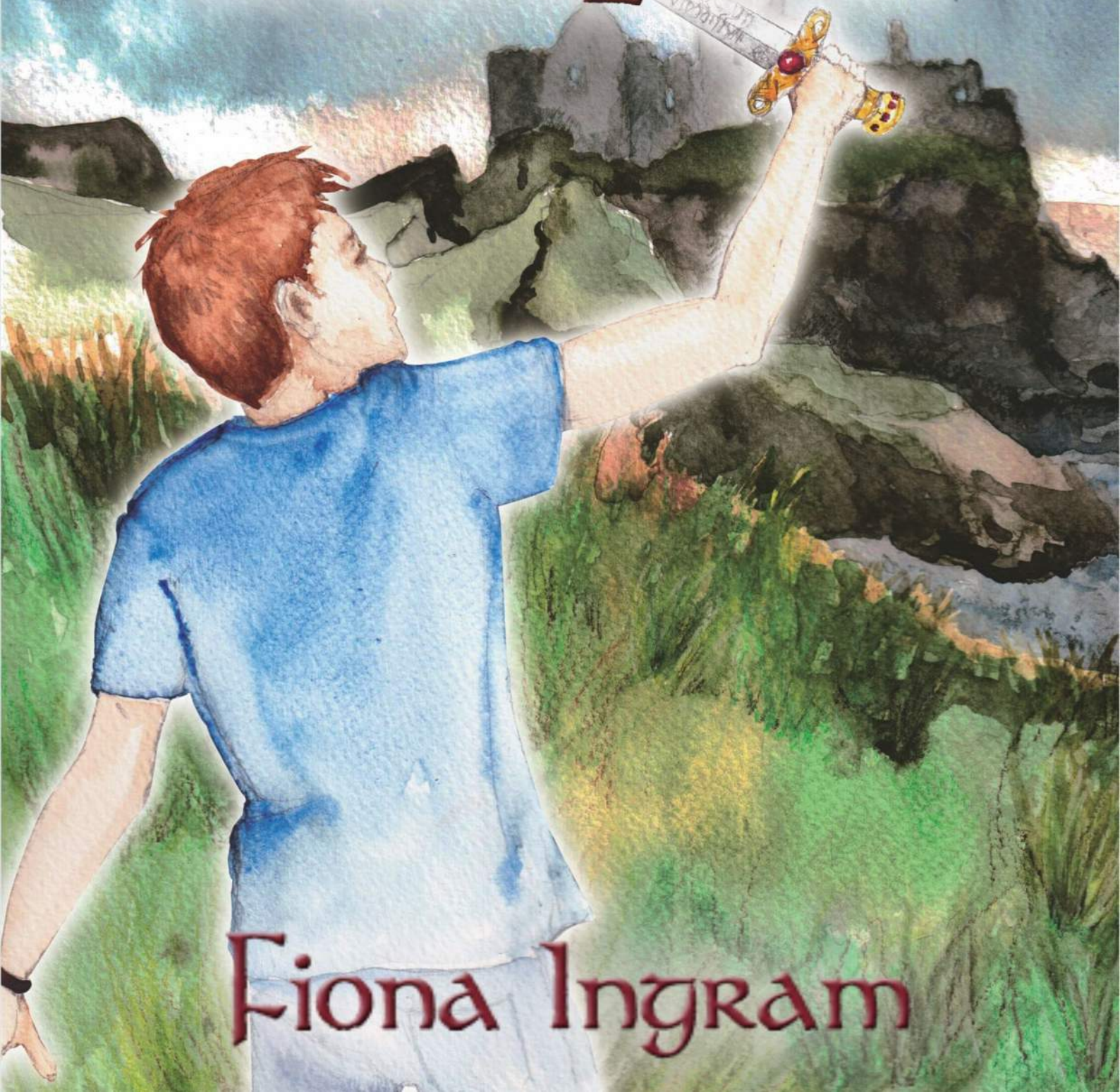


BOOK II - THE CHRONICLES OF THE STONE

THE SEARCH FOR THE STONE OF EXCALIBUR



Fiona Ingram



THE SECOND ADVENTURE BEGINS

“Oh. My. Gosh!” Justin said in utter disbelief. “This is so not happening.”

Surrounded by their luggage in the departure lounge of Johannesburg Airport, Adam and Justin Sinclair stood with their mouths open, staring at their Aunt Isabel racing toward them, frantic. She had an African girl with her and clutched the child firmly by one hand. The girl, who looked about ten, held a small travel bag in her other hand. Thin black plaits flew around her head as the two dashed along.

The cousins had been waiting twenty minutes already for their aunt. It was surprising she was late because with Aunt Isabel things were organized. Going on a trip with her was an experience in efficiency, as they had discovered just a few months ago when they had visited Egypt with her and Gran.

Egypt. Adam’s lips curled into a satisfied smile. What an adventure. Egypt was where the whole quest had actually begun with the discovery of the first Stone of Power and meeting Ebrahim Faza, the Egyptologist who knew so much more than anyone else about the Seven Stones of Power. They had found the tomb of the Scarab King and rescued James Kinnaird, their archaeologist friend who had been abducted by the evil Dr. Khalid. They had also helped the Egyptian police crack Dr. Khalid’s smuggling ring. The Egyptian government gave them medals for their efforts, which was pretty cool. The only bad part was that Ebrahim suspected Dr. Khalid had survived when the tomb of the Scarab King collapsed into an abyss, and that he would also be hot on the trail of the remaining Stones of Power.

Now the cousins were about to fly to London and then on to Scotland for the next stage in the quest—finding the second Stone of Power and the Scroll of the Ancients. The words of James’ letter danced in Adam’s mind.

“Dear Adam and Justin,” James wrote. “I hope you’re both ready for some action because things have been happening faster than I’d expected. I think the second Stone of Power has been discovered, but I can’t say more. I’ve enclosed your air tickets. I’m sure Isabel will persuade your parents that an educational trip to Scotland will be just the thing to fill your July vacation. Looking forward to seeing you both. Your friend, James.”

Amazingly, Aunt Isabel had had no problems convincing their parents because they had been so proud of the boys’ role in cracking the smuggling ring. Justin’s father had also remarked several times about how mature the cousins now seemed. Adam’s father had also agreed that

travel broadened the mind and said that of course the boys should visit Strathairn Castle, James' home in Scotland. Their parents knew nothing about the quest, the Seven Stones of Power, or the Scroll of the Ancients. Just as well, too. Adam could imagine his parents totally freaking out if they knew the real danger involved in the quest.

Adam frowned. Who was the girl? It was supposed to be just the three of them—Aunt Isabel, Justin, and him. He wasn't keen on sharing their adventure with a stranger. Maybe she was just some kid lost at the airport. But as the two drew nearer, Adam had the sinking feeling she was coming with them.

Justin's face wore a black scowl. "If she's coming, I'm not going."

"We don't know that. Maybe she's lost and Aunt Isabel is helping her."

Justin glanced at Adam. "Yeah, right. Very likely, I'm sure."

Adam thought again. Justin was right. The girl was coming with them.

Isabel pounded up to them, pulling the girl in front of her as she came to a halt. Adam couldn't quite find the right words to describe his aunt's state. He had never seen her like this. Aunt Isabel was always in control, always so strong. Even when they were kidnapped in Egypt and faced serious danger at the hands of the ruthless Dr. Khalid, she had confronted their enemy with courage and strength. Now she was wild-eyed and seemed desperate. Her auburn hair was untidy and her face was red as she gasped out her next few words.

"Boys! This is Kim Maleka. She's going with you." Isabel swallowed and tried to catch her breath.

"But—" Justin protested.

"No buts." Her voice was stern with a strange undercurrent Adam had never heard before. "There's no time to tell you everything. In fact, the less I say the better."

Surprised, Justin blinked and then subsided into silence, not even trying to conceal his resentment as he gave his rucksack an angry kick. Adam glanced at Kim. She seemed uncomfortable. Adam grinned, trying to be friendly. Kim returned a small, sad smile.

"I can't stop events now so just listen."

Their aunt's intensity grabbed their attention, making the cousins suddenly alert. There was a lot at stake. The discovery of the first stone had begun stirring the ether; now they must hurry to find the remaining six Stones of Power before the confluence of the planets and before Dr. Khalid and his master got to them.

Isabel spoke in a low voice, the torrent of words tumbling out as if she couldn't speak fast enough. She ran her fingers through her mop of auburn curls in an exasperated gesture. "James has been hurt. He was in France on a field trip and something happened at the dig. We think it was instigated by ..."

She didn't finish the sentence, but of course she meant Dr. Khalid. He must have survived falling into the abyss when the Scarab King's tomb collapsed—just as Ebrahim had thought.

"Now, don't worry," she continued, "James is recovering, but I must fly to Paris to see how he is and find out what's going on. Before he left for France, he said he had new information about the second Stone of Power and would tell us everything when he saw us. The three of you can go on ahead and I'll meet up with you later. Hopefully, James will be well enough to fly back with me to Scotland."

Adam found his voice. "But, Aunt Isabel, we don't know where to go or what to do." He hated sounding so small and weak, but that's exactly how he felt.

Isabel gave him a quick, reassuring squeeze. "Don't worry. I'm not just abandoning you. It's all been arranged or, I should say, *rearranged*. James called Gran and left specific instructions. I have them somewhere, but I'm not sure how accurate they'll be. You know your whacky grandmother."

Whacky sounded just like Gran.

Isabel dug in her handbag for a crumpled piece of paper. She squinted at the spidery writing and even turned the page around to see if she had it the right side up.

"I can barely read this. Your gran's writing is terrible. It says something about you'll be met at Heathrow Airport by someone called Ink Blobb and then you'll take the bus to Oxford."

Isabel tried to decipher more squiggles. "James is insistent you meet with someone called Humpleby Twiddle. Twiddle?"

Adam sniggered. *Imagine having a name like that.*

"Imagine having a name like that," Isabel said, echoing his thoughts. "I'm sure your gran's got it all wrong. Anyway, this person is a ... pagli-bolo-pher. She must mean a palaeographer, someone who studies old writing, I think."

Old writing? The Scroll of the Ancients. Adam's heart thumped with excitement. He nudged Justin, who ignored him.

"So that's it." Isabel sounded calmer now. "You'll catch the flight to London and then take the bus to Oxford with this ... er ... Blobb person. You'll stay with Mr. ... um ... Twiddle,

who's obviously a friend of James, until I tell you what to do next. I'm sure it'll all work out fine."

Justin made a flapping gesture with one hand to attract Isabel's attention and then indicated the girl standing next to them.

"Oh, yes. Kim. You're so quiet I almost forgot about you." Isabel gave Justin a sharp look. "Justin, you're in charge now because you're the eldest."

Justin had a strange, pained expression as if struggling between pride at being put in charge and annoyance at having to babysit.

At last, he said with forced cheerfulness, "No problem, Aunt Isabel. Just as long as they both do exactly as I say."

Adam opened his mouth to object, but his aunt cut him short.

"Of course they'll listen to you," she said, giving Adam one of her stares, brimful with meaning. Adam shrugged as if he didn't care.

Trust Justin to want to boss us around.

Isabel held Kim close for a few moments. "Sorry I haven't had much time to tell you everything, my dear, but I'm sure Adam and Justin are just dying to fill in the gaps. They're heroes, actually."

Kim widened her large brown eyes. "Really?"

"Really and truly. They even have the medals to prove it. The Order of the Guardians of Ancient Egypt or something fancy like that."

Isabel handed Kim's air ticket and passport to Justin. "Here's Kim's documentation. A flight attendant will look after you on the plane and this Blobb person will meet you at Heathrow and take you to Oxford."

Her tone softened as she said, "I know there's been quite a drastic change of plans, but I trust you boys to see it through. Take care of Kim and make the best of things. You're both old enough to manage. I'll be in touch as soon as I can."

She walked with them to the British Airways departure gate, hugged them, and then strode off to go fly to France.

Adam looked at his companions. The silence was crushing.

"This is a bit of a double whammy for you guys," Kim said.

What could they say to someone who was clearly not welcome? She'd just get in the way of the action.

"I mean, here I am, a girl, and guess what? You're stuck with me. Looks like I'll mess up your plans and they sound pretty exciting." Tears glistened in her eyes despite her bravado.

Now realizing how unwanted she felt, Adam broke the ice by awkwardly sticking out his hand. "Hi there. I'm Adam. This is my cousin Justin. Yes, we had an incredible adventure in Egypt a few months ago and that's the reason we're going to Scotland—well, Oxford first. Anyway, you're welcome to come along."

Kim gave a shy smile as she shook hands.

Justin mumbled a reluctant hello and then said, "This is a stupid question, but where did you come from? We were at my aunt's house before we went to Egypt and you weren't there."

"I know. I'm kind of a problem kid." Kim laughed at Justin's shocked expression. "Not *that* kind of a problem kid. I was living with my mother in a township and it was hard to study properly."

Adam had some idea of just how tough it must have been for her. There were plenty of newspaper reports about life in the townships in South Africa, where many of the country's poorer black population lived. They were not pleasant places for children to grow up, let alone study and do well at school. Many of the houses were mere shacks made of tin, plastic sheeting, and cardboard, with no running water, proper sanitation, or electricity. Most of the roads were dirt tracks that turned into churning mud troughs when it rained. Crime was high and countless children ended up in street gangs, or lured into drugs and worse.

Adam thought of his comfortable house in Durban, their hometown. He had his own bedroom and his dad had just bought him a new computer with fantastic programs. He felt sorry for Kim.

Kim started again. "I mean I couldn't keep up at school, so my mother—she works for Aunt Isabel as her housekeeper—asked if I could stay with your aunt and get some help with school and homework. Life's much better now. I have my own room, plus a computer, and my mother stays in the cottage behind the house so she's happy."

"What's it like actually living with Aunt Isabel?" Justin asked, with a sideways glance at Adam.

Kim chewed her bottom lip, thinking. "Um ... how can I explain this? Some people would say she's strict. I think she's firm, but fair. You know exactly where you stand with her."

Kim had hit the nail on the head. Their unconventional aunt was loads of fun, but she had rules about how she expected her nephews to behave.

“School comes first,” Kim continued, “if you know what I mean. I’m a grade behind already so it’s all about me catching up and getting a proper education.”

Justin frowned as if he didn’t really understand how someone could fail an exam, let alone a whole grade. “What’s the problem at school?”

Kim looked downcast. “Math and English are my worst areas. I just can’t get the hang of it.”

“I’m top of my class in math and Adam’s the whiz at English, so maybe we can give you some help if we have time during the trip.”

Kim brightened. “Cool. I really want to hear about your adventure. Egypt sounds totally amazing.”

Justin glowed and opened his mouth to say more, but a crackle of static interrupted him and a loudspeaker called their flight. They saw a smiling flight attendant heading in their direction. It was time to go.

Justin grabbed his rucksack. “Let’s get on board and then I’ll tell you all about it.”

Adam gave a wry grin; Justin loved being the center of attention. Adam slipped his hand into his pocket to hold his golden scarab. Even though it was only a replica, it made him feel safe, just as the real sacred scarab had done.

Maybe it’s just because I got so used to it in Egypt.

Familiar with air travel after their Egyptian adventure, they reassured the terrified Kim that the plane wouldn’t fall out of the sky. After the flight attendant had settled them comfortably, Justin told Kim the whole story about their previous trip, including the Seven Stones of Power, the secret of the sacred scarab, and the way Dr. Khalid’s men had ruthlessly hunted and kidnapped them, taking them across the desert to the Scarab King’s hidden tomb. Then Adam described the destruction of the tomb and their realization that the sacred scarab—containing the first Stone of Power—began their quest to find the remaining six stones, which had been scattered throughout the ancient world and lost in the mists of time.

“So now you guys have to find the next Stone of Power?” Kim asked.

“That’s right,” Adam said, “but that’s not all. Our mission is also to find the Scroll of the Ancients. James’ ancestor, Bedwyr the Curious, was a thirteenth-century monk and he somehow managed to find it and then hide it away somewhere.”

Justin added, “This ancient scroll contains all the clues to the remaining Stones of Power and how to use them to read the *Book of Thoth*, the most powerful book in the world.”

Remembering their friend Ebrahim Faza’s warning about future danger, they didn’t tell Kim too much about Adam’s importance in the quest.

Kim’s big brown eyes grew even bigger as she listened, breathless with excitement, to the most extraordinary tale she had ever heard.

“So this means we’ll be involved in another adventure? I’ll get to be part of it, right?”

Adam and Justin exchanged uneasy glances. Justin struggled for a tactful reply.

“Uh ... I guess so. I’m not being mean, but I don’t understand why Aunt Isabel included you on this trip. She knows what we went through in Egypt. We could’ve been killed a few times. No kidding.”

Kim’s face fell. “I don’t think she had any choice. My mom had to go sort out a family problem. Then the people who were supposed to take care of me while Aunt Isabel was away said they couldn’t at the last minute. I think it was easier for her to take me along.”

Adam said, “Aunt Isabel thought she was going to be with us, but things are different now that James has had this accident.”

“So, it’s just three of us,” Justin said. Then he added in a bossy tone, “Remember what Aunt Isabel said. *I’m* in charge. You’re quite little, Kim, so stay out of trouble and do as I tell you.”

Kim turned up her nose at Justin. “I’m not so little, you know. I’m a small-sized person, but I don’t need anyone to look after me.”

Justin raised his eyebrows. “Really? So exactly how old are you?”

Kim glared. “I’m nearly thirteen.”

Justin sniggered. “O-ho, then you just keep quiet, little girl, because nearly thirteen actually means you’re still twelve, the same age as Adam. I’m older than both of you and that puts me in charge, just like Aunt Isabel said.”

Adam just rolled his eyes, not wanting to get involved in the argument.

Kim smiled sweetly. “Don’t worry, Justin, I’ll listen to you. You can still be in charge, seeing as it’s so important for your supersized ego.”

With that, she gave Adam a mischievous wink. He grinned back. Justin was going to have a hard time ordering a determined girl like Kim around. Justin subsided into his seat with a cross expression and pretended to read the in-flight magazine, ignoring Kim.

When Justin went to the bathroom, Kim asked, “Is he always like that? So bossy?”

“I guess so,” Adam said. “He likes to be in charge. It makes him feel important. Don’t misjudge him, though. He saved my life twice.”

Kim gave him a disbelieving stare. “Really? How?”

“Once when we were in the desert, trying to save someone from sinking sand—actually, one of the men who kidnapped us. Then another time, when Dr. Khalid was about to shoot me while the tomb of the Scarab King was collapsing. Justin hit him in the eye with his slingshot. Justin just likes to feel important because he’s older, so don’t worry too much about what he says.”

Kim smiled. “All right then, I won’t. You were telling me about this sacred scarab. What does it look like?”

“I can show you.” Adam took the scarab out of his pocket and pressed the tip of the head. Gold pincers emerged, holding a round crimson jewel. Golden wings shaped like those of a vulture, sparkling with green and blue gems, shot out from the sides of the body. Legs emerged from the base, each clawlike foot clutching a gleaming green stone.

Kim caught her breath when the jeweled wings opened. She gently touched one. “It’s magnificent. How can you own such a valuable thing? I thought you said you gave it back to your friend Ebrahim.”

“Yes, I did. I gave him the real scarab. This is just a replica. When we got our medals from the Egyptian government, they also gave me this as a reward for saving the real sacred scarab. Justin got an incredible snake stick with genuine crystal eyes.”

“You brought the scarab with you?”

Adam jumped at the sound of his cousin’s voice.

Justin sat down next to Adam. “What for? What happens if you lose it?”

Adam quickly pressed the tip of the scarab’s head again, retracting the scarab’s glittering wings, pincers, and feet. He put it back into his pocket. “Nothing. No reason. I won’t lose it.”

Justin cocked his head to one side and raised a disbelieving eyebrow.

Adam felt his cheeks redden. “Okay, I brought it along because it makes me feel more secure.”

“It doesn’t work, you know,” Justin said. “It’s not like the real one.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Adam retorted stubbornly. “It’s mine and I want it with me.” He folded his arms and glared at Justin, who shrugged and said, “Suit yourself.”

Kim looked puzzled so Justin explained, “The real sacred scarab is a pretty powerful artifact, only we didn’t know it at the time. It’s safely locked up in a vault underneath the Bank of Egypt in Cairo now. This is just a replica.” He glanced at Adam. “But it’s also quite valuable. I bet Uncle Mike and Aunt Jennifer don’t know you brought it with you.”

At the mention of his parents, Adam scowled even more. Kim hastily changed the subject, remarking that the cousins looked like brothers because they both had red hair and freckles.

“No way,” Adam sputtered. “We’re *completely* different.”

Adam pointed out their different eye colors—his eyes were brown while Justin’s were blue—and Justin’s bigger build.

Adam added, “Justin’s the action guy. I’m the—” He stopped, suddenly remembering they hadn’t told Kim everything about his role in the quest. “I’m more of a geek,” he finished lamely, shooting a warning glance at his cousin.

Justin picked up on Adam’s cue. “When we were in Egypt, that’s how things worked out. Adam did all the clever things. I just had to keep saving everyone from certain death.”



Early the next morning, the plane landed at Heathrow Airport. They disembarked and retrieved their bags with the help of the friendly flight attendant. She herded them through passport control and finally to the exit gates, saying, “Off you go now. There’s the person who is collecting you.” She gave them a cheery wave good-bye.

Adam stared at the sign bobbing above a sea of faces. It read *Attention Adam and Justin Sinclair*. A lanky youth appeared, holding the sign. He was about nineteen, tall and skinny, dressed in black jeans and a black T-shirt with a white skull and crossbones on it. The most striking thing about him was his shock of jet-black hair standing up on his head, in distinct contrast to his pale face.

He gave them a wide grin. “Hi, guys. My name’s Benjamin Blott, but you can call me—”

“Ink!” the three kids chorused loudly.

He stared. “How did you know?”

Kim and Adam sniggered while Justin said, straight-faced, “Lucky guess?”

It wasn’t hard to see why Benjamin was nicknamed Ink: his black hair was the color of ink and with a last name like Blott ...

Ink laughed. “Yeah.” Then he said to Kim, “Hello. This is a surprise since I wasn’t expecting you as well, but welcome to England.”

Kim gave Ink a tentative smile.

Ink picked up the two biggest suitcases. “Let’s go.” Not waiting for a reply, he strode through the crowd, leading the way to the bus station. The kids followed him, clutching their remaining bags, and hurrying to keep up with his long-legged stride. Ink bought three bus tickets to Oxford and gave them to Justin.

“You look like the eldest so you’re in charge.”

Justin said, “Aren’t you coming with us? We have to meet someone called Humpleby Twiddle, the paleographer.”

“Actually, it’s Humphrey Biddle,” Ink replied as he helped the driver load the suitcases into the luggage compartment underneath the bus.

“Uh ... yeah,” Justin said. “Do you know him?”

“He’s my dad. I’m going to Oxford as well, but not in the bus. I’m riding my bike.” He pointed to a gleaming black and silver motorbike parked nearby.

Justin’s mouth hung open. “Wow! That’s yours?”

Adam couldn’t see what was so exciting about a motorbike. He preferred Ink’s skull and crossbones T-shirt.

Ink seemed amused by Justin’s obvious admiration. “Like it?”

Justin nodded.

“I’ll give you a ride sometime,” Ink said, with a careless pat on Justin’s shoulder. “Get on board now. See you in Oxford.”

He put on his crash helmet and took a black leather jacket from one of the bike’s panniers. Adam climbed onto the bus with Kim and Justin and they watched the huge bike roar off into the distance. When Ink disappeared from view, Justin lay back in his seat, looking rather dazed. Adam and Kim giggled softly. Not many things left Justin speechless.

The journey from London to Oxford took about ninety minutes. Once the bus had passed from the city outskirts onto the highway, they enjoyed the pleasant views of green fields dotted with peacefully grazing sheep and cows, distant villages, and a sapphire blue sky. Adam opened the nearest window. The air felt moist and fresh, with gentle sunshine filtering through to warm their arms.

Adam winked at Justin. “Better than Egypt?”

Kim asked, “How hot is it there?”

“It was blazing,” Adam said. “We couldn’t go outside without loads of sunscreen or else we’d have fried. Everything felt so dry.”

“But how did you survive? I can’t imagine being stuck in a desert and having to ride a camel for miles.”

“I don’t know,” Justin said solemnly. “When I think about it now, if I had known what was coming, I’m sure I would’ve run away rather than face something like that. But once you’re in it, once you know there’s no turning back and you have to keep going because so much depends on you ... well ... you just do.”

Adam quickly began talking about something else because Justin looked so serious. “So, have you met Gran yet?”

When Kim nodded, he asked, “What does she think about you living with Aunt Isabel?”

Adam felt a tiny stab of jealousy at sharing their beloved aunt and grandmother.

Lolling back in her seat, Kim giggled, remembering something amusing. “Oh, Gran’s so funny.”

Then she sat up and put on an expression just like the boys’ grandmother. She pursed her lips, screwed up her eyes, and, peering at Adam, tapped him on the chest.

“She said, ‘I suppose I now have another grandchild to keep in line.’ When I said, ‘Yes, Ma’am,’ she said, ‘Don’t call me Ma’am, call me Gran, and if your school marks don’t improve, you’ll have to tell me why and it won’t be a pleasant experience.’”

“She’s only kidding,” Justin said. “I mean, she wasn’t being—”

“I know what she means,” Kim interrupted. “She’s such a cool person for a grandmother. I love her nails and all her bling.”

Adam thought of their eccentric grandmother, with her long red fingernails, constantly changing hair colors, and loads of glittering jewelry.

“You should’ve seen her in Egypt,” he said. “She was so brave that when we were kidnapped in the Valley of the Kings, she drove all the way from Luxor to Cairo with two Turkish carpet salesmen in a beat-up old cab and made the British ambassador send the Egyptian army to rescue us.”

Kim’s mouth formed a perfect *O* in surprise. “Wow! So you guys actually were in serious danger in the desert.”

Justin said, “I wasn’t joking when I said we nearly died there.”

Adam thought about James’ letter again. Had the second Stone of Power really been found? Where should they start looking for the Scroll of the Ancients? Which one was the most important right now?

There was no time to ponder possibilities because the bus had pulled up to the station and the passengers were already grabbing their bags and getting off.

Kim peered out of the window. “There he is,” she said.

Adam caught a glimpse of Ink perched on his motor bike, waiting for them. Ink waved and beckoned them toward a cab. Once the luggage was in the trunk, the cab whizzed off. Obviously, the driver already had his instructions.

The center of Oxford was charming; its narrow cobbled streets crammed with quaint shops, mediaeval architecture and, of course, the famous university colleges with their intricate wall carvings and equally famous spires stretching skyward. The sun glowed on the saffron-colored Cotswold stone. Most of the old colleges were made of this yellowish limestone, giving the buildings their distinctive, aged appearance.

“I hope we have time to explore.” Adam craned his neck to see as much as possible out of the cab window. “This looks like a cool place. Lots of mysterious old things here, I bet.”

As the cab turned a corner, Adam glimpsed a flash of sunlight on water through the fronds of several weeping willow trees. “Hey, a river. We can go boating.”

“Let’s see what Aunt Isabel and James have planned for us first,” Justin said, sounding serious.

After a few twists and turns, the cab pulled up outside a pretty thatched cottage. It had a shop on the ground floor and living space on the upper level, judging from the floral curtains fluttering in the second-storey windows. Ink roared to the back on his bike and reappeared a few moments later to give them a hand with their luggage.

“Welcome to Humphrey Biddle’s Amazing Antiquarian Bookshop,” he announced with a small bow. “Prepare to be amazed.”

The shop bell tinkled as the front door flew open. A plump little man appeared, beaming a welcome. Dressed in a tatty old green cardigan and worn brown corduroy trousers, Humphrey Biddle resembled an elderly, rumpiled hobbit. He was balding, with fluffy white tufts clustered around his ears, and a wispy salt-and-pepper beard straggling down the front of his cardigan. Instead of regular glasses, Humphrey wore an old-fashioned pince-nez perched on the end of his button nose. Adam noticed extremely shabby bedroom slippers on the old man's feet. A sock-clad toe peeped through a hole in the front of one slipper. Humphrey's sharp gray eyes were piercing, as if they could see right through you. Adam liked him immediately. Humphrey had the same quality about him as their Egyptian friend Ebrahim Faza, even though Ebrahim was the picture of elegance and Humphrey the exact opposite.

Humphrey gave them all vigorous handshakes while propelling his guests into the tiniest, most cluttered bookshop Adam had ever seen. Books, books, books! They were everywhere: teetering on the edges of small tables, bursting out of glass-fronted cabinets, clustering in piles on the floor, and lurking on the tops of cupboards. Their covers were a variety of faded colors, with curly gold lettering on the spines. There were rolls of old parchments and ancient-looking scrolls all over the place, maps galore, and some yellowing globes of the world.

A fine film of dust lay over everything. The shop smelled of old paper and history: a mixture of sunlight on warm, freshly mown grass, a hint of vanilla, and dried flowers. Adam felt as though they had stepped back a hundred years or more. He sniffed in appreciation.

This is the most incredible bookshop in the world.

Kim just stared, her brown eyes goggling. She wrinkled her nose. "Ugh! Smells weird," she whispered.

Justin wore a similar expression. "Ditto."

At last, their host stopped bustling around to peer with interest at his visitors. "Let's all sit down," he chirped, leading the way through the shop. At the back was a small living room cluttered with loads more books.

A large sofa with fat cushions took up most of the room. Two tapestry armchairs squeezed in on either side of the sofa, and an old television set sat in one corner. In front of the sofa was a long, low coffee table, untidy with used cups and saucers. On the walls hung several faded maps, along with a number of dark landscape oil paintings in gilt frames. At the far end of the room, Adam noticed a fireplace, the ornate mantelpiece crowded with dusty ornaments and figurines. Tarnished brass fire irons lay on the hearthrug. Evidently, Humphrey wasn't too fussy about cleaning up.

“Get cake and refreshments,” Humphrey said to Ink, as he shoved several piles of books off the sofa to make space. “We might need an extra chair or two. We don’t often get so many visitors all at once.”

He fussed about the room, moving books and papers, and pulling the armchairs to form a circle with the sofa. Then he patted the worn cushions invitingly, releasing a cloud of dust. Kim sneezed.

Humphrey looked apologetic. “Sorry. Never seems to be much time to dust. Amelia always complains because I seldom let her in here with the vacuum cleaner.”

He shook his head determinedly. “I say to her, ‘Amelia, I am an antiquarian book dealer. Old books are my business. What is an antiquarian bookshop without dust?’ Besides, I think vacuuming is bad for the manuscripts.”

He plonked himself down on a nearby armchair and immediately leaped up again as an angry yowl came from beneath him.

“Dear me, Bismarck? My apologies.”

A large, yellow-eyed marmalade cat shot out from under Humphrey and leaped onto the windowsill behind the sofa. After shooting several scornful glances in their direction, it began washing itself.

Humphrey leaned forward, his eyes shining behind his pince-nez. “Such excitement,” he whispered. “Now, what’s this I hear about the second Stone of Power?”