this Feisal guy everyone’s talking about?” Julia interrupts, leaning forward.

Kelly’s eyes sparkle.

“Well, I first read about him when I was reading about Gertrude Bell. Gertrude had many men in her life but her most spectacular friendship was with the first King of Iraq, Feisal. He was a son of the Sharif of Mecca and a leader of the Arab revolt. A handsome man, tall, dark and elegant. This may very well be the same palace that Gertrude Bell spent many long hours in, talking with the king and advising him on his new position, organizing dinner parties for him, and just generally keeping him company. She was in her 50’s and he was in his 30’s at that time, but they seemed to have a natural rapport.”

“Wow,” says Julia. “Sounds kind of romantic.”

“Who *is* King Feisal?” I ask. “All I know is he had something to do with an Arab revolt.”

“Well, Ginny,” Dad says. “That’s right. It was during World War I. The Turks had come into the war on the side of the Germans and the British needed help in the Middle East. They encouraged the Arabs to revolt against the Turks who ruled most of the Middle East in what was called the Ottoman Empire. In exchange, they promised the Arabs independence.”

Vikram nods his head vigorously.

“Lawrence of Arabia was one of the many British officers sent out to assist the Arab revolt. Most of their fighting involved sabotaging the Hejaz railway that carried Turkish troops up and down what is now Jordan and the western portion of Saudi Arabia. But Feisal and Lawrence’s moment of glory came when they rode into Damascus and liberated it from the Turks. Feisal then become King of Syria. But to cut things short, the French didn’t let him stay in Syria so the British made him King of Iraq instead.”

“That is my area of expertise,” says the man in the dark suit. I noticed that he had been moving closer during our conversation, seemingly interested. He introduces himself as Aban. “I was born during the reign of King Feisal’s grandson, Feisal II. Feisal I died in 1933 and was succeeded by his son Ghazi. Ghazi died in a car crash leaving a young Feisal II who reigned with a regent until a military coup in 1958. I went to the Baghdad University and studied that brief monarchical period.”

“You see, Ginny,” says Dad. Dad actually seems to be enjoying himself. Now he’s got Vikram, Aban, and Kelly to talk to. “Jordan is also a monarchy. At the time that Feisal became king of Iraq, his brother, Abdullah, was assuming control in Jordan. The monarchy survived there but didn’t here in Iraq.”

At this point, Dad and Aban and Vikram launch on a discussion about something called the Hashemites and what the Middle East would have been like if Iraq and Jordan had joined together into one Hashemite kingdom.

“I wonder when we get to eat?” says Julia. Vikram’s sunflower seeds are long gone.

“Or drink,” says Kelly, looking around. “In this heat, it’s more important that we have water.”

“There must be a bathroom and a kitchen somewhere,” I say. “Wouldn’t the water be there?”

“From what I’ve read, the water situation can be haphazard. That’s what I was actually here to discuss. Before anything can move forward, the people need the essentials like electricity and water. And after that, food. Syria and Jordan can’t absorb any more refugees and things need to be sorted out here.”

“I’ve never been so hot in my life,” complains Julia. “Is it possible to melt?”

“No,” says Kelly, wiping the sweat of her forehead with the back of her hand. “Hopefully we’ll get a little relief at night.”

I glance over at the Egyptian lady and her daughter. Despite the noise and the light, they’re both sleeping on their mattress.

Kelly sees me looking at them.

“They’re smart,” she says. “It’s the best way to survive the heat. Sleep during the day and do things at night. Gertrude Bell and King Faisal used to have parties under the stars when the temperature was a little cooler. Practical and picturesque.”

Julia groans and flops down on our mattress. Despite the dilapidated look of the mattress, I join her. Kelly drags her mattress over to be nearer to us and with Dad still talking to Vikram and Aban, we manage to snooze a bit.

I wake up, desperate to use the bathroom.

I don’t know how long I’ve slept, but the room is a lot dimmer and a lot quieter. Dad is just leaning against the wall near our mattresses, staring in the distance. Knowing Dad, he’s probably praying. Vikram and Aban are leaning against different sections of the wall, also quiet.

I get up and make my way to the curtained area. Dad gives me a brief smile.

“It’s pretty primitive,” he says.

Pretty primitive, sums it up.

It's a hole in the ground. It looks like the result of some large object impacting it, like a missile, or something. For a man it would be easy enough to aim at, but not so easy for a woman.

I sigh.

I've done enough camping at dig sites so it's not the first time I've had to go to the bathroom without the luxury of a toilet. I do my best and think that maybe, under the circumstances, no food isn't such a bad idea.

When I return, Dad whispers, "Get as much sleep as you can. It'll make time go by faster."

I nod.

I'm just drifting off to sleep when the whole room explodes.

~ CHAPTER THREE ~

“*Mother of God!*” someone shrieks.

Suddenly, Dad is at my side, holding my hand and grabbing Julia’s.

“What happened?” I gasp.

Even with my eyes closed, there had been a blinding light.

It looks like half the roof has fallen into the middle of the room. Since everyone is near the outer walls, no one is hurt, but everyone is either screaming or staring in shock.

Imad comes hurrying into the room, followed by a couple of men with weapons.

They confer with one another in Arabic.

Kelly, wide-awake and wide-eyed, translates for us.

“They are wondering if it was intended for us or if it was just a random hit.

They’re deciding it was just a random hit because nobody knows we’re here.”

“Come! Come!” Imad is looking highly agitated. “Now! We’ll get you out of here!”

There is more Arabic between the men.

“They want us out of here before someone finds us,” translates Kelly, as we stand up and gather our few possessions.

The light is dim and we’re led down a staircase of some sort, with Imad in the lead and the men with weapons behind us. It’s even darker in the room that Imad leads us into.

“OK, OK,” he says, as if anticipating protest. “I’ll get a lamp, or something.” He calls back something in Arabic and after standing around in the dark for a few minutes, a lamp appears in the hands of one of the men.

The mattresses are also dragged down the stairs.

There is a huge bonus to this new room. It has a damp feeling to it, but it’s cool!

“We’re underground now,” says Dad. “This is much better!”

Everyone is in agreement. A darker room is OK if it’s cooler.

“Sleep,” says Imad and he’s about to leave when the Egyptian woman stops him. They have an exchange in Arabic.

“She wants to know where the toilet is,” says Kelly.

“Good question,” says Julia.

Imad disappears briefly and then comes back with a report that there is some find of a facility down a hallway. The Egyptian lady and her daughter are allowed to take the lamp to go down the hallway, with Kelly and Julia right behind them.

“What was it like?” I ask when they return.

“Fine,” says Julia. “Like the Arab bathrooms when we were in Syria. Lots of tiles and a hole in the ground.”

I sigh with relief. I remember the first time I saw an Arab bathroom where it was a tile floor and a hole instead of toilet. But that’s a lot better than hanging over the edge of a crater.

“No doubt about it,” says Kelly to us, but mostly talking to Dad. “This is the palace. The bathrooms were gorgeous. No running water, unfortunately. But I read that Faisal had his palace built partially underground as a measure against the heat. I think we’re in a room where he probably met with people during the day. I can’t wait to see it when there’s a little more light.”

It’s a lot harder to sleep after the excitement of having some kind of missile drop on us in the night. Plus, I’m not sure any of us would want to. With only one small light, I can’t help but wonder what kind of critters lurk in the corners of this underground room.

The lamp is commandeered for an all-night poker game between the man with the deck of cards, two young guys who look North American, and an African business man.

Julia and I end up leaning on each other and sort of dozing our way through the night.

With morning comes light, and we can see our surroundings better.

The room is elegant, though has been extremely neglected. Paint is peeling, there are pools of water and unidentified liquid, and in one corner is a pile of garbage.

Imad comes in after awhile with bottles of water, one large one for each of us.

We receive it with appreciation and most of us finish half of it in our first encounter.

“If you want food, I need money,” says Imad brusquely.

We exchange glances.

It occurs to me that thus far, no one has attempted to separate us from our wallets, purses, jewelry or any other valuables.

Dad pulls out his wallet and rifles through it.

“Jordanian dinars?” he asks ruefully.

Imad shrugs.

“Good enough.”

People start pulling out their wallets.

Imad accepts American dollars and Jordanian dinars. When he comes to the Egyptian lady and her daughter, she holds out a bill.

Imad shakes his head.

“The Egyptian pound,” Kelly explains to us.

“Ma andee dollerat,” says the woman, sounding slightly hysterical.

“I don’t have dollars,” translates Kelly for our benefit.

Silently, Dad stands up and walks over to Imad and hands him some more Jordanian dinars.

The woman manages to give Dad a weak smile before collapsing in tears. Her daughter just holds onto her arm and keeps her eyes on the ground.

Imad and his two armed escorts are counting the money and conferencing by the doorway. Our little group is closest to the door and can hear them talk even if only Kelly can understand.

“Did you hear that, Dad!” Julia grips our dad’s arm. “They’re talking about sabotage! I heard him say sabotage! They’re not going to buy us food! They’re going to go blow something up!”

Dad raises his eyebrows and looks at Kelly.

She stifles a laugh.

“Saba-tosh, Julia,” she says. “Saba-tosh is Arabic for 17. Imad told one of his men to go buy 17 falafel sandwiches.”

“Oh,” says Julia, slightly deflated. “Oh well.”

But it’s good to know that falafels are on their way. I’ve never gone this long without food before.

Vikram and Aban come over and sit down on the ground beside Dad.

“Of course,” says Vikram skipping the small talk, “it would be nice to know why we are here. Why us? Why should the Americans care about me? I’m from India.”

Aban sighs.

“I agree,” he says. “It wouldn’t help our situation but it would keep my mind from going around in circles.”

Dad takes a deep breath and exhales.

“We could always ask,” he suggests.

“Ask them?” Vikram points a thumb at some of the men outside the doorway of our prison.

“Sure,” says Dad. “Except that I was thinking more of Imad. He doesn’t mind talking and he seems to be in charge.”

Vikram and Aban look at each other.

“I like it,” says Aban.

“It couldn’t hurt,” agrees Vikram.

“OK,” says Aban, turning to Dad. “You do it. And do it soon. I don’t like the thought of another night in this same outfit.”

Dad laughs.

“We’re all in the same boat.”

The conversation turns to weather and the observation that it is currently the equivalent of a heat spell in Canada in this room, despite that this is cool temperatures for Iraq.

It takes about half an hour for Imad to reappear and when he does, he has the falafels. Everyone accepts them with great enthusiasm.

When he comes around to us, Dad casually says, “Oh, Imad?”

Imad is surprised.

“Yes?”

“We were just wondering why we were here. We're not that important. Why would the Americans care about us? Are you counting on an international outcry over us?”

Imad just stares at him for a moment. Then he laughs.

“Well, I tell you what. The answer is right here in this room.”

Dad and Vikram and Aban all look at one another.

“That’s right,” continues Imad. “You are all basically human shields.”

“Human shields?” Dad asks incredulously. “You mean you want to protect King Feisal’s palace?”

Now it is Imad’s turn to look incredulous.

“King Feisal’s palace...? Oh! Is this King Feisal’s palace? I hadn’t realized. No, I am not trying to protect the historical artifacts of Iraq. Iraq is beyond that now, I think.”

“Then it’s about people,” says Dad softly.

Imad nods.

“Yes. I told you in the van. It’s a prisoner exchange. A massive prisoner exchange. We are calling for all political prisoners to be released. Thousands of innocent people. Just Iraqis imprisoned for being Iraqis.”

“It’s noble,” says Vikram, speaking up. “But a bit alarming. The American government isn’t going to open up the prisons just because you have a few foreigners hidden away somewhere. We’re really not that important.”

“No,” agrees Imad. “You aren’t. But some of you are more important than others.”

He glances around the room. And then he leaves.

“Wow!” says Aban. “So that’s it!”

“Someone in this room!” says Vikram, looking around excitedly. “Someone is not who they appear to be.”

“Now you’re talking like it’s an Agatha Christie,” says Kelly leaning forward. Like most of the people in the room, she started listening to the exchange between Dad and Imad.

“Well folks!” Dad calls out to the general room. “Now we know what it’s all about. Any ideas? Who among us is more important than others?”

“You’re a well-known archaeologist,” Kelly says.

Dad laughs.

“I’m an archaeologist,” he says. “But it’s not exactly a big deal in Iraq these days. Nope, it’s definitely not me. Besides, Imad glanced away from me when he said it.”

Nobody in the room seems to want to admit that they are important enough to have merited this whole kidnapping scheme, so everyone just ends up eating their falafels in silence.

“It’s political,” says Vikram, finishing his falafel and wiping his mouth on a handkerchief that he found in his bag. “Somebody who’s politically important.”

“As opposed to what else?” asks Aban.

Vikram shrugs.

“Yes, I suppose everything is political here. I was just thinking out loud, that’s all. The more we know, the greater the chance we can save ourselves.”

“That’s where we go two separate directions,” says Dad, crumpling up the falafel wrapper and putting it carefully beside him. “I don’t believe we can save ourselves. I’m leaving that up to God.”

“Which God?” Vikram asks. “My God? Your God? Imad’s God?”

“Well, I reckon I’ll leave it up to the God who can handle it best and get us out of here.”

“A diplomatic answer. I still want to know who it is in this room who’s gotten us into this mess.”

“That’s probably why they’re not in a hurry to tell us who they are,” says Aban.

“I wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of everybody’s wrath!”

“So it’s you then,” says Vikram, slyly.

“No. I’m not the one. I’m exactly what I say I am.”

“You never said what you were,” Vikram points out.

Aban laughs.

“I’m a history professor. I used to teach here in Baghdad. But when things started to get bad I took a job offered to me in a small liberal arts college in England. It’s not as prestigious as my life here, but at least one doesn’t have to worry about getting shot on the way to work. I just came back to visit.”

“Ah-ha!” says Vikram, triumphantly. “Then you are the one! You are an Iraqi, yet all the other Iraqis were released at the airport.”

Aban rolls his eyes.

“I never said I was Iraqi, only that I had a job here. I’m Syrian and I carry a Syrian passport.”

“Then why did you come back to this God-forsaken place,” says Vikram.

“Well, first of all, like Dr. Kent here, I’m a religious man and I don’t say this place is entirely God forsaken. It’s absolutely none of your business, but I came back here to visit a friend. And before you grill me about my friendships and accuse me of being a political spy I shall tell you that my friend is a woman and that before the war, we were becoming very close and had life gone on in a normal way we would have probably gotten married.”

Aban takes off his glasses and polishes them with his shirt. He started off looking business-like, but now his jacket is gone and his shirt is untucked. I think we’re all looking disheveled.

“You see,” says Aban continuing. “My salary was substantial in Iraq but completely inadequate now to support a wife. Not to mention that she didn’t want to leave her family here and I had absolutely no way of getting them all to England...”

Aban takes a deep breath and sighs, as he stares off into the distance and the pause is long enough to indicate that he’s done with explaining his situation.

“Say no more,” says Vikram, waving his hand. “I am thoroughly ashamed of myself. OK, so it is none of us here. And since the person probably doesn’t want to be identified, I will leave the subject alone.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” says Dad. “I don’t think it would hurt to know what’s going on. Lives may depend on it and it may help us all get out of here. The only question is, how do we get information?”

“Well,” says Kelly, speaking up. “If you ask me, it would be easier to find out from Imad than to try to be sneaky and learn all we can about our fellow prisoners. Imad obviously knows more than all of us put together and the person or people he’s referring to may not even realize they’re a target.”

“Excellent point,” says Dad. “Do you think we can just get him to tell us?”

Vikram laughs.

“Maybe if we pray enough.”

“Actually,” says Kelly. “I was thinking that we get him to say something to one of his fellow kidnapers. He doesn’t know I speak Arabic and it’s possible he might say something within my hearing under the right conditions.”

Dad thinks about this.

“You’re right. You’d be the logical person. I mean, he’s got to assume that many of the people in this room speak Arabic but if you don’t let it slip out that you’re one of them, you may pick up something.”

“It may be risky, but if Julia and Ginny and I were to wander around a bit, talking in English and getting as close as we can to the guards, we may hear something. They wouldn’t feel threatened by us.”

Dad looks hesitant.

“Oh come on, Dad!” Julia leans forward. “Let us do it!”

He sighs.

“Well, OK. But be careful...”

“Dad! We’ve been kidnapped! This is dangerous! Why are you telling us to be careful at this point?”

Dad sighs again.

“It’s just a parent’s prerogative, Julia.”

“Well, I’ve got to go to the bathroom,” I say, getting to my feet. “How about we start with that?”

We have to go down a hallway. Most of the rooms don’t have doors and I can see that at one time they were probably bedrooms and sitting rooms for the royal family.

At the end of the hallway is the bathroom. Like all of the other rooms, it hasn’t been cleaned in years, but at least having just a tiled floor and a hole in the ground keeps things from getting too filthy, like it would be if these were toilets.

“Hey! I’ve got an idea,” says Kelly when we’re all done. “Let’s ask Imad if we can clean up this place a bit. That way we’ll get him talking and maybe find out how long we’re going to be here.”

“Sounds good,” says Julia. I nod.

We head back down the hallway and through the room where everyone is. Kelly keeps going into the hallway where the guards are and we follow her under Dad’s watchful eyes.

“You-hoo!” calls out Kelly.

The guards look over, surprised.

“Hello!” says Kelly, smiling.

They nod warily.

“I was wondering if we could talk to Imad...”

The guards just stare at us until finally one of them calls out something in Arabic.

A few moments later, Imad appears from another room.

“Hello!” says Kelly, still cheerful. “We were just using the bathroom and it dawned on us that if we’re going to be here awhile, maybe we could clean things up a bit. You know, make it more habitable.”

Imad thinks about this.

“Yes,” he says slowly. “I guess that would be OK. But only the room you’re in and the bathrooms.”

“If you would let us have some buckets of water from the river, we’d really appreciate it,” says Kelly brightly.

“Yes, I guess we could do that.” He calls out something in Arabic to the guards and two of them head for the stairs.

We head back to Dad, Vikram, and Aban.

“Well,” says Kelly, sitting down. “I think we’re going to be here for awhile.

Imad’s given us permission to clean this place up a bit.”

“Cleaning up ourselves a bit would be nice too,” says Dad.

“Some of the guards are bringing us water from the river. I guess we could use that to bathe with. I wouldn’t want to drink it, but it probably wouldn’t kill us to splash around in it a bit.”

“It’s really an issue of clothing,” says Aban. “We’ll need to ask our prison guards if we could give them some money for a change of clothing so that we can have some kind of a laundry line...”

Kelly nods.

“I’m going to take that up with Imad.”

She scoots off.

“I’m sure the guards will love hauling water for us,” says Vikram.

Aban shrugs.

“They’ve got us into this mess. They’ll have to deal with it.”

Kelly comes back to report that though Imad is sounding fed up, he’s agreed to the idea of taking some money in exchange for a change of clothes. Kelly has been put in charge of collecting the money.

Dad stands up and gives the announcement that anyone who wants a change of clothing can contribute. Most people agree to the idea. The Egyptian woman and her daughter shake their heads. They have a small carry-on bag between them which, she explains, contains a light change of clothes for each of them. She is interested, however, in some water, soap and a bucket in order to clean her clothes.

By the time all the mundane details are worked out with Imad some guards have brought in a couple of buckets of water.

Kelly explains to everyone that she’s going to clean up a bit and that the guards will bring us more water for our clothes. The guards look surprised but they don’t contradict her.

Nobody seems interested in helping Kelly clean so Julia and I stand up to help her. Most people are gathered around another poker game.

“I think the first thing we should do is look for a mop,” says Dad, also standing up.

Vikram and Aban look surprised.

“C’mon!” says Dad, waving them up. “It’s a big room and we need the help. Now, if we can’t find a mop, look for an old stick and something to attach to it so we can do some mopping.”

“This is women’s work,” complains Aban.

“Women’s work?” says Vikram. “Untouchables, is more like it.”

“Fine,” says Dad. “Don’t do it. Let us show you how it’s done. In the west we’re all free to do anything, including mop floors.”

Aban sighs.

“On the other hand, who am I trying to impress?” He stands up.

Vikram groans.

“So now I will be left here all by myself? I guess I don’t want to miss out on the fun.”

Aban finds some old bedposts in one of the rooms and Vikram finds a pile of old curtains so we’re able to make some rough mops.

“We’ll take the bathroom,” says Kelly.

“You’re welcome to it,” says Vikram, shuddering.

“What did Vikram mean by untouchables?” asks Julia, when it’s just us girls back in the bathroom.

“Well,” explains Kelly. “In India they still have a caste system, particularly among the Hindus. There are lower classes who do the more menial work and the lowest class of all, the untouchables, do the dirtiest work of all.”

“I didn’t know that,” says Julia.

“It’s because Dad’s never gone looking for Biblical artifacts in India,” I say, scrubbing hard with my mop.

“I know they have tea in India,” says Julia. She’s polishing an ornate mirror with one of the old curtains.

“They have tea here too,” says Kelly. “It’s served in a glass with cardamom and lots of sugar. Quite delicious.” She smiles. “We should ask Imad to get us some.”

Julia snorts.

“I think he’s losing patience with us.”

“OK,” says Kelly. “We’ll save tea for when we get out of here.”

Cleaning the bathroom is grueling work but I have to admit, after an hour of scrubbing, the place doesn’t look half bad.

When the Egyptian lady comes in to use the facilities, she just sort of looks around and kind of sniffs. She didn’t see it before the clean up, I guess.

“Well, what next ladies?” asks Kelly. She’s looking rosy and even though we’re underground, the heat is starting to penetrate our environment.

“Rest?” suggest Julia. “And get Imad to get us some water to drink.”

“Or tea,” I smile mischievously.

We head back to the main room to discover that our fellow clean-up crew members are all taking a break and that everyone else is just lounging around. Thankfully, some water bottles have been distributed while we were gone and Dad hands us our three.

“Any news?” asks Kelly, after taking a deep gulp.

Even lukewarm, it’s good to have a drink.

Vikram shakes his head.

“They are silent. Like mice. Creeping around.”

“I don’t want to raise any false hopes...” says Dad really quietly. Our eyes widen and we all lean forward to hear him. “But a thought occurred to me...”

“OK, OK,” says Vikram impatiently. “What is that silly expression you have...spill it?”

“Well,” says Dad. “It occurred to me that Feisal may have had some way of escape out of here. He was put here by the British and not everybody in Iraq would back a king with Western powers behind him. Later in his reign he was effective in pushing the British out of Iraq but at the beginning of his reign things were more uncertain...”

“You are so right!” exclaims Aban. But even his exclamation is low. The guards are close enough that a regular conversation is out of the question. “In fact, even a popular ruler can become unpopular and a wise ruler prepares.”

“So, what do you think, Dr. Kent?” asks Kelly. “A tunnel, of some sort?”

Dad nods.

“Most likely. In those day he couldn’t rely on a helicopter or anything too fancy.”

“But how are we going to find it?” asks Vikram. “Without the guards catching on, obviously.”

“Well, that’s the best part,” says Dad. “You see...”

He is rudely interrupted.

“OK!” bellows one of the guards, marching into the room. “Everyone on feet! NOW!”

~ CHAPTER FOUR ~

Dad looks worried.

Quickly he grabs onto mine and Julia's arms.

The guard pulls something out of his pocket.

We all stare. It's a digital camera.

"Up against wall," he directs us with a wave of the hand.

He has two guards behind him to make sure we do as we're told.

We all cluster together and after a bit of jostling by the guard, I guess he wants to make sure that all of our faces will be clear, he snaps about twenty photos.

"Phew," says Aban, wiping perspiration from his forehead. "I suppose that's to prove that they really have us."

"In a way, it's encouraging," says Vikram. "It means that things are happening."

We return to our spot in the room.

"But come now, Dr. Kent," says Aban. "I have a feeling you were on the verge of telling us something very important."

Dad nods and speaks softly.

"You know that remains of the bed that we took the bedposts from?"

"To make the mops? Yes," says Vikram.

"Well, after we got what we needed, I tried to move those old mattresses. I just wanted to check it out and see if maybe we could use some of them. Well, I don't know if you noticed, but the whole room has cracks. Cracks in the ceiling, cracks in the wall. If I've got this place figured out, it's one of the rooms right under that blast we just had and the damage looks recent to me. In fact, it's probably a dangerous room for us to be in. It could collapse in time..."

"Yes, Yes, Dr. Kent," says Vikram, impatiently. "Death could come at any minute. But *what did you find?*"

"Well, I think I found a door of some sort. That room is painted with a vertical stripes pattern and without all those new cracks I wouldn't have noticed it. The door is barely noticeable even with all the cracks to show it up. In fact, it's not really a door. It's only about three feet, so it's more like a crawlspace, whatever's behind it..."

Kelly slaps her forehead.

"Of course!" she says. She too manages to make this exclamation without raising her voice. "I don't know why I didn't notice that! The whole room is highly unusual. I mean, *painted stripes?* If people want patterns, they get wallpaper."

“Except that, of course, a door behind wallpaper would be a bit of a nuisance if one was trying to exit quickly. This way the pattern hid it, and it was conveniently hidden until...

“Until now!” exclaims Vikram, forgetting to be quiet.

“I was going to say, until he needed it,” says Dad. “How did he die, anyhow?”

“He had a heart attack after drinking a cup of tea,” says Kelly.

Dad’s eyebrows rise.

“When we get out of this, remind me to ask you more about that.”

“So, if it’s a tunnel, then our first duty is to get out of here,” says Aban.

“Why is it our first duty?” asks Julia.

Dad laughs.

“A good prisoner always makes it his first duty to escape, Julia. Usually he has to start digging a tunnel.”

“But our problem isn’t digging a tunnel,” says Vikram. “It’s exploring the one we’ve got. Where does it lead? Maybe it’s all caved in, or maybe we’ll end up in the river...”

“Well,” says Dad. “I think we’ve got a good thing going by making ourselves the cleaning crew around here. Nobody’s going to pay attention to us if we don’t do anything too suspicious. But I will say this...” He turns to me and Julia. “You’ll have to stay out of that room until we know more. It’s too dangerous.”

“The obvious thing is a diversion,” says Vikram “Someone out here has to do something to hold onto the guards interest while someone else is in that room prying open a 70 year old door. It may stick a bit, after all.”

Dad nods.

“Laundry,” says Kelly standing up and briskly brushing any dust off of her skirt. “You leave it to me Dr. Kent. Come on ladies!”

We follow Kelly as she marches over to one of our guards and tells him that we need water to wash our clothes in.

“Also, where are our new clothes?” she asks, peering out into the hallway as if expecting someone to appear with a bag of newly purchased outfits. “Naturally, we must have a change of clothes before we take off the clothing that we’re wearing.”

The guards seem momentarily distracted by this interesting line of thought and when I sneak a peak back at Dad, he’s gone. I doubt any of the guards have noticed.

“We stink,” continues Kelly. “It’s not pleasant for us and after awhile it won’t be pleasant for you having to be in close proximity to us. We understand things are a little primitive. Under the circumstances, that’s to be expected, however...Ah! Imad!”

Imad has appeared.

“Your clothes, right?” He sounds as if this whole thing is becoming a little more than he bargained for. “I’ve sent someone out. Soon. Soon. Don’t worry.”

He looks like he just wants to wave us back to our spot against the wall.

“Fine!” says Kelly brightly. “For now, we’ll get a clothesline up.”

She looks around the room.

“Do you have any string, or should I just hunt around...?”

“Hunt around, hunt around!” he replies impatiently. Clearly he wants to talk to his guards without us standing there.

“OK,” says Kelly agreeably. “C’mon, ladies.”

We follow.

It’s hard to resist, but we don’t look at Dad in the room with the stripes. We just keep walking down the hallway trying to find something that will work as a clothesline. A few dusty boxes are sitting in one of the other rooms and after sorting through some unidentifiable metallic items, we find some pieces of rope.

“OK,” says Kelly. “Now I think we should take one of the smaller pieces and put it in the bathroom so that ladies will have a place for their more intimate items of clothing and this larger piece can go out in the main room.”

We nod.

Our fellow prisoners don’t oppose the idea of a clothesline, but no one leaps up to help us either. The men are either watching a poker game or playing poker. Ruella, the European lady, is talking to the Egyptian lady and her daughter.

Aban and Vikram stay seated, presumably not to draw attention to the fact that Dad is missing.

There are a few nails in the wall that we use to hang the clothesline with.

“Here is your clothes!” Imad calls out as he tosses Kelly a large bag. She catches it.

When she opens it up, we discover that our new clothing consists of what looks like cotton nightgowns. They’ll probably be quite comfortable in the heat.

In all the shuffle of distributing the clothes to people who have paid for an outfit, Dad returns to his spot. He tries to hide it, but his eyes sparkle.

We hurry back to our spot and hand the remaining cotton garments to Dad, Vikram and Aban.

“There’s something there!” he says quietly, not bothering with preliminaries. “I am deeply sorry to report that it’s not a tunnel, but the archaeologist in me is pretty excited that there’s some kind of a trunk in there.”

“So what is it then?” asks Aban.

“Oh, I didn’t have time to open it...”

“No, I mean the crawlspace. It doesn’t go anywhere? It’s just a closet?”

Dad nods.

Aban sighs.

“We’re stuck here then.”

“It would seem so, yes,” says Dad.

“Oh well. It was worth a try,” says Vikram, leaning back against the wall.

Only Kelly is interested.

“Dr. Kent? Is it possible that whatever’s in there could date back to...”

“Feisal’s day? Yes, I believe it’s possible. The trunk is an antique. The air in there is dry. I didn’t notice any mold or smell anything musty. Whatever’s in there is probably in good condition.”

“This is incredible!” says Kelly, her eyes widening.

“I closed it up as best I could. It doesn’t look like it’s been opened. It’s possible that we may have to come back here at a later date to retrieve it.”

Kelly nods.

I can tell they’re thinking like archaeologists now. I’ve seen it before with my Dad. The artifact is everything and preserving it will be his number one objective from here on out.

In contrast, Vikram and Aban don’t seem the slightest bit enthused about some trunk dating back to a lost era. I get the impression that they were both counting on an escape tunnel. A thought occurs to me and I’m about to lean forward and say something to Dad except that the air suddenly fills with the sound of gunfire.

~ CHAPTER FIVE ~

We all gasp. It's sort of a collective thing. I don't notice myself doing it, but I'm sure I did too.

The gunfire is outside, but it sounds like it's right outside, like on the other side of the wall.

Instinctively, we all crouch down. Again, I don't notice myself doing it. I just know that I'm lying on my stomach while all around us is the sound of gunfire and the occasional explosion.

When it's all over, nothing in the room seems to be damaged.

But within seconds of the silence, Imad has charged into the room, howling, "Everybody out! NOW!"

We leap up and unthinkingly follow him. It takes a few minutes, but as the guards hurry from their respective posts, they surround us and we are hurried up a flight of stairs, over a lot of rubble and down a long hallway. Even in the craziness of it all, I notice how elegant the hallway is.

We're pushed through a small doorway and next thing we find ourselves back in the vans.

That's when I notice that Dad is not with us.

"Oh God!" I cry. My hand instantly goes to my mouth. "Where's Dad? Is he dead..."

Before I can panic, Kelly grabs my hand.

"It's OK, Ginny!" she says, squeezing hard. "I saw him! When the gunfire started, he ran into that room!"

"To get the trunk?" I lower my voice so that only she and Julia can hear me.

Kelly nods.

"He was just coming out of the room with it when Imad came running in. I'm sure he's fine. But he's probably in the other van."

I nod.

Kelly lets go of my hand, but Julia and I look at each other. Wordlessly, we reach for each other's hands. Suddenly I realize how awful this experience would be without Dad. In fact, I realize how awful *life* would be without Dad. I say a prayer for him. I know he's probably saying a prayer for us.

The vans have taken off at high speed. It's not until then that I notice that I'm still clutching my cotton nightgown. Whatever happens, at least I'll have a change of clothes.

Whatever it is we're running from doesn't seem to be chasing us because after awhile the vans aren't driving so recklessly and the guards are laughing and joking with each other.

"They're relieved," explains Kelly to us, quietly. "They're saying things like, *Whew! That was a close one!* The Arabic equivalent, anyway."

"I wonder what it was all about," muses Julia. "Who are they afraid of?"

"My guess is the Americans. We're such a mixed bunch that we'd only be of interest to the Americans, I think. It's possible that we've become an international news item. Probably all of our respective countries are doing diplomatic things to get us out of here, not that I have a whole lot of faith in diplomacy in a time like this. That's the irony of it all. I mean, here I am, with the U.N., sent out to do some preliminary work on a report about ways to meet the needs of the women and children of Iraq and the first thing I do is get myself kidnapped. I guess that sums up the situation here."

"SO that's what you're doing here!" I say. "I thought it was some top-secret thing!"

Kelly laughs.

"No, I'm not that interesting."

Julia. "So, apart from the war, why is it hard for the women and children of Iraq?" asks

"Good question," says Kelly. "Well, I was sent here to talk to the women and really hear it from their mouths. But I can say this much, Iraq used to be an Arab country that allowed its women freedom to pursue an education, dress in any style of clothing, most of the freedoms we have in the West, in other words. But what's happened is the religious parties have gained a lot of ground and Iraq is heading for being that type of Arab country where women have to completely cover themselves. They'll be under a strict Muslim law. It's called Sharia law. Even aside from the fighting, an Iraqi woman is no longer safe going out by herself. She's expected to have a male escort."

Julia. "But I thought this war was supposed to bring democracy to this region," says

"Well, democracy is a good thing but if the majority of people vote for parties that uphold Sharia law, the irony is that this whole thing could be a step backwards for freedom in Iraq."

I guess we forgot to keep our voices down because one of the guards speaks up.

"Maybe we don't want your Western freedom," he says harshly. "Maybe we just want our country back!"

He's young, his hands are on his machine gun, and his face is angry.

"Well," says Kelly calmly. "That makes sense to me. I'm interested in only one thing. What the Iraqi people want."

"We want you to get out!"

I'm a little bit scared but Kelly shows no sign of fear. I guess it's the U.N. training.

"I'm not here to stay," she says. "I was sent to help women and children. Not to impose myself on your lives. Iraq is for the Iraqis."

The man scowls. There isn't much to say at this point so we all just sit in thick silence.

The drive isn't long anyway.

But our destination isn't another building. It's some kind of an orchard. I think they're date trees. I've never actually seen them in real life before, but they're tall and look like palm trees. We're all pushed out of the vans and herded together in the centre of the orchard, presumably to keep a close eye on us. But at least we're with Dad again.

Sure enough, he's carrying a trunk. It's about forty centimeters long, wooden and well-crafted.

"Girls!" Dad's relief is great.

He momentarily puts down the trunk to hug us both.

"Dad!"

He gets hugs right back.

Imad is moving around but although the guns are all pointed at us, he is going around from guard to guard talking to them and too quiet for us to hear.

Aban and Vikram were in Dad's van but they're standing off by themselves.

They too are talking quietly.

"Dad," I say. "I think it's kind of strange that Aban doesn't seem very interested in this chest. I mean, didn't he study the monarchy and all? Shouldn't this be exciting for him too?"

Dad glances over at Aban and watches him thoughtfully.

"You could be right, Ginny," he says. "He's definitely got something else on his mind. Maybe we'd better find out what it is."

Along with Kelly, we inch our way over to Aban and Vikram.

"That must be heavy," says Vikram, nodding toward the chest. "I'm surprised they haven't taken it from you."

Aban looks disgusted.

"They probably don't care about his luggage right now."

"That's sort of what I was wondering about," says Dad. "You don't seem to care either. This probably dates back to the time of the monarchy in Iraq. What aren't you interested?"

Aban glances at Vikram. A few seconds go by as they just look at one another.

"Oh go on, tell them," says Vikram. "Why shouldn't they know too?"

"What is it?" says Kelly. There's a touch of panic in her voice.

"OK, here it goes. When we were cleaning up back there, I overheard some of the guards talking. They were talking Farsi. It's the language of Iran. I know a bit of Farsi and I really got the impression that we are all going to be killed."

Dad just stares at them.

"But that doesn't make sense. Why hold us and then kill us?"

"Because, it's going slow. Too slow. They're probably finding that dealing with so many different nationalities is a big nuisance. Too many countries to deal with. And we're not important anyhow. There's somebody here who is." He looks around. "My

guess is that they targeted this flight because it had somebody important on it, but the rest of us are just a nuisance as time goes on.”

“That’s a lot of speculation,” says Dad.

Aban shrugs.

“OK, Dr. Kent. But why are we here? How long do you think they are going to keep us in a date orchard? We had a chance as long as we were at the palace, but out here? My guess is we have an hour or so.”

“Well,” says Dad exhaling a long sigh. He puts the trunk down again. “I’m not keen on just standing here and getting shot. But at the same time, we can’t just charge off and find ourselves in just as bad a situation in the middle of Baghdad. You know this city. What should we do?”

“My advice is this…” says Aban. “In fact, it’s what Vikram and I were discussing. Don’t all look, but do you see the tallest building in Baghdad? It’s behind me.”

We discreetly glance over his shoulder.

“That’s the Sheraton Ishtar. Or more accurately, it was the Sheraton Ishtar.

Being the tallest building it’s taken a lot of hits and I don’t even know if it’s operational. But across from it is The Palestine. It’s a hotel that is used by journalists. It’s outside the Green Zone but it should be fairly safe. We wouldn’t be able to just charge into the Green Zone anyway without authorization. So, my advice is to run. Just run. I can run anywhere and try to find safety. But you people, being foreigners, would be better off running to The Palestine.”

Dad nods.

“That’s good advice Aban, and I appreciate it. But why don’t we all run for the same destination? I’d hate for you to miss out on us opening up this trunk.”

Aban smiles.

“You are ever the archaeologist. But your optimism encourages me”

“Well, thinking practically for a moment,” says Dad. “We can’t just run. They’ll gun us down. So we’ll have to create a diversion.”

“Maybe Feisal kept grenades in that trunk,” suggests Vikram.

“It’s not an impossible suggestion,” says Dad. “But I don’t want to try to pry it open at this point.”

“Too late,” says Vikram grimly nodding towards the guards.

Imad and his men have turned their attention back to the prisoners.

“Half an hour!” calls out Imad. “That is all you have left. If you like to pray, pray now. Pray that the American government will be reasonable. They have been very slow about responding and we have told them the time is short.”

The murmur that runs through our group is intense. The Egyptian woman starts to weep. Her daughter holds onto her.

All around us, eyes are wide. There is anger. There is fear. And there is desperation.

Even though we would all be gunned down if we try it, I’m surprised there isn’t a mass exodus from the date field.

I can't believe that we only have half an hour left to live. It doesn't seem possible.

"Maybe we should talk to them," says Vikram. His voice is desperate. "After all, it will just be a waste of life.."

"What is life worth in Iraq these days?" says Aban, sounding annoyed. "There'll be no mercy for us, I assure you. I'm not staying to die here in a field. I didn't come here for that..." His eyes are moving all around, watching the guards and looking in the distance.

"Well, this would be a good time for a miracle," says Dad, looking around. I think he's sort of expecting the American military to suddenly show up.

"There are no miracles in Baghdad," says Aban. His eyes are also scanning the landscape. "I could find a thousand people who will back me up on that."

I don't see how we can run and get away with it. There's just too much open space. So I'm looking at the people. I've never seen people before who have been told that they only have half an hour to live. Dad will be strong right to the end because of his faith, but I realize from people's faces that most people don't have his faith. They're facing death with fear and anger and desperation.

My eyes are drawn to the two young men who have spent all their time up til now watching the older men play cards. The ones who look American. From the similarity in their features, they're definitely brothers. They're standing by themselves, earnestly talking to each other.

"Why don't they have parents?" I say out loud.

"What?" Only Julia is paying attention.

"Those guys over there," I say, nodding in the direction of the two young men. "It's strange that they don't have parents. Why would two guys who look American be traveling to Iraq by themselves? They're too young to be soldiers."

"You know, you're right," says Julia. "This isn't exactly a vacation destination. And they're certainly not Arabs returning home."

"I don't know why we didn't notice it before!" says Vikram. I don't know at what point he started listening, but now even Aban and Dad are looking over at the boys.

"It's because one or both of their parents are here," I say, answering my own question. "And whoever their parents are, they're important enough to take the sons as hostages."

Aban nods vigorously.

"It's a logical conclusion," says Dad, thoughtfully. "But it doesn't help us out of here. In fact, it kind of makes it worse. We can't just run and leave those boys behind knowing full well..."

"Now, now, Dr. Kent," interrupts Vikram. "It's all very well and nice to have a conscience. But in some instances it's not very practical. This is one of those instances. Besides, those boys will be the last to be shot. They're the important ones. There will be some kind of retribution if they're shot. I don't think there will be retribution for us. India will not invade Iraq to avenge me, nor Canada for you."

"What kind of parent would let his or her child come to Iraq?" asks Dad. Pretty funny considering we're standing next to him.

“The kind of parent who doesn’t mind invading a country,” says Aban, bitterly. “Now, let’s get back to matters at hand. Staying alive, for instance.”

But I’m still watching the guys who are talking intensely to one another. One of them is nodding vigorously and they seem oblivious to everyone else. They’re the only people who don’t look afraid. But why wouldn’t they be afraid like everyone else?

“Dad!” I whisper urgently. “I think those guys are going to do something...”

I’ve barely said the words before the guys start running. They just take off. And they’re running fast.

It takes a few seconds before someone notices.

One of the guards shouts something. He lifts up his gun, but Imad quickly pushes it back down and shakes his head.

Our theory that these young men are who this whole thing is all about is born out by the fact that all of the guards, including Imad, begin chasing the boys, but not shooting at them.

“C’mon!” Dad grabs the trunk and starts running after the guards. Julia and I are stunned for the moment, but we have no choice except to follow. “We have to make sure those boys are OK,” Dad explains over his shoulder.

After the initial shock, the group breaks out in talk. I glance back and see that once everyone is over the surprise and realize that the guards’ guns aren’t pointing at them anymore, they all start running in different directions. Any direction but the one we’re now running in. Even Vikram and Aban are running away from us, toward that Palestine Hotel that Aban was talking about.

I don’t know how Dad is doing it, carrying a heavy trunk and all, but he’s managing to keep up with the guards. We’re right behind him.

Thankfully the guards don’t seem to care about us.

The young men are in shape because they are actually getting ahead of the guards. I know I’m not going to be able to keep this up for much longer. We are out of the trees and running down a road now. There is only the occasional pedestrian and the sight of the guns causes each one to leap back into a doorway or hurriedly turn down a side-street.

Of course, the boys don’t have any clue where to run. At least that’s what I think, at first.

“They’re heading for the Green Zone,” says a voice behind me. I’m so startled that if I could jump while running, I would.

It’s Aban.

He and Vikram are now huffing and puffing right along with us.

“Your dad put us to shame,” explains Aban, somewhat gasping for air.

“Somehow we felt... guilty.”

“Though I don’t know why,” says Vikram. He’s younger and slimmer so the run isn’t affecting him as much as it is Aban. “Why should we feel guilty for self-preservation?”

I’m not sure if Dad is aware of the entourage behind him.

Some of the guards are slowing down although Imad shows no sign of stopping.

“If they make it to the Green Zone...” says Aban. He can’t finish for exertion but the message is obvious. If these guys make it to the Green Zone, it will be game over for Imad and his gang.

“Oh taxi,” calls out Vikram to no one in general. “If only we had one. If the boys had one they could make it to the Green Zone. If we had one, we could pursue in leisure.”

I don’t know much about war-time Baghdad, but judging from the infrequent traffic on this road, I doubt a taxi is going to magically appear. Still, now that we’re out in the open, anything could happen.

“American troops,” gasps Aban.

“Of course!” says Vikram. He must do a lot of running in his spare time because his voice doesn’t sound at all strained. “American troops would be far more useful than a taxi. Particularly if they figured out that American citizens are being pursued by Iraqi terrorists. Of course, I don’t know what they’d make of us...”

“I’m a believer in miracles,” says Dad, puffing, over his shoulders. So he does know that Vikram and Aban have caught up. “And a tank-load of American troops would be an answer to my prayers. But my experience is that God is seldom that obvious in answering my prayers.”

“Maybe we should have our theological debate after this is all over,” says Aban. His cheeks are rosy, but he seems to be getting a second-wind.

“On the contrary,” says Vikram. “It’s times like this that theology becomes so much more interesting. We all worship different Gods, I presume?”

“If you mean, I’m a Muslim, you’re a Hindu, and he’s a Christian?” Aban nods towards Dad.

“Exactly,” says Vikram. “So, if deliverance comes, from which God did it come from?”

Dad laughs.

“You didn’t include the men we’re chasing. What about their God? Whose side is Allah on? Aban’s or theirs?”

“The victim,” groans Aban. “Always the victim. I hope.”

And then the miracle happens. To this day, I guess Aban will say it was Allah, Vikram will say it was Vishnu and we’ll say it was Jesus. And an atheist will say it’s just everyday life in Baghdad.

~ CHAPTER SIX ~

A car blows up.

I had noticed it just parked on the side of the road. Probably I had noticed it because there were so few cars parked on this particular road. This one was old, battered, and I think it was blue. It was kind of hard to tell after it blew up.

The boys had already run past it. But their pursuers were just coming up to it.

Naturally, it slowed them down. In fact, by the time we caught up with them, although none of them were dead, some were lying on the ground with blood on their face or body, and their guns were just scattered around. No one seemed interested in moving.

A white van zipped by but didn't stop to help. In Baghdad, it's probably safer to just keep going.

Imad survived and was obviously torn between continuing the chase and taking care of his men. Taking care of his men won out and by the time we were there, I couldn't even see the boys anymore. Obviously, they had glanced back, seen what happened and hadn't waited to see the aftermath. There was a side-street to turn down so that's probably where they had continued running.

Dad looks concerned as he appraises the situation – scanning the road for the boys and then looking down at the men.

“Do we call an ambulance?” he asks.

Imad snorts.

“I guess you don't want any contact with anyone,” says Dad, nodding his agreement. He puts down the trunk. “Well, can we help you get them somewhere?”

Imad looks at him strangely.

“We were holding you captive. In fact, we still are.”

“I agree that you have the guns, but at this point, you don't really have the men to use them.”

Imad sighs, takes a deep breath and looks around. Then he nods his agreement.

“OK, OK. Let's go. We'll take them....” He stops to think. “...somewhere.”

“Why did this car blow up?” asks Vikram.

Aban is prudently picking up all the weapons that are scattered on the sidewalk.

“You want a technical answer?” Imad, now crouched down to help one of his comrades looks up at him quizzically. “I'm not a specialist in car bombs...”

“No, I mean, this road is somewhat quiet. I’ve seen, like, three people since we left that date orchard. Who could be harmed by such a thing?”

“I dunno,” shrugs Imad, standing up, his comrade now with an arm around his shoulder. “Maybe the house over there is the house of some American-appointed government person.”

We all glance at the house behind the tall fence. All we can see are a few trees behind it.

Julia and I don’t seem to be expected to help with the injured men so it’s left to us to carry the load of the trunk. Dad and Vikram are each escorting a bleeding man. Aban looks comical with his cache of weapons and I have no doubt that, even for Baghdad, we make an odd group. There are a few people on the street. I guess the sound of the car bomb got their attention. But they all stay on the other side of the road and nobody says anything to us.

“Well,” says Imad, over his shoulder. “I have a difficulty. I can’t exactly take my men to safety and then have you know where we live.”

“No problem. We can go now,” says Vikram, looking like he’d be happy to just turn and walk away and leave his bleeding man to hobble along on his own.

“We’ll help you as far as you want to go,” says Dad. “Then we’ll make our own way from there.”

“And what is to stop you from following us?”

“You said yourself that it’s dangerous for foreigners. I assure you, once you don’t need us, we’ll be heading for the nearest point of safety.”

“That would be Amman,” says Vikram.

“I have weapons,” says Aban. “That means we have the advantage.”

“They’re not loaded,” says Imad, something like amusement leaking out of his voice. “I wasn’t able to get any ammunition and I was counting on everyone behaving themselves.”

Aban is looking at his weapons.

“If you don’t believe me, try them,” says Imad.

Aban sighs.

“We’ll go back to the vans,” says Imad. We were already heading back in the direction we had come. “I’ll let you have one and we’ll take the other...”

“It’s a generous offer,” says Dad. “But I’m afraid there will only be one van when we get back.”

Imad’s head whips around in Dad’s direction.

“I saw the van drive by us,” Dad explains. “Right after the car blew up.”

Imad curses and swears in Arabic.

“Boy, it’s true about the crime rate here,” says Vikram. “How long did we leave those vans alone? Like, ten minutes?”

Dad smiles.

Julia and I exchange glances over the trunk. Dad knows something. But he obviously can’t tell us right now.

It’s a long walk back to the date grove where the one van is now parked. I didn’t realize how far we ran, and now, of course, the injured men are moving much slower.

When we get to the van, the injured men are helped inside and then we all stand around awkwardly.

There is a long pause.

“Oh, come on!” says Imad, jerking his head towards the van. “I’ll drop you off wherever you want to go.”

Vikram looks like he’s about to say something, like, that he’d like to go to Mumbai, but before anyone speaks, Aban hops inside, still holding the weapons and says “The Palestine.”

“Fine,” says Imad, shutting the back door after we’ve all followed Aban.

Everyone’s pretty quiet for the short drive. We aren’t guards and prisoners anymore. Just people caught up in a crazy situation in a city unlike any other I will probably ever visit again.

Imad doesn’t pull up directly in front of the hotel, but Aban seems satisfied. He’s the first to leap out, abandoning the weapons and gallantly reaching back to assist Julia and I as we climb out. Dad has resumed charge of the trunk.

Imad had climbed out to open the back door and now we stand around wondering how to say good-bye to this man who although, he hasn’t exactly been our friend, he hasn’t exactly been evil incarnate either.

Aban and Vikram are hurrying towards the hotel, but Dad puts down the trunk and grabs Imad’s hand to give it a shake.

“I wish you all the best,” he says. “I want to thank you for not harming me and my family. I hope we can meet again under better circumstances.”

Imad just stares at him. Then he smiles and the smile turns into a laugh.

“Likewise,” he says before hurrying to the front of the van, hopping back in and taking off.

“Well,” says Dad, staring at it as it heads down the road. “That’s that then.” He turns around, picks up the trunk, and we head for The Palestine Hotel.

~ CHAPTER SEVEN ~

Aban and Vikram have already created a stir by the time we get there.

They are in the lobby, surrounded by men who are probably reporters, telling them their story of harrowing abduction and heroic escape.

The lobby looks like it's been bombed at one point. Some of the windows are boarded up and the walls have a rough unfinished look about them. The reception area isn't the elegant marble counter-top you find in some hotels, but more of a kitchen counter. Everything seems temporary and in transition.

I know this sounds crazy, but I hope Imad has time to get away.

So far, everyone just has a microphone or a portable recorder in the faces of Aban and Vikram and nobody seems interested in pursuing the white van.

When we arrive, Aban points at us and a few of the reporters rush over to Dad. He makes some remarks about how nice it is to be free again and how his first objective is to phone his wife and let her know that we're OK. A lot of flash goes off so I know that our picture is going to be in the newspapers, but since Aban and Vikram are more loquacious than Dad, the reporters drift back to them, leaving us to head for some pay phones in the corner of the lobby.

Dad attempts to phone Mom only to be told something about phone lines being down and try again later.

"I wasn't even told that by a phone operator," he says to us. "It was some lady who lives here in Baghdad. She said that she had been trying to get through to her brother in Cairo for three days now and that unless you have a mobile phone it's near impossible to get through to anyone."

"You have a cell phone," says Julia.

Dad nods.

"But I'll have to find a way to recharge it. Maybe one of the reporters can help me. But first, we have to do something about Kelly and the boys."

"Kelly and the boys?" says Julia.

Dad nods.

"That white van that drove by us after the explosion was Kelly. She must have been following us and she turned down the side-street that the boys went down. I'm hoping she was able to find them."

"That's so smart!" says Julia. "Everyone else was running on foot and she thought to grab a van."

“Must be part of that U.N. training,” I say.

Dad grins.

“Would she come here?” I ask.

“I think so,” says Dad. “She was there when Aban suggested running to The Palestine. So hopefully she’ll come here as soon as she can.”

“I think she’s already here!”

I had glanced into an adjacent dining room and had noticed that although it was mostly empty, one of the corner tables was occupied by a woman and two young men.

We hurry into the dining room and next thing, Julia and I are both hugging Kelly and Dad is shaking the boys’ hands. Tears are in our eyes. It’s really an emotional moment.

“When did you get here?” asks Dad.

“We were here about ten minutes ago,” she says. “The van is parked out back and we came in with a little more discretion than those two.” She nods in the direction of Vikram and Aban.

Dad laughs.

“It’s their moment of glory and the reward for all their suffering.”

Kelly nods.

“But the guys and I wanted to plot a little strategy before talking to the reporters.”

A waiter comes up with three plates of hamburgers and fries and puts them down in front of Kelly and the boys.

“Hamburgers and fries?” says Julia, incredulously.

“Yes,” says Kelly already with a french fry in her mouth. “God bless them. I love this place. Would you like to order?”

Julia orders the hamburger and french fries but Dad and I ask for falafels and salad.

“Anyway,” says Kelly. “This is Michael and this is David.”

Michael looks about sixteen and David about fourteen.

The boys grin and nod. Their mouths are full of hamburger.

“Their dad is a Colonel here...”

“Lieutenant Colonel,” says Michael, putting two french fries in his mouth and taking a swallow of his cola.

“Their mom died and they were living with their aunt and it wasn’t going well, so they decided to come be with their dad. Obviously someone figured out who they were and decided they would make excellent targets. At least, that’s my theory. And the guys agree with me.”

Michael and David nod.

“Let’s get this straight,” says Dad. “You guys decided on your own to come here?”

They nod again.

“Did your dad know you were coming?”

Michael and David look at each other.

“No,” says Michael, looking slightly ashamed. “But if we had told him ahead of time he wouldn’t have let us come, would he?”

“Then it's not these guys,” says Dad, leaning back. “Did you leave a note, or anything, for your aunt?”

“Yeah,” says Michael. “I mean, we just said we were going to be with Dad.”

“I guess it's possible that your aunt told someone and they told someone and so it got out that you were on your way here...” says Dad, thinking out loud. “But that just doesn't seem right...”

“But Imad's men chased them,” I say. “They have to be the important ones.”

“Actually,” says Michael, “that may have been my fault. When we were back at that place I told that terrorist dude that my dad was a Lieutenant Colonel here and that when he found out what was going on, he'd get them and he'd get them good.”

“Ahhh,” says Dad. “So they didn't know you were important until then. But then when you ran they didn't want to lose you.” He turns to Kelly. “So, what's to stop us from just getting into that van and driving to the Green Zone?”

Kelly shakes her head.

“Gas,” she says. “I was running on fumes just to get here. It's on empty. So we'd end up on some street, no hijabs for me and the girls, obvious Westerners, well, I hate to think how long we'd last.”

“So, we're stuck here,” says Dad, leaning back in his chair. “At least until we can find a way to make a local phone call.”

“Well,” says Kelly, wiping her hands on a napkin. “I think I'm going to see about getting a room for me and the guys here.”

Having gotten a head start on us, they're finishing their food. The waiter is just bringing our food now.

The guys join Kelly as she goes out to the reception desk and after a quick blessing, we start on our meal.

After a few minutes, she returns.

“There are only two rooms left in the whole hotel and I've got them,” she announces, sitting down again. “If you want to stay here for awhile, you can share with the guys and I'll share with the girls.”

“OK,” says Dad, after a moment's thought. “I guess that's the best thing to do for now. Is that alright with you guys?”

Michael and David nod their permission for Dad to share their room.

“Then we ladies will take room 307 and you guys can have 308.”

In the meantime, the journalists are winding down with Vikram and Aban. Aban notices us and joins us in the dining room. A few of the journalists also return to the dining room and start typing away on laptops. The waiter is busy taking orders for coffee.

“Praise be to God!” says Aban, pulling up a chair and sitting beside Dad. “Here you all are!” He gives Kelly and the guys a special smile.

“Praise be to God,” agrees Dad. “Tell me, are we going to get any help from those journalists? All the phone lines are down and the only way to communicate is by cell phone. We also need a number to call...”

Aban pulls a cell phone out of an inside pocket and flips it open.

“Dead,” he announces.

Vikram is strolling into the dining room with a journalist and when he sees us with Kelly and the guys, his face brightens and he excuses himself to hurry over.

"Familiar faces in an unfamiliar world," he says, sitting down beside Kelly.

"We are discussing communication," says Aban. "We have no way of doing it and we do not know who we want to communicate with anyhow."

"Ah yes," says Vikram. "We should tell someone we are here."

"Will the journalists report our presence to anyone?" asks Dad.

"No, but after all the exciting news we've given them," says Vikram, looking around, "I'm sure one of them might help us. Let's just let them write their stories and send them off and then we will pester them for help."

"Wise thinking," agrees Dad.

When the waiter returns, Dad, Kelly and Aban order coffee, Vikram, Julia and I have tea, and Michael and David order more colas.

It doesn't take long for the reporters to wrap up their stories and then Vikram heads over to the man who he came into the dining room with.

After some nodding, the man pulls out a cell-phone, hits a button and waits. He presses a button again and waits. After a few times, he shrugs. He and Vikram talk for awhile before Vikram returns to the table.

"OK," he says, sitting down. "Bob can't get through right now. But he promises he'll keep trying. Bob has a contact in the Green Zone. He figures that a lot of the other hostages are probably showing up here and there and that soldiers are out looking for the ones who are still missing. In any case, Bob says we're safe here for the time being and that we shouldn't leave. As soon as he gets through, they'll probably send someone to get us."

"That's fine," says Dad. "Unfortunately, I hear we have the last two rooms in the hotel..."

Aban shrugs.

"I won't be here for long," he says. "I'm going to go see Saraa."

All the adults look concerned.

"Is that safe?" asks Kelly.

"Safe?" Aban looks at her. "Safe?! We have just been held by terrorists. Is anything safe? If God can protect me from terrorists he can protect me from Iraq. I came here to see Saraa and I have waited long enough. I just ask one thing." He turns to Dad. "Please don't give that trunk to anyone until I've had a chance to see what's in it. It is a marvelous find and I wouldn't want to miss..."

"Say no more," says Dad, holding up a hand. "After all we've been through together, it's only right that we open it up together." He glances at the trunk that is underneath the table between his feet. "In fact, I don't think it would be easy to open without the right tools. I don't want to just pry it open and do any damage to it. The trunk itself is of historical value."

"I promise I will be in touch," says Aban. "As soon as my phone is recharged I will call you. By then, yours should be recharged too."

He and Dad exchange phone numbers. Aban gives us a little wave before heading out of the dining room and then out of the hotel.

“I’m worried about him,” says Kelly, watching him go.

“Me too,” says Dad. “But he came here knowing the dangers and he’d rather face them than lose an important relationship.”

“It is very touching,” says Vikram, taking a sip of tea.

“But we need to find you a room,” says Dad to Vikram.

Vikram shook his head.

“There are plenty of rooms. Bob over there told me that the hotel is practically empty right now so don’t let them rip me off when I rent a room.”

“What?!” Kelly is outraged. “That man over there told me that it would be a little expensive because there were only two rooms left...” She is glaring at the reception desk.

“Well then,” said Vikram standing up. “I must hurry over there and book my room. Maybe a whole bus-load of tourists from Switzerland will be arriving at any minute and...”

“I’m coming too!” announces Kelly, standing up. “I have a few Arabic words I want to have with that guy...”

Michael and David excuse themselves to go into the lobby. They sit down on the couches and begin flipping through some magazines.

Kelly returns to triumphantly announce that there has been a significant reduction in the rates of our room. She also gives me and Dad each a room key and says that she will be going upstairs to take a long awaited shower.

That sounds good. Unfortunately we have nothing to change into. The gowns from Imad are long gone. I guess we’ll be hand-washing our clothes and then wrapping ourselves in bedsheets. Dad is thinking along the same lines because he stands up and says, “Let’s see about finding a change of clothes for us all.”

“Just don’t leave the hotel,” says Vikram, still sipping his tea and looking content with life now that we are out of danger. “I promised Bob that we’d stay put. And as soon as he calls his contact in the Iraqi government, they’ll tell us that we should stay put. Or maybe his contact isn’t with the Iraqi government. Come to think of it, I really don’t know who his contact is. It could be a cleaning woman for all I know...”

Dad shakes his head. But he’s smiling.

We head over to the reception desk and the man behind the counter is very sympathetic. But he is also very sorry. There are no complimentary outfits with our room.

“Don’t worry, mate,” a passing journalist has heard the conversation. “I’ve got some things you can have.” He has an Australian accent and he gives Dad a big thump on the back. “The thing is, we all interviewed those blokes who first came in, but no one’s interviewed *you*. Give me an exclusive and I’ll give you some clothes.”

Dad laughs.

“Now that’s a fair deal,” he says. “Especially in these hard times.”

The journalist, who’s name turns out to be Mel, invites us up to his room.

His room is hideously messy with computer equipment, clothing everywhere, and food wrappers. He generously digs out some clothing for us right away and then he and Dad sit down at a little table.

Mel is thrilled to find out that Dad is a prominent archaeologist and Dad doesn't mind promoting that he was originally coming to the Middle East to work at Pella, a refuge for Christians in the first century. Dad tells his whole story, including the scary plane landing all the way to our final dash around Baghdad to try to rescue the boys. The only thing he doesn't mention is the conversation with Kelly and the boys where we found out that their dad is a lieutenant colonel, or whatever they said.

"And you say you found this trunk in what's-his-name's palace?" says Mel, nodding towards the trunk between Dad's feet.

Dad nods.

"Feisal the First. King of Iraq from 1921 to 1933. Obviously, if there are any contents, they will be of some value, even if it's only historical."

"Well, can we open it now?"

Dad shakes his head.

"The contents might be fragile after all these years. We'll have to open it in a protected environment where the contents can be preserved. Plus, this old trunk won't be easy to open since we don't have a key. I don't want to damage it..."

"OK, OK," said Mel, waving his hand in defeat. "I get the point. I'm talking to an archaeologist, not a treasure hunter. But promise me this, let me be there when you do open it."

"I will if I can," says Dad.

"I'll sweeten the deal a bit," says Mel, digging around in his suitcase. "Some shaving stuff for you." He hands a razor and some shaving cream to Dad. "And some perfume for the ladies." He hands an elegant bottle to me. "Bought it for my wife in the souk. But she'll understand."

"Thanks!" says Dad. "It's much appreciated. Another thing you could help me with is my cell-phone. Any chance of recharging it?"

"I can help you there, but I should warn you, the service is down a lot. A lot of people have been using cell-phones to detonate car bombs so the Americans sometimes jam the signals..."

"Understood," says Dad. "I want to try to call my wife, of course, and I want to stay in touch with Aban. You know, the man you interviewed..."

Mel nods as he goes into the bathroom and comes back with a phone recharger. "Can't afford to lose this, mate. Why don't you leave the phone with me and come back for it in a few hours?"

Dad nods and thanks him as he hands over the phone.

"Well, now that we have clothes, I'm eager to take a shower," says Dad, standing up and piling his new outfit on top of the trunk.

Our new clothing is a bit unusual. Julia and I have white dress shirts, white undershirts and black dress pants. Thankfully Mel is on the slim side so they may actually fit. Dad might have a bit of trouble getting into his pair of jeans and plaid shirt. Mel has also kindly thrown in a pair of socks for each of us. We're on our own for underwear.

When we get to our room, Kelly is out of the shower. Unlike us, she didn't lose the gown that was purchased for her. Must have tucked it into her purse.

Despite the feeling that the city is in a state of war, The Palestine has maintained standards. The two double beds are covered in matching bedspreads, the carpet is thick and the curtains are an elegant cream. The dresser has a coffee-maker and some complimentary coffee. Kelly is already having a cup as she sits on her bed and watches the TV.

“Oh, hi guys!” She gives us a brief smile and returns her attention to the news which is incomprehensible to us being that it is in Arabic.

Julia gets first dibs on the shower and I wander off to the window. It's only the third floor but it gives an idea of the Baghdad skyline. Some buildings have been destroyed, giving the feeling of war. But, in the distance is a whole series of matching high-rises which make me think that some people must still be here and doing OK.

My favourite buildings are the ones with a distinctive Middle Eastern look – the mosques with their minarets and golden domes, the low rise mud-coloured buildings with their arched entry ways, the elegant modern buildings that preserve the spirit of Islamic architecture. The Tigris river dominates the scene with sleek bridges spanning the two shores.

Julia comes out of the bathroom complaining that she needs something to hold up her pants.

Kelly looks up from the news and reaches for her purse on the dresser.

“I think I've got some safety pins,” she says. “You can tighten up the waist with a couple of those.”

Sure enough, Kelly comes through.

With all of Kelly's and Julia's clothing hanging in the bathroom, there isn't much room left for my stuff. After the shower I have to hang my wet clothing up on hangers instead of over the shower curtain. At least my pants are a better fit than Julia's. Either Mel has given me a smaller pair or I'm bigger than I thought.

“Nothing on the news about us,” Kelly announces, when I come out of the bathroom. “I guess we'll be here for awhile. Shall we see what the guys are up to?”

She knocks on the adjoining door. David answers. He's wearing a bed sheet, toga style. Kelly laughs.

“I'm glad you guys have taken a shower,” she says. “I guess it will be room service for us tonight, eh?”

David nods, looking embarrassed.

In the background we can hear the television on.

“Find anything good on TV?” asks Kelly.

David shakes his head.

“It's just Dr. Kent watching the news. All the English stuff is news and I can't understand the Arabic stuff. I can't wait to get to the Green Zone. Do you think they have movies?”

“Oh, I'm sure they do. But patience, dear David. It may be a while...”

David shrugs.

Dad comes to the doorway and he's looking pretty funny in his tight jeans and plaid shirt.

“This will teach me to always carry a spare outfit in my carry-on luggage!” he says ruefully. “I think your plan to do room service for dinner is a good one.”

Kelly nods.

“I’ve just finished watching all the Arabic news. There’s nothing about us.”

“Nothing about us on the English channel either. I guess it seemed like a big deal to us, but there’s so much else going on here...” Dad gives us a smile over Kelly’s shoulder. “Vikram’s man will get through at some point and I’ll have my cell-phone back soon.”

Boredom causes us to put in an early order for dinner and pretty soon, we’re sitting around the guys’ room eating a feast of pita bread and hummus and olives and fried eggplant and kebabs on rice.

When we return to our room, Kelly switches on the news again, but Julia and I climb into bed and fall asleep. After the last few days, an air-conditioned room and clean sheets are a luxury.

But despite my exhaustion, something wakes me up in the middle of the night.

~ CHAPTER EIGHT ~

At takes me a second or two to figure out where I am. Julia is sound asleep beside me and everything is quiet for the moment. But then I remember. It was some kind of explosion. I sit straight up.

It must have come from outside. I hurry over to the window.

Kelly comes out of the bathroom. She's closing up her cell phone and joins me by the window.

“What was *that*?”

“I dunno,” I say. “But there's a lot of light over there.” I point.

In the distance, it looks like a building is on fire.

“Well, at least it's not near us. Could be the government soldiers cleaning out some terrorist cell.” Kelly snorts. “Or what they think is a terrorist cell.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, turning away from the window. Whatever is happening is too far away to figure out.

“Unfortunately, nowadays, everybody's so edgy in Iraq that sometimes they swoop in and make arrests and leave it til later to figure out who's innocent and who's guilty. It wouldn't be so bad except that sometimes the soldiers take out their frustrations on both the guilty and the innocent.”

“That's awful!” I gasp.

Kelly nods.

“It's been happening here in Middle East for a long time. Even back in the days when the British had a mandate to rule Palestine. A few Jewish terrorists would blow up a government building and then the British soldiers would take out their frustrations on the Jews in general.”

I think about this.

“But wouldn't that just make things worse?” I say. “I mean, if ordinary people get hurt, then maybe they start to support terrorism against the government instead of just staying neutral. I mean, I know that if soldiers came and took Dad away and hurt him then I would be more likely to want to fight against that regime...”

“Well, Ginny,” says Kelly. “I think you've just figured out one of the biggest problems here.” Kelly keeps staring out the window. She seems far away and kind of sad. “Better get some more sleep, honey.”

I use the bathroom and then rejoin Julia in the bed. She, of course, has slept through everything. I toss and turn a bit and just when I think I'm never going to get back to sleep, I drift off.

Thankfully, most of our clothing is dry in the morning. My socks are still a bit damp so I just go barefoot in my shoes.

Dad knocks on our door and we all head down to breakfast. The Palestine has a breakfast buffet of Arabic bread with lots of different things to spread on it. I recognize hummus and Kelly tells me and Julia what the other stuff is.

"That's a date spread," she says, pointing. "That's sesame. Cheese, of course. And be sure and try some of the jams. They have fruits here that we don't have back home. Oh! And look! You have to try this cream!"

"It's really thick," I say, putting a tablespoon on my plate.

"That's because it's buffalo cream," says Kelly, reaching for the spoon.

I stare down at my plate.

"Gertrude Bell used to serve it at her afternoon teas," says Kelly enthusiastically.

We join Dad and the guys who have filled up their plates with eggs.

Vikram comes in when we're almost done.

"Good news!" he says. "I just stopped by Bob's room. He got through! They're sending someone to get us this morning! We'll be having lunch in the Green Zone!"

"That's great!" says Dad, standing up. "If the phones are working, I really should try to get through to my wife. Girls," he says to us. "Stay with Kelly! I'm just going to dash upstairs and get my phone from Mel."

We nod.

Julia is on her second plate anyhow and is going to take awhile. I help myself to more tea.

Vikram gets a plate of food and joins us.

"Do you think you could keep Ginny and Julia company?" Kelly asks Vikram.

"If the phones are working, we really should try to make some calls. Come on, guys."

She and Michael and David get up and hurry out of the dining room. I guess they're eager to try to get a hold of the Lieutenant Colonel.

"I've always wanted to see the Green Zone," says Vikram. "This is going to be fabulous for my dissertation."

"Yeah," I say. "I guess very few people really know what life is like here."

"You're going to have a lot of stories to tell when you get home," says Vikram, spreading some sesame paste on pita bread.

"I think Mom will be horrified," says Julia. "She thought we were going to go poke around in some dirt in Jordan and here we are in a war zone."

Vikram laughs.

"But she will be very happy to know you are safe."

"Is the Green Zone safe?" asks Julia.

"Well, safer than here," says Vikram looking around. "It must be your father's prayers that are keeping things quiet here. As you can tell from the lobby, they've had

rockets hit the hotel. The Green Zone has rockets too, but they keep a tight control over who goes in.”

“So, they’ll be a lot of Americans there?” I ask.

Vikram nods and stirs his tea.

“Most Westerners live in the Green Zone. Also, the current Iraqi government. It’s where the rich Iraqis and the supporters of Saddam Hussein used to live. It’s where Saddam Hussein’s palaces are. The Americans were living in the Republican Palace while they had their embassy built. I’ve heard that it’s like a different world than the rest of Baghdad. Quiet streets, palm trees...”

“The streets are quiet out here,” points out Julia. “And they have palm trees.”

“Ah, yes,” says Vikram, “but it’s an ominous quiet. Though I imagine the palm trees are the same. But Bob says the only reason the streets are quiet right now is because there is a gasoline shortage. He says that as soon as it becomes available again, there will be so many cars on the road and the driving will be so crazy that you cannot even cross the road.”

“Gas shortages?” says Julia. “Don’t they, like, *make* gas here?”

“Yes,” nods Vikram. “It is one of the ironies of war. And something many Iraqis are not happy about. Particularly since there are no gas shortages in the Green Zone. They even have air-conditioned buses for the Westerners.”

“You mean, like with bus stops and everything?” says Julia.

“That’s right,” says Vikram, nodding. “We’ll also see a lot of villas and palaces. And they’ll be a lot of Western things. Food and clothing and all that. I’m sure we’ll all enjoy checking out the shops. I mean, this used to be my favourite shirt...” Vikram tugs at his white shirt. “But after this is all over, I’ll never wear it again. Or maybe I’ll give it to my brother...”

“Then it’s not really like being in Iraq,” says Julia, taking her last bite of bread and jam.

“Yes and no,” says Vikram. “We will still be able to sit and drink Arabic coffee in a cafe. And there are mosques inside the Green Zone. Many Iraqis live and work in the Green Zone, so it will not entirely be like an American village.”

“Why doesn’t Bob live in the Green Zone?” I ask.

“I can answer that.”

We all jump.

“Sorry!” laughs Bob, taking a seat beside Vikram. “Just came in and couldn’t help but overhear your conversation.”

Bob is probably in his mid 30’s, with sandy brown hair, tall and large. He’s wearing a light blue shirt and khaki pants.

“No,” he says. “We go to the Green Zone a lot for press conferences but we live out here. The Green Zone is for the government and companies rebuilding Iraq. To be honest, it’s a bother even going there. They search you pretty thoroughly before going in.”

“Yuck,” says Julia. “You mean like...”

“Well, I think they’ll be a little more lenient towards you guys considering all you’ve been through. So don’t worry about it. Besides, women search the women.”

“Good,” says Julia.

“What's life like in Iraq?” I ask.

“Well, believe it or not, it's not all bad. I like the people. They're wonderful despite all the stresses. I wouldn't live in the Green Zone for anything. In there they eat American food and hang out with fellow Americans. Out here it's real. I'd rather get my stories from the soldiers that are out on the streets. The soldiers see the real day-to-day stuff. And whenever I can, I try to get to know the Iraqis. The best is when they let me come into their homes and they tell me about what life was like before the Americans came and what it's like now.”

Dad returns to announce that he's gotten through to Mom.

“How is she?” I say, eagerly. “Was she worried?”

“Your mother,” he says shaking his head, but grinning. “She hasn't even turned on the news since we left. She had no idea what was going on. Now she's more worried than ever to hear we're in Iraq, not Jordan.”

“Well, you should be picked up soon,” says Bob, glancing at his watch. “And I imagine you'll be in Jordan before you know it. The flights between Jordan and Baghdad are pretty frequent.”

“Where's Kelly?” asks Dad, looking around.

“She wanted to make some phone calls,” I say.

“Well, I want to give her money for our share of the rooms,” says Dad. “But I guess we can settle accounts in the Green Zone.”

Bob's right. No sooner has Dad ordered himself a cup of coffee than a group of soldiers are striding through the lobby and into the dining hall. Bob waves them over to our table.

Introductions are made and Dad says that he'll go upstairs to let Kelly and the guys know it's time to go.

“What about our clothes...?” asks Julia. “Should we bring the clothes Mel gave us?”

Dad looks at the soldiers.

“What happened to our luggage?” he asks. Dad, of course, has been carrying the trunk from the palace with him wherever he goes.

“Oh, we've got it,” says the leader of the group.

“Good,” says Julia, leaning back.

Dad goes off to find Kelly.

Bob stands up to talk to the soldiers while we wait for Dad.

Still carrying his trunk, Dad comes hurrying back about five minutes later.

“They weren't in their rooms!” he says, slightly breathless. “I've looked everywhere. I can't find them!”

~ CHAPTER NINE ~

“This isn't good,” mutters the head soldier. He turns around and orders the other soldiers to search the hotel.

“Any idea where they might have gone?” the head soldier asks Dad.

Dad shakes his head.

“Did she say where she was going?”

Dad turns to us.

“Just that she was going to make some phone calls,” I say.

“Any idea as to who she wanted to get a hold of?”

The Kent family exchanges looks.

“Well,” says Dad, carefully, aware of Vikram and Bob's presence. “I imagine she wanted to get a hold of the young mens' father...”

“She told you who he was?”

Dad nods.

“Just you?” The soldier glances at Vikram and Bob.

Dad nods.

“Good,” says the soldier. “You guys are coming with me, *now!*” The last word is said with emphasis.

“What's going on, Dr. Kent?” hisses Vikram. Bob is trotting along behind us. Understandably, he senses a good story.

“I don't think I can say...”

“It's a matter of national security,” says the soldier sharply. That puts an end to discussion.

“Which nation?” asks Bob. But the question is ignored.

There are some military-type vehicles parked in front of the hotel with more soldiers guarding them. We're about to climb into something that looks like a fortified Jeep when Dad remembers something.

“There was a van,” he says to the head soldier. “A white van parked in the back of the hotel. That's how Kelly got here...”

The head soldier orders two of his men to go around to the back of the hotel and look for this van.

When they return they announce there is no white van on the premises.

“So much for running on fumes,” says Dad.

“What do you mean?” asks the soldier.

“Well, when I suggested we use the van to drive to the Green Zone, Kelly told me that it was too low on gas to go anywhere.”

“Well, there’s been a gas shortage,” explains the soldier. “But everyone’s been filling up today.”

When we came out of the hotel, I had noticed that the street was a lot busier than the day before. And the increased street traffic resulted in an increase of pedestrians. It was as if everybody liked going out when the streets were crowded. It did feel safer. Vendors even had little tables set up and if we had been allowed, I would have loved to check out some of the dresses and scarves.

Bob, of course, is not allowed to go with us, but he slips a piece of paper to Vikram and says something about calling him if he finds out more.

And then we’re off.

The traffic is very haphazard, but our little conveyer drives along in a steady straight line and most traffic just moves around it.

Since we’re not in the back of a van anymore, this is really my first good look at Baghdad.

Many people are out shopping in the little stalls that are filled with boxes of fruits and vegetables and nuts and dates and rice and spices. The women are veiled and dressed in black and usually have some children with them. Imad is right. We ladies would have really stuck out as foreigners. The men are dressed in Western clothing though. An occasional army vehicle drives by with either American troops or Iraqi troops, but apart from that, I don’t see soldiers just walking around.

But what’s really on my mind is Kelly and where she and the guys are. Were they abducted? Did Imad come back and get them? Or did they leave on their own? And if so, why?

I know Dad and Julia must be thinking about them too because both of them are quiet despite all the new sites. Normally we’d all be talking. But with Vikram in the vehicle we can’t really say anything.

Vikram is also quietly staring out the window, but his eyes are far away.

We have the head soldier and a driver in our vehicle. Occasionally a walkie-talkie crackles and there’s a brief exchange.

Then Dad speaks up.

“Sir, if I may ask, what’s being done to locate Kelly and David and Michael...?”

“I’m sure they’ll show up,” says the soldier.

“But surely they’re in some sort of trouble...”

“It’s trouble just coming to Baghdad,” is the reply.

“But something should be done...”

The soldier turns around and gives Dad a good look.

“My job is to get you to the Green Zone. That’s what I’m doing. Your destination was Jordan and we’re going to get you there. Miss McHammond and the two young men were destined for Baghdad. That puts them in a different category.”

“I never thought about that,” says Dad.

The remainder of the drive is silent.

Despite Bob's warning that we might be physically searched, when we reach a gate manned by soldiers, we are just waved in. And Vikram is right. It's a different world behind the wall.

Instead of Iraqis, we see Westerners everywhere. The women are wearing business suits or pants and aren't followed by children. Among the men there are ones in shirts, ties and slacks. Some of them are wearing combat boots which looks a little strange. There are also construction workers and many buildings are either being rebuilt or built from scratch. But, on the whole, the buildings don't look as battered as on the outside of the Green Zone, although there are some that have clearly been abandoned.

We drive down wide streets to some kind of an administration building.

The Jeep pulls right up to the front. We go up a few steps and through the glass doors. The first thing that I notice on the marble floor is our suitcases. The second thing I notice is how intense the air-conditioning is. The Palestine was air-conditioned, but only enough to keep it from being uncomfortably hot.

A lady in a pastel pink business suit with matching pumps hurries forward to greet us. The soldiers turn and disappear outside.

"Hi!" she says. "I'm Lisa! Welcome to Baghdad!"

Dad laughs.

"OK," she says, grinning ruefully. "That's a silly welcome at this point. I think that you've probably seen more of Baghdad than I have. You probably just want to take a shower and change into something else..."

"Well, we did OK at The Palestine," says Dad. "So there's no great hurry there. What I'm really worried about is a friend of ours..."

"Oh yes?"

We're still standing in the foyer. Lisa suggests that we grab our luggage and she'll show us to a lounge that we can stay in until the next flight to Jordan.

We walk down a long wide hallway with doors on either side and people coming in and out carrying files or cups of coffee.

Lisa opens one of the doors and we're in a room that looks like a staff lounge. There are simple blue couches and chairs, coffee tables with current news magazines, and in the corner, a pot of coffee, mugs, sugar, cream and a plate of cookies.

"Now, here we are," says Lisa. "I'm sure you have a lot of questions and as soon as we can, we'll answer as many of them as security will permit. I have to go back to the front desk. We can thank God that many of the people that were on your flight are showing up around town and we're working hard to safely bring them all in."

"I understand," says Dad. "But we really do have some questions..."

Lisa nods, but she's already in the doorway.

"I'll send someone to talk to you as soon as I can," she promises before shutting the door. There's a slight click.

"Unbelievable!" says Vikram, as he lunges for the door and rattles the handle. "We're locked in!"

"Locked in!" Dad tries the door for himself, only confirming what Vikram has said. "OK, this is too much!"

“Why would they want to lock us in?” says Vikram, collapsing onto one of the couches.

“I don't know,” says Dad, also sitting down, a little more slowly. He's still holding his trunk. “The question is, are they locking us in because they don't want to lose us again, or do they think we are some kind of a security liability?”

“Dr. Kent, how could we possibly be some kind of a security liability?”

“Well, not you, but us. We know something...”

“I figured that out back at the hotel,” says Vikram sarcastically. “Now if I'm going to be locked into this room as some kind of a security issue, I'd like to actually *be* a security issue.”

Dad nods.

“I don't mind telling you,” he says.

While Dad tells Vikram about the identity of Michael and David and how Kelly rescued them in the van, Julia and I wander over to the coffee and cookies. I make myself a cafe au lait while Julia starts on the cookies.

“I think Imad must have come back and got them,” says Vikram. “He knew where we were and when he saw the soldiers pull up, he knew this was his last chance. He'd probably found the van after Kelly left it there. Maybe he even filled it up with gas...”

“You know, Dad,” says Julia, wandering over to Dad and Vikram to offer them some cookies from the plate. “I don't know when Michael told Imad that his Dad was a lieutenant whatever. I never saw him talk to him.”

“Well, you didn't have your eye on him all the time.”

“Actually,” said Julia. “I did. That Michael's kind of cute and I was watching him in the palace. He was right in front of us when we went inside and then he was always over watching the card game. Kelly was the only one who talked to Imad.”

“That's strange,” says Dad, taking in this new information. “Because if that's true, then Imad would have had no reason to focus on those boys when they took off. We all started running. He could have gone after any of us.”

“And now we're trapped in here,” says Vikram gloomily. “Who knows what's going on?”

“It's not quite that bad,” says Dad, a twinkle in his eye. He pulls his cell phone out. “We have our friends on the outside!”

“Bob!” says Vikram, reaching into his pocket for the number.

“And don't forget Aban,” says Dad. “He's out there somewhere. I'll give Bob his number so that they can get in contact with each other.” He glances down at the number on Vikram's paper. After a few rings he's talking to Bob. And Bob is a very appreciative audience.

I'm kind of surprised that my Dad is disregarding national security. But then my Dad is like that. He operates on a principle that people are more important than issues.

“OK,” says Dad, after he hangs up. “Now he knows everything.” He stands up and goes over to the small table with the coffee pot and pours himself a mug. “He won't stop til he's gotten to the bottom of the story. Plus, he knows we're here in a locked room. So he's going to phone us periodically until he knows we're released.”

“Do you honestly think we're prisoners?” asks Vikram.

“I do,” says Dad, slowly stirring sugar into his coffee. “We're here in this room because we know who those boys are. Their father may be the top man here. He'll do anything to get them back. And they may not want the world to know what they did to get them back.”

“Why?” says Julia, taking a huge bite of cookie.

“Because it may go against their policy. I'll just give you an example. Some countries have a policy of not negotiating with terrorists. That way the terrorists won't bother abducting the citizens of that country because they know that the country will just let their citizens be killed.”

“That's awful,” I say.

“It is,” agrees Dad, sipping his coffee. “But if you think about it, it actually makes sense in the long run because it makes it pointless for terrorists to abduct, say, American citizens. That's why so many people were worried when we were abducted. They were worried that if their government or if the American government had a policy of not negotiating with terrorists, then we would just be killed.”

“Yeah, I remember that,” nods Julia.

“So, here's the thing. Say the government here negotiates to get those boys back. Well, then they might not want other terrorists to know what they did. Or they might not want U.S. citizens to know what they did because it's obvious that they only negotiated in this case because the young men had an important father. People who have lost sons or daughters in this war will be furious that these particular men get special protection.”

“That makes sense,” says Julia.

“And since we're the only ones who know who those boys are, we might pose a problem...”

The door opens suddenly and a young man in a striped shirt, dark tie and dark pants comes in.

“Ah,” says Vikram. “You are here to answer our questions, yes?”

“Uh,” the man looks uncomfortable as he clears his throat. “I just came to see if you needed something to eat. He glances at the half empty plate of cookies in Julia's hand. “Real food, I mean. We can do hamburgers, chicken, whatever you want...”

“Well, I guess a real meal would be nice,” says Dad. He stood up when the door opened but now he sits back down on the couch. “Whatever's fine by me.”

Julia and I put in orders for hamburgers. Vikram orders chicken.

Then, as the man is heading for the door, almost as an afterthought, he says, “Oh, by the way, I need to take your cell-phones.” Dad and Vikram look at him with shock. “I mean, just for the time that you're here,” he says, quickly. “You'll be heading out soon and you'll get them back again. It's just a security thing, you understand...”

Dad sighs and reaches into his pocket.

“It's not worth arguing about,” he says, handing it over. Vikram does the same.

When the man leaves, the door is locked again.

“Well that confirms it,” says Dad. “They want to make sure no one else finds out about those missing boys.”

“Except that now we're not the only ones who know,” says Vikram. “Praise be to God and you, Dr. Kent! Once it hits the papers, there will be no reason to keep us here.”

I'm just glad that we're locked into a room that has a small bathroom.

The room doesn't have a window so it's easy to lose track of time. Vikram reads all the news magazines. Julia and I play twenty questions until we get bored. Dad sits on one of the couches, sipping coffee and staring at the wall. But I think he's praying.

Coming in and asking us if we want something to eat must have just been a pretense for taking the phones because when the food does finally come, it's delivered by a different man and it's roast beef, baked potatoes and green beans. There are also four slices of apple pie for dessert. We all get a can of lemonade and a fresh pot of coffee is brought in.

But the door remains locked. The man who pushes in the cart of food says he's not authorized to answer any of our questions.

I guess this meal is dinner.

“Well,” says Dad. “We'd better expect that we may be spending the night here.” He reaches for his suitcase and opens it up. “I feel like a change of clothes even if we're being denied showers and beds.”

We all take turns changing into a fresh outfit and brushing our teeth in the small bathroom.

If we had any doubts about our status as prisoners, it's confirmed by the fact that no one comes to talk to us. No one even comes for the dirty dishes. The room is so chilly that we all have to put on layers of clothing from our suitcase in place of blankets. Dad and Vikram gallantly let Julia and I have the couches while they try to make themselves comfortable in the chairs. I feel like I'm never going to fall asleep and I keep getting up to go to the bathroom. Finally, I just say a prayer and try to forget about everything.

~ CHAPTER TEN ~

“Ohhhh!” groans Vikram. “That was not comfortable!”

At first I think that it was Vikram's groan that woke me up but it was actually the door opening and another tray of food being rolled in. Scrambled eggs, potatoes, toast, more coffee, a pot of tea, but again, the man wheeling in the tray says he can't answer any of our questions.

“Well, at least tell us how long we're going to be here and why we're being held as prisoners,” says Vikram, sounding annoyed.

“Oh you're not prisoners,” says the man sincerely. “You should see the prison...”

With that, the door is locked again.

“He's got a point,” says Vikram, going over to the cart and examining the breakfast. “I've heard horror stories about the treatment of prisoners here...”

“So have I,” says Dad quickly. “Let's not go there.”

Clearly things have happened that he doesn't want Julia and I to know about.

“Well,” says Vikram, pouring himself some tea. “What's the plan for today? Should we try to make our escape?” He takes his tea back to a couch.

“How far would we get?” asks Dad, standing by the cart of food and spreading jam on a piece of toast. “Someone would notice us breaking the door down. And even if we made it outside, all the gates are guarded. And even if we managed to get past the Green Zone, where are we? Foreigners in a war-zone...”

“OK, OK,” says Vikram, sighing. “Well maybe we should just ask for a television next time we see someone.”

But as it turns out, it is not our destiny to spend another day in this room.

After our breakfast, two men come into the room. One is the man who took our cell phones yesterday, the other is an older man and obviously in the military.

I expect that the man in the suit will do the talking but it's the soldier who speaks with authority.

“Now, I want you to tell me what you know,” he says, sitting down in one of the chairs. He's a big man, with grey hair, a mustache and a manner that says he isn't going to take any nonsense from us. Vikram just stares at him. But Dad is up for the discussion.

“You want us to recount our experiences here in Iraq?”

The man nods.

“Start with the plane.”

Dad obliges. He leaves out everything related to the trunk but he tells about the guys running away and us running after them to make sure they were OK. Then he tells how Kelly rescued them and we all rendez-voused at The Palestine. Then he mentions that we found out at that point that the boys were the sons of a lieutenant colonel.

“And I think you must know the rest,” says Dad. “When our escort arrived, they were gone. And I would just like to add, I don’t appreciate being locked in a room for nearly 24 hours without explanation...”

The man nods.

“Understood,” he says. “You have my apologies. It was my decision. I was trying to contain the situation in order to facilitate negotiation with the terrorists. Unfortunately, it goes against policy. You see, the boys are mine. And I’ll be frank with you Dr. Kent, I didn’t know what to do. You have children, I’m sure you understand.” He nods toward Julia and I.

“I’m sorry, sir,” says Dad quietly. “I most certainly do understand.”

“First of all, I didn’t know my sons were coming out,” the man continues. “The first I heard of it was when the passenger list was handed to me after we were informed of the terrorists’ request. You were still aboard the plane at the time. They wanted to make a trade for about 500 people.”

“That’s a lot!” says Vikram, leaning forward.

The soldier nods.

“Well that explains why we got through all those roadblocks so easily,” says Vikram, thinking back to our first day here.

The man nods.

“Naturally, my first thought was they knew my sons were aboard that plane. That’s something we’re looking into now. We had men out looking everywhere for our guys. I won’t go into it all, but suffice to say, I was so relieved when the news came in that my sons were at The Palestine. Everybody else on that flight is safe and now inside the Green Zone. Except my sons and my sister-in-law.”

We all just stare at him. But he’s looking down at his hands.

“Well, that’s it folks,” he says. “They’re still out there and we’re still working on bringing them back. The news is in all the papers that my sons were aboard that plane and are still missing so whatever we do, we’ll be held up to scrutiny. There’s no longer any need to detain you. You’ll be on the next flight out of here.”

Without looking at us, he and his companion, stand up and head for the door.

“Oh, one thing,” he says, turning and looking back at Dad. “Thank you for going after my sons to make sure they were OK. You have my gratitude for that.”

Dad nods.

They shut the door behind them but there is not the familiar click of a lock.

“Did you hear that?” hisses Vikram, leaning forward. “His *sister-in-law*?”

Dad nods.

“It changes everything, doesn’t it?”

“What’s going on?” says Julia, excitedly. “I don’t get it!”

Dad puts his fingers to his lips to indicate we’ve got to keep it down.

“It means you were right, Julia,” he says. “Those boys never told Imad who their Dad was. They didn't have to. He already knew.”

“How?”

“My guess is, Kelly is the aunt that they went to live with after their mother died. Except that they didn't run away. They all came to Iraq.”

“But she said she worked for the U.N.,” I say. “And why didn't they sit together on the plane...?”

“I can only speculate, but it's possible they planned all of this out. Kelly obviously has sympathies for the Arab cause. And her nephews were the perfect hostages being the sons of an important man.”

“And Kelly was talking about how a lot of innocent people have ended up in prisons here,” I say excitedly.

“Somehow, she must have made contact with Imad and they came up with this...”

“But we're the only ones that know the whole story,” says Vikram. “Even Bob doesn't have all the pieces.”

Dad nods.

“I think it's for the best, don't you?”

Vikram thinks about this for a minute or so, and then finally nods.

“My lips are sealed, Dr. Kent.”

“So are ours.”

“But why would they do it?” I ask. “I mean, it's dangerous...”

Dad nods.

“Kelly would do it because she believes in it. The boys would probably do it for the adventure.”

“It actually all makes sense,” I say, thinking back to everything from Kelly's willingness to talk to Imad at the palace to the middle of the night phone call and our brief talk by the dark window.

That's all the time we're given.

Lisa comes in and announces that it's time to go to the airport. Quickly we grab our suitcases and with Dad clutching the trunk awkwardly under one arm we hurry down the hallway. There is a bus waiting for us outside the building. We pass briefly through the heat and up the steps into its air-conditioned interior. I recognize all the faces. They are the people who were prisoners with us. But, of course, Aban, Kelly, Michael and David aren't present.

We're given a half-hearted greeting by some of the people. Most people just sit and stare out the window. I get the feeling they'd rather forget about this whole trauma.

Dad and Vikram take two seats behind Julia and I.

“Something tells me they all had a more comfortable room than we did last night,” I hear Vikram mutter behind me.

The bus is just about to take off when Lisa hops on board and scans the occupants. She hurries down the aisle and with a big smile, hands Dad and Vikram their cell phones.

“Thanks,” says Dad.

Vikram doesn't bother to say anything.

“Have a nice flight, folks!” she calls out on her way back down the aisle.

This comment is entirely ignored by the occupants of the bus.

“How's your phone?” asks Dad to Vikram.

“Dead,” he says, glumly.

“Mine too,” says Dad, sighing and putting it in his pocket.

Things don't seem right, just leaving like this. I feel like we should break out of the bus somehow and run around Baghdad until we find Kelly. I mean, we can't just leave her behind. She's a friend. Even if it's starting to seem like she was behind the whole thing...

But I really want to know more. I want to hear it from *her*.

Again, we pass through the gates of the Green Zone with no search. We're escorted by a military convoy. Our windows are tinted but I see a few people snapping pictures of the bus. I guess it's for the newspapers.

There are more photographers at the airport but we are hurried into the terminal and straight onto a plane. I've never experienced such a quick trip through an airport.

I wonder if the plane will do some kind of a spiral for take-off, but everything is normal. Vikram and Dad talk softly through the flight. Julia stares out the window as we munch on peanuts and ginger ale.

“What will we do when we get to Amman?” I ask, leaning across the aisle towards Dad.

“Well,” he says in a low voice. “First thing I do is take care of this trunk.”

I nod.

“Do you think we'll ever make it to the dig at Pella?” I ask.

He laughs.

“We'll see.”

The flight attendant comes around to take all empty cups and peanut wrappers. It's already time to put up our trays for the landing.

There's a surprise for us at the airport. We step off the plane, walk down a short hallway, and there in front of us is a giant banner, “Welcome Dr. Kent & Ginny & Julia!” It's so large, it makes me laugh. Then there is Dr. Afak, hugging us, and Dad and him are talking all at once, and all around us, everyone is being surrounded by their relatives and people are crying and the noise is so loud I don't think anyone can hear anyone but it's OK. Everyone's happy. It's obvious that the American government has kindly informed the right people about our arrival. But there are no reporters so it wasn't a general public announcement.

“Have I got *so much* to tell you,” says Dad.

“Come, come!” says Dr. Afak. Students from the dig are helping to carry our luggage but Dad is still holding tight to the trunk. “We have rooms at Le Meridien. I will hear everything. Come, come!” He's signaling to the students and we're all being hustled into vans and cars. Just before we climb in, Dad spots Vikram leaving the airport and rushes over to him to get his cell phone number.

The talk in the car is mostly about what happened to Dr. Afak after we were separated. Basically, he and the students were put on a flight to Amman and they have been monitoring the news here ever since.

“I have had calls from your brother,” says Dr. Afak. “But I have told him not to worry. We agreed that your wife need not know anything until we had some good news to tell her.”

Dad nods.

“I appreciate that. I managed to get a hold of her in Baghdad, so I think I should call her as soon as we get to the hotel. My phone is, of course, dead.”

Once at the hotel, as we're standing around in the lobby, Julia announces that she'll die of boredom if she has to listen to the whole story of our captivity one more time.

Dad and Dr. Afak look at each other and laugh.

“Should I have some of the students take them around Amman?” asks Dr. Afak. Dad shakes his head.

“After all we've been through, I don't want them out of my sight.”

“Understood,” says Dr. Afak. “How about we go up to my room and I'll order coffee while you tell me everything. There is satellite TV here,” he says to Julia.

“Sounds good to me,” says Julia.

Though the hotel is luxurious, I'd prefer that we be allowed to explore the bustling streets of Amman. Hopefully we'll get to it later.

Once we're up in Dr. Afak's room, Dad starts, once again, with our story. Julia's got the TV on and is channel-surfing, but I'd rather hear Dad talk.

With the Americans, Dad left out the stuff about the trunk. With this version, he leaves out all of the stuff about Kelly and Michael and David. It's still an interesting story.

Dr. Afak is nearly bursting with excitement about the trunk.

He carefully examines the exterior.

“It is very old,” he says. “And extremely beautiful.” Now he and Dad go into archaeological mode. They discuss the trunk and Feisal's palace and the styles that were prevalent at the time. Then Dr. Afak is on the phone. Then Dad is on the phone. At this point, even I lose interest and join Julia in front of the TV where she's found an old American movie to watch. Dad gets Mom on the phone and we take a break from the TV to assure her that we're fine and that we're having a great time.

“What now?” asks Dad, when he and Dr. Afak are off the phone. They remind me of when Dad and Uncle Ken get together. They make all sorts of plans and make all sorts of phone calls and it takes awhile before Julia and I find out what's going on.

“Now, we eat, we sleep, and tomorrow, Pella!”

~ CHAPTER ELEVEN ~

After all the excitement of being a prisoner in Baghdad, it's soothing to be back at an archaeological site. We took a bus from Amman to Pella, through desert with red sandstone formations and Bedouin tents and goats and sheep with shepherds. This part of the world is so Biblical. Sometimes you even see a camel.

Now Julia and I are in a locus. And we're doing what we've done so often in the past. We're digging through the sand. The idea is to go slowly and dig evenly. Then if you find anything, it's place in the sand gets measured and photographed and recorded in every possible way.

Dr. Afak had sent some of the senior students ahead to get the dig started so all of the area of the site we're working on is already measured out.

What usually happens on a dig is that we have coffee and bread when we first wake-up at about 4:30. We're camping just outside the small village so it's pretty chilly in the morning. We all wear pants and sweaters as we have our coffee at picnic tables. The day starts early so that we can work while it's cool and rest in the afternoon when it's the hottest. After digging for a bit, we have breakfast at the site – usually hummus, Arabic-style bread, tomatoes, cucumbers, and tea. There's more digging until we have a coffee-break. Then it's lunchtime, but lunchtime is also quitting time, so it's back to the tents for a meal of eggplant casserole or lamb and rice. I think Dr. Afak has some arrangement with people in the village to do the catering.

After lunch we sit around and wash any pottery that has been found. Then Dr. Afak and Dad and some of the senior students examine the pottery and make records of it and then put it in bags for safekeeping.

We've been here for five days now.

Some of Pella has already been excavated so Dad lets us wander around and look at the ruins. Most of it is from the time of the Romans.

Kids from the village are playing soccer by the ruins so we watch that for awhile before returning to our campsite.

Dad and Dr. Afak are really excited about something when we get back.

"There you are!" says Dad, spotting us. "Come on! We're going to Irbid right now!"

"What's Irbid?" asks Julia.

"The second largest city in Jordan," says Dr. Afak.

"Oh, we're going to see some ruins then," says Julia.

“No,” says Dad. “We’re going clothes shopping.”

“*Clothes shopping?*” I say.

We’re heading for the bus. It’s full of students and they’re all chatting animatedly about something.

“What is going on?” Julia demands.

Dad laughs.

“We want to look our best for tomorrow. Dr. Afak has friends from the University in Amman coming tomorrow. We’re finally going to open the trunk!”

“Why do we have to dress up for it?” asks Julia, as we take a seat in front of Dad and Dr. Afak. Since we’re the last to get on, the bus starts up immediately and we’re off.

“We’ve got some special guests,” is all Dad will say.

Julia turns right around to look at Dad.

“But what about Aban and Vikram and Mel?” she says. “Are they coming?”

Dad nods.

“I called them. They’re going to do their best to be here.”

“I think Kelly should be here too,” says Julia.

“I do too,” says Dad. “But I don’t know how to get a hold of her.”

“Who is Kelly?” asks Dr. Afak.

“One of our fellow prisoners,” explains Dad. “She was a good friend to the girls.”

That explanation seems sufficient and everyone settles into their seat for the half hour ride to Irbid.

Irbid is modern and busy but with the distinctive minarets of the Eastern city skyline.

The students are all instructed to be back at the bus in two hours.

“What kind of clothes are we looking for?” I ask.

“Clean clothes,” says Dr. Afak, ruefully, looking down at his dusty shirt and pants.

“Whatever you like,” says Dad. “As long as it’s dressy.”

“Can I have one of those?” I point to a shop that sells the traditional Bedouin dresses with their beautiful embroidered patterns.

“Of course,” says Dad. We go into the shop and look around. I pick a black dress with an orange, green and yellow embroidered pattern. Julia picks out a red one with a blue and pink design.

I’m surprised when Dad and Dr. Afak go all out and buy suits, white shirts, ties and dress shoes.

“Wow,” says Julia. “Is the Queen of England going to be there?”

The men laugh.

“You’re close,” says Dr. Afak.

Now they’ve really got me curious!

Since we’ve done our shopping so quickly, Dr. Afak suggests that we pick up some falafels from a street vendor and look around Irbid.

We leave our new purchases on the bus and head down the busy street. Unlike Baghdad, most of the women here are unveiled and dressed in Western-style clothing. The open air cafes are full of people drinking coffee and tea.

“Hamdulillah!” says Dr. Afak suddenly. Something has caught his eye. He rushes over to a newspaper stand and purchases a paper. “Praise be to God!” He waves the paper in our face but it’s in Arabic. “The last of the hostages have been found!”

“What?” says Dad, grabbing the paper, even though I doubt he can read it. “You mean the young men...?”

Dr. Afak nods and takes the newspaper back to translate it. “It says that the last of the hostages in Baghdad have been located. They were found in an abandoned house just outside of Baghdad. By the time soldiers arrived, their abductors had fled. The young men and the lady are now safely in the Green Zone.”

Dr. Afak looks up.

“Well, that’s that, isn’t it? Everyone is safe now!”

“Yes,” says Dad thoughtfully. “We can thank God for that.”

Of course, there’s nothing more we can say at that point, so we just buy our falafels and wander around Irbid until it’s time to go back to the bus.

The alarm doesn’t go off at 4:30. But everyone is still getting up early, rushing around camp, trying to tidy things up which is kind of hard when everything is sandy. But clothes lines are coming down and dusty boots are being put inside tents rather than lined up outside.

Even the villagers seem to be in on it.

Ladies from the village are rearranging our picnic tables, covering them with table clothes and setting up platters of pastries and bowls of dates and nuts and dried fruits.

“*What is going on?*” says Julia to me.

Dad and Dr. Afak are conferencing at one of the picnic tables. It seems to be the only picnic table that has food that we can eat now. Julia and I sit down and sip some tea and hope that someone will tell us what’s happening.

“Girls!” says Dad, glancing at us. “Get dressed! They’ll be here soon!”

“Who?” says Julia. But nobody’s listening.

We go into our tent and get dressed up.

Mel is the first of our Baghdad friends to arrive. He comes in a taxi and heads straight for Dad and the coffee. Then comes Vikram and Bob. It’s good to see them, but I don’t think they’re the reason for us having to dress up.

Mel and Bob eye each other warily. I guess journalists are competitive. But they end up chatting over coffee and dried fruit.

Aban is the final familiar face to come in a taxi.

He’s greeted warmly by Dad and Vikram and he gives Julia and I a friendly wave. He seems a lot more relaxed than he was in Baghdad. We soon find out why.

“I am engaged to be married,” he says, grinning broadly. “My fiancée is in Amman clothes shopping right now.”

“Wonderful! Wonderful!” says Dad, slapping him on the back.

A van load of men and women from the University of Amman arrive and there are more introductions to be made.

But the fact that the trunk is not brought out and that we’re all still milling around is an indication that there is someone else we are waiting for.

“There they are!” calls out Dr. Afak, pointing to a small convoy of cars on the horizon.

The villagers start talking in rapid Arabic to one another. There's a feeling of excitement.

We watch the cars approach and then stop in front of our camp. A man in a khaki uniform with a red and white keffiyah steps out of the front seat and opens the back door of one of the cars.

A man about Dad's age with dark hair, a beard, mustache and wearing a grey suit steps out, followed by an elegant woman with long dark hair and wearing a burgundy silk dress, gold braided belt and matching shoes.

Dr. Afak rushes forward to greet them. Clearly they are the ones we've been waiting for. Dr. Afak brings the distinguished visitors over to meet Dad and explains that he was the one who actually found the trunk.

“I was very sorry to hear of your ordeal,” says the man, with genuine courtesy. “And I am very glad to have you safe here with us.”

Then Dad introduces us.

“Your Highness,” he says, “I'd like you to meet my daughters, Ginny and Julia.”
Your Highness!

We shake hands with both the man and the lady.

“Girls, this is King Abdullah and Queen Rania.”

I just about drop on the spot. I've never met a King and Queen before!

“You had the unfortunate experience of staying in the palace of my great grandfather's brother,” says King Abdullah to me and Julia.

“Feisal was your great grandfather's brother?” I say.

“King Feisal,” whispers Dad.

King Abdullah laughs.

“He has passed into history now. He won't mind. I am very excited to be here today and to see what was left behind in his palace.”

Dr. Afak decides that's a good point for starting the day's activities. The trunk is now on a picnic table surrounded by the people from the University. With great care and a set of tools they work at opening the trunk without doing any damage to it. Bob and Mel are both snapping pictures, as are several men who have come in the King's convoy.

The moment arrives.

King Abdullah is given the honour of opening the trunk. Very carefully, he lifts the lid. Several cameras flash.

Dad and Dr. Afak have on rubber gloves and very carefully, Dad lifts out the first item.

It is a large sheet of stamps. Immediately, someone from the university steps forward to put it in a plastic bag. Then the king is allowed to examine it.

“This is remarkable,” he says. “These stamps have a picture of my great grandfather's brother, but they are from Syria. He was only King of Syria for a short time. To the best of my knowledge, these were never made public.”

As the cameras click, the experts confer and agree that King Feisal was asked by the French to leave Syria before any stamp of him had been publicly issued.

“This is of incredible value!” says Dr. Afak to everyone in general.
 The next object is similar, more stamps.
 But they cause a stir too.
 “Unless I'm mistaken,” says Aban, stepping forward, too excited to stop himself.
 “These are from the Hijaz!”
 King Abdullah leans forward.
 “The Hashemites used to rule the Hijaz,” he says.
 “Exactly,” nods Aban. “And you probably know all this but when your great great grandfather broke away from the Ottoman Empire, they had to have new stamps. T. E. Lawrence was in Cairo at the time, working for the British and he was assigned the job of designing a new stamp for the Hijaz. For fun, he decided to make the back strawberry-flavoured so that it would be a pleasure to lick it. The only problem was that people licked them too thoroughly and they never stuck properly to the envelopes.”
 Everyone laughs.
 “So, these stamps were designed by Lawrence of Arabia?” calls out Mel.
 Dad nods.
 “Wow.” Mel scribbles something down.
 The next thing that comes out causes all the University folks to gasp. It's a set of diaries and a quick but careful look through them confirms that they are the diaries of the late King Feisal the First.
 There is moisture in King Abdullah's eyes as he is handed one to examine.
 “We thought these were destroyed when the royal family was killed in 1958 and the palace looted. No one ever dreamed that these things had survived.”
 He reads some of the diary while everyone respectfully waits. Then the diaries are carefully wrapped in plastic.
 “It will be an incredible contribution to the understanding of the birth of modern day Iraq,” announces Dr. Afak.
 The final item is an unbound manuscript of a book. The title is *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*. Underneath is typed, *by T.E. Lawrence*. Then below that is scribbled in pen, *To a cherished Friend and the Man behind the Revolt in the Desert, Lurens*.
 “Now is that Lawrence of Arabia's book?” Mel calls out.
 Dr. Afak nods.
 “One of the earlier manuscripts from what I can tell. An amazing treasure, particularly with the inscription.”
 King Abdullah and Queen Rania look moved by the day's find.
 “It is all another time and another place, isn't it?” says the King. “A lost world.”
 Dr. Afak nods.
 I see tears in Aban's eyes.
 “This is a great treasure for those who love King Feisal and all that he accomplished in his lifetime,” says Aban.
 And that seems to sum things up.
 While the contents of the trunk are carefully packed away to be temporarily stored at the University, the rest of us have coffee and pastries with the King and Queen. All the

villagers are lined up to meet them and they greet them all. Much of the conversation is in Arabic. Then, as the day gets increasingly hotter, it is time for the party to break up. The trunk is taken in the van which now joins the King's convoy.

Dr. Afak, Dad, Aban, Vikram, Mel, and Bob are left to sit at a picnic table under the shade of a tarp, eating dried fruit and talking about the finds and the happenings.

"I'm pooped," announces Julia, heading for out tent.

I know what she means. All the excitement is kind of exhausting, especially when the temperature is 40 degrees Celsius in the shade.

~ CHAPTER TWELVE ~

We're back in Baghdad for a week.

This time we're staying in a hotel in the Green Zone and under constant security. Being that he found and saved the trunk, Dad has been permitted to read King Feisal's diaries. They're in Arabic, but Dr. Afak is accompanying him and will be able to read it to him. The contents of the trunk have been donated to the Baghdad Museum which was interestingly enough, started by Gertrude Bell back in the 1920's. I really wish Kelly were here to share it all with us.

I'm hoping that we run into Kelly and Michael and David but the Green Zone is big and there's no way of knowing whether they're still even here. In fact, Dad has forbidden us to discuss Kelly. He says he doesn't want to be a prisoner locked in a lounge again.

Aban has accompanied us back to Baghdad. His fiancée protested but this is his once-in-a-lifetime chance to read the diaries for himself. Since he was part of finding them, he's being allowed to join Dad.

Julia and I don't accompany Dad and Dr. Afak and Aban to the Baghdad Museum everyday. We aren't considered scholars. So, instead we have to hang around in a big recreation centre all day. It has a gym, a pool, some computers for video games, pool tables, a big screen TV that's mostly playing CNN, and a snack shop. There's also a small room with some lounge chairs and some bookshelves filled with light fiction and magazines. Julia and I divide our time between the small library and the snack shop.

"I wish we could get out and see more of this Green Zone place," complains Julia, coming back from the snack bar with her third yogurt shake. It's only 11:00.

"I wish we could get out and see more of Baghdad," I say, biting into a granola bar. We're sitting on patio chairs by a large window that looks out onto a parking lot. Not very scenic. We've been warned to stay inside just in case someone fires rockets over the cement walls. I guess having shards of glass spray all over one is better than having a rocket land on one's head.

"Wish we could try to find *you-know-who*," says Julia, lowering her voice.

"I know," I say. "I wish we were Nancy Drew. We'd go ahead and do it somehow."

"I haven't seen any of the people who were here the first time," says Julia, looking around. There are a lot of men and women in the recreation centre, most of them in sweats on their way into or out of the gym. A couple of soldiers are playing pool.

"I think it's a big place," I say. "I heard Dad say it's the size of a village."

We kind of stick out because there aren't a whole lot of young people in the Green Zone. The only time I saw small children was when we first arrived and the bus we were on passed through a neighborhood full of Iraqi people. A lot of the Iraqi people have stores and cafes here.

With Dad gone all day, it's tempting to wait at one of the bus stops and just take our own tour of the Green Zone. But he was nice enough to let us come back to Baghdad with him. The dig at Pella is carrying on with the students but Dad didn't want to just leave us there by ourselves. So it was come here or be sent home. I know if we do any exploring on our own, it will be the next flight back to Toronto for us.

In the evenings, Dad picks us up at the recreation centre and we go back to the hotel to have dinner with Aban and Dr. Afak. So far, this being the sixth day of our stay, dinner talk has always been about the contents of the diary. It seems to have a lot to do with the British making Feisal King of Iraq and then him having to somehow convince them that he and his government are competent enough to rule without them.

"How was your day?" asks Dad today when he's back from the museum. He's walked over from the hotel after being dropped off by a military vehicle.

"I read two Perry Mason novels," I say.

Dad laughs.

"That brings it up to a total of nine, doesn't it?"

I nod.

"I ate four blueberry yogurt milkshakes," volunteers Julia.

Dad smiles.

"Those blueberries are probably from Maine," he says. "It's pretty impressive how they keep Little America alive and well here."

It's late in the day but the heat is stifling. Dad has told us that while there are power shortages all over Baghdad due to the conflict, the Green Zone has its own supply of electricity thanks to generators.

I'm sure just not having air-conditioning has made a lot of people mad at what's going on in their country. It was no fun when we were prisoners in the heat.

"So that's it?" says Dad. "That was your day?"

Julia and I shrug.

"We watched some CNN," I say. "Apparently there has been some sporadic fighting in some northern district of Baghdad. Also, record-breaking temperatures for this time of year. Of course, despite the fact that we are actually here, we wouldn't know since we are being forced to spend the whole time in a freezing recreation centre..."

"OK, OK," says Dad, grinning. "I get the point. Actually, we're done with the diaries and Aban has suggested an excursion tomorrow. I've been against the idea, but I'm starting to think that maybe you guys don't need another day of Perry Mason and yogurt milkshakes..."

"That's great, Dad!" I say. "Where are we going?"

"Aban thinks it would be respectful to pay homage to a great man," replies Dad. He can be cryptic when he wants to be. I guess we'll find out tomorrow.

For our trip outside the Green Zone, Julia and I have to wear complete covering. Every hair has to be under a hijab, we are told. We purchase some outfits at one of the stores inside the Green Zone.

Dad, Dr. Afak, Aban, Julia and I take a bus to one of the gates out of the Green Zone. Clearly, this is an excursion that is not being endorsed by our American hosts. Which means we have to submit to an embarrassing search, though I figure it will be more thorough and more embarrassing when we return.

Then Aban waves down a taxi and we all climb in.

Aban says something Arabic to the driver as Dad and Julia and I take the back. Dr. Afak and Aban join the driver in the front.

"I asked if we could take a little ride around the city," Aban calls out over his shoulder to us. "If we go straight to Haifa Street, we'll be there in thirty seconds."

"City safe today," our driver calls out helpfully.

"Well, OK then," says Dad.

There's a lot of Arabic talk in the front. Even a few laughs.

Despite the news reports and despite the heat, people are out on the street, mostly doing their shopping. The cars are whizzing all around us and lanes don't seem to matter, but our taxi driver is confident and has the situation under control. Plus, Dad said a pretty thorough prayer for our safety this morning.

We pass by a wall that is plastered with posters of men who look stern and serious, kind of the way a wall in Toronto may be plastered with posters advertising a theatre show.

I enjoy looking at the billboards, a lot of which are in Arabic and English. They advertise everything from honey to cars. Some have public service messages, like encouraging people to get out and vote in some upcoming election. There are also a lot of signs promoting national unity between the Sunnis and the Shias.

"What are Sunnis and Shias?" I whisper to Dad.

"Different groups within Islam," Dad whispers back.

"You mean, like Catholics and Protestants," I ask.

"Sort of. It all goes back to when the Prophet Mohammad died and there was disagreement over who should be his successor. The Shias believe a successor should always be a descendant of Mohammad. It's something to look into, eh?"

I agree and continue to watch out the window. That's always been Dad's approach to home-schooling, getting us to look into things for ourselves.

"We're on Haifa Street now," Aban calls out over his shoulder.

Dad nods. Evidently this means something to him.

Haifa Street is long and wide and there are high-rises on either side of the road.

We drive the full length of the road until we come to a monument of some sort. It's a man on a horse.

"If it is possible, we would like to get out and look," says Aban to the driver.

"Mumken, possible," says the driver. He moves into the lane closest to the statue and pulls as close as he can to the side without actually going over the barriers that surround the area.

Aban hops out and we all follow.

“King Feisal,” announces Aban.

We all stand in front of the monument and look up. It's an impressive and elegant tribute. Feisal is dressed in traditional Arab clothes, the horse is in motion. I can almost imagine him at the front of an army of men ready to go into battle.

“I'm tempted to say how times have changed,” says Aban. “And that Feisal must be rolling over in his grave. But his life was one of war and conflict too. First it was the Turks. And then it was the French. And then it was here...” Aban waves a hand around the battered city. “Trying to bring unity to a country of factions.”

There's something almost sacred about this little space in Baghdad. It's as if we've been allowed to connect with this man. We've been in his palace and seen his most treasured possessions. We've had a taste of war in Baghdad. His statue shows him alive and intent but now he rests like so many others who have lived and died for this city.

“Well, come on,” says Aban, waving us back to the taxi. “We have seen it all now.”

Dad snaps a quick photo.

We get back in the car, back to the Green Zone, back to the twenty-first century and the war that lingers in an ancient city...

~ EPILOGUE ~

It's the last week on the dig at Pella.

Dad's a minor celebrity in the area after the big King Feisal find. Reporters come and interview him. A few students come to talk to him about the diaries. They'll be published in English and Arabic, but it's going to take awhile so a lot of people want to see Dad's photographs of the pages.

After weeks and weeks of sifting through the sand combined with the steady routine of life at a dig site, the memories of Baghdad are fading a bit.

From what little we were able to glean from the papers, since Kelly and the guys were rescued, there was never any release of prisoners. So Imad's mission was a failure. There's no report that he or his comrades were caught though.

With three days to go before we take a bus to Amman and then fly home, there's a visitor at our site. A taxi pulls up and a woman wearing a Jordanian abaya and headscarf steps out.

At first I think it's just another reporter or student to talk to Dad or Dr. Afak. But as the woman gets out and looks around, I recognize her.

"It's Kelly!" I grab Julia's arm, causing her to drop her trowel.

We hop out of our locus, now quite deep thanks to a whole summer of digging.

I think she's kind of overwhelmed by our greeting. We practically knock her off her feet with our hugs, but she recovers and laughs and hugs us back.

"It's good to see you, girls!" she says. "I'm so glad you're safe and that everything's OK!"

We nod.

"You've missed a lot," I say.

By this time, Dad has noticed our visitor and is hurrying over.

"I know," says Kelly. Her eyes are on Dad as he strides towards us. "I've been reading the papers. Dr. Kent."

She reaches out a hand for Dad to shake. Dad removes a glove to shake her hand. But he doesn't say anything and Kelly looks down at the ground. "I guess I owe you guys an explanation," she says.

"I think you do," says Dad. "Shall we...?" He points to the picnic table with the tarp over it and the place where coffee and water are laid out.

"I take it you know who I am," she says, once we're seated and she's removed her head scarf and stuffed it in her purse.

Dad. "If you mean, do we know that you're Michael and David's aunt, yes, we do," says

that." "But we haven't told anyone," says Julia, quickly. "We've been really good about

Kelly's eyes widen.

"Well, I appreciate that," she says. "I'm half expecting to be arrested any day..."

She looks around as if maybe a mounted cavalry might appear on the horizon.

"I don't think anyone will ever piece it together, Kelly," says Dad. "We were the only ones who had all the facts to put together. You see, we were the only ones who found out you were the lieutenant colonel's sister-in-law. Even the newspapers just thought you were another prisoner."

"I'm assuming that you told the reporters who the guys were," says Kelly, reaching for a cup and filling it up with coffee.

Dad nods.

"We were prisoners in the Green Zone. It was our only insurance that they'd let us go."

"It was also the reason that the whole thing failed." Kelly takes a sip of coffee.

"Once the word got out who the boys were, their Dad couldn't play favourites."

"I think the whole thing failed when we were taken to that date grove," says Dad.

"Imad was fed up at that point, wasn't he?"

Kelly nods.

"I think so."

She sips her coffee and stares at the ruins of Pella without seeing them.

"I lived in Baghdad, you know," she finally says. "Before the Americans came. I do work for the U.N. and I do help with issues concerning women and children." She adds some more sugar to her coffee before continuing. "Imad was a friend from those days. But the American invasion changed him. He lost his whole family during the shock and awe phase of the war. His whole house, gone." Kelly continues to sip coffee and stare into the distance. "He was out with a friend at the time, watching all the fireworks from his friend's roof. He got home and found his whole world gone. I guess you can imagine how that would change a man."

Dad nods.

"But that doesn't condone terrorism..."

"No," says Kelly. "But that wasn't his idea." She pauses. "It was mine."

We stare at her.

"I went home when my sister died. The boys came to live with me. And I tried to keep track of my friends in Iraq. Except that so many of them kept disappearing. You see, Dr. Kent..." She looks at my dad. "They were nationalists, patriots. They wanted an independent Iraq, no Western occupying armies or governments that were puppet regimes."

"Sounds like King Feisal," says Dad, sighing.

"Exactly," agrees Kelly.

"Except that Feisal never took hostages," says Dad grimly.

Kelly is silent.

“So your friends were all in prison...” says Dad to encourage her to continue.

“Yes,” says Kelly. “And I was sitting there in America thinking, I’ve got these boys. How many prisoners could we get released on the strength of their connections?” Dad just shakes his head.

“Look, before you think I’m some horrible aunt, putting my nephews’ lives on the line, they agreed with me. They hate this war. They hate having their Dad so far away. They went along with it right from the start.”

“OK, so they went along with it,” says Dad. “Then what?”

“Then I called Imad and we worked it out from there. He had gotten in pretty deep with what the Western press would call extremists. So he set it all up on this end. All the boys and I had to do was let him know what flight we’d be on and then just go along with it. We figured that as long as the press didn’t find out who we were, my brother-in-law would go to any length to free the prisoners that we requested.”

“The boys must be pretty disappointed with their father,” says Dad.

“On the contrary,” says Kelly, carefully putting her cup down on the table. “They scored big time. He’s resigned from the army. He’s already left Iraq and they’re all home in America. The whole thing shook him up. He wants to spend as much time as he can with them.”

“Well, that’s one good thing out of it all,” says Dad.

“Yeah,” says Kelly sighing. “And you’re right. It all started to go wrong in the date grove. That wasn’t part of the plan.”

She sits quietly for a moment before continuing.

“Imad’s changed,” says Kelly softly. “The war has hardened him. I started to worry that he may just be looking at us as Americans, invaders of his home, and not as friends. I didn’t know how to communicate it to the boys, but they figured out something was wrong and decided to make a run for it.”

It’s as if we’re all back in the date grove, the memory of it comes back with such clarity.

“And you know the rest,” says Kelly. “I’ll always be grateful for your part in keeping them safe, Dr. Kent.”

“It was the Christian thing to do.”

“Still, it was brave.”

“So, why did you disappear from The Palestine?” I ask. “Did Imad come back for you?”

Kelly takes a deep breath before answering.

“No, that was my idea. We had come so far, I wanted to give it another chance.”

“Imad had nothing to do with it?” says Dad.

“That’s right. It was just me and the boys. We had come so far and I just wanted to give it one more try. I was hoping that if we stayed away long enough some prisoners would be released. It didn’t happen and we were found before I could decide what to do.”

This conversation is full of long pauses. We all sit around, sort of biting our lips or lost in thought.

“Hey,” says Kelly, trying to speak brightly. “It didn’t work out so badly for you and all. Finding Feisal’s trunk, I mean.”

"I agree," says Dad. "I can't be hard on you because it all did work out for the best. In fact, I would go so far as to say it was all meant to be."

"Well, I'm glad you don't hate me," says Kelly.

"We don't hate you. And I'm sorry about your friends. Iraq is a messy business."

Kelly nods.

"That's why I'm going back."

"*Going back?*" says Julia.

"After all I've done, I feel like it's the only place for me. There are so many needs there and I don't think I can go back to the States and just live an ordinary life."

"Sounds like you're doing penance," says Dad.

"In a way," Kelly nods. "And I know it's not the Christian way to try to atone for ones sins. So don't tell me I need forgiveness and that I should turn to Jesus..."

Dad laughs.

"Are we Christians as heavy-handed as that?"

"Sometimes," shrugs Kelly. "No, I'm going back because Baghdad has been my home for so long that I've got to help somehow. I'll give up my terrorist ways and stick to helping refugees." Kelly stands up.

"Well, God be with you, Kelly," says Dad, also standing.

"Is God even in Iraq right now?" asks Kelly.

"He was with us," Dad points out.

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

Kelly turns to Julia and I.

"Friends?" she asks.

"Friends," we say at the same time.

"Good," she says, giving us both a hug. Then she heads back to her taxi.

And so it ends. At least for us. And at least for now.