



# THE SEARCH FOR THE STONE OF EXCALIBUR



CHAPTER 1

## THE SECOND ADVENTURE BEGINS

“Oh. My. Gosh!” Justin separated each word, his voice tinged with utter disbelief. “This is so not happening.”

Surrounded by their luggage, Adam and Justin Sinclair stood in the departure lounge of Johannesburg airport with their mouths open, staring at their aunt as she raced toward them. She had a frantic look on her face—almost of fear, Adam thought—and was dragging along a young black girl, clutching the child firmly by one hand. The child looked about twelve years old. Her many thin black plaits flew around her head as the pair dashed along.

Adam didn’t know what to say because he felt much the same way. They had been waiting twenty minutes at the airport for their aunt who was—very surprisingly—late. It was surprising because with Aunt Isabel, everything was organized. Going on a trip with their aunt was an experience in efficiency, something the boys had discovered just a few months back when they had visited Egypt with her and their Gran. Egypt. That was where the whole journey 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 did about the Seven Stones of Power. Then came the finding of the tomb of the Scarab King and rescuing their new friend James Kinnaird, the archaeologist who had been abducted by the evil Dr. Khalid. During their adventure, they had helped the Egyptian police break Dr. Khalid’s smuggling ring, and had been given medals by the Egyptian government for their efforts. The cousins were waiting for their aunt because the three of them 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. Adam almost felt the letter they had received from James burning a hole in his pocket. He could see the words dancing in his mind.

“Dear Adam and Justin,” James had written, “I hope you’re both ready for some action because things have been happening fast, actually much sooner than I’d expected. I think the Second Stone has been discovered but I can’t say more. I’ve enclosed your air tickets with this short note. I know I can rely on your aunt to persuade your parents that an educational trip to Scotland will be just the thing to fill your July holidays. Looking forward to seeing you both. Your friend, James.”

True to his word, James had enclosed the tickets and, amazingly, Aunt Isabel had had no problems convincing their parents to say yes. A big plus was their parents’ enormous pride in the boys’ role in cracking the smuggling ring, as well as their opinion that the first trip had done the boys good. Justin’s father had remarked several times on how mature the cousins now seemed. Adam frowned. It was supposed to be just the three of them. Who could this girl be? Maybe she was simply some kid who was lost at the airport. But, as the two figures drew nearer, Adam had a sinking feeling that somehow, inexplicably, the kid was coming with them. He glanced at Justin. His cousin’s face wore a black scowl.

“If she’s coming, then I’m not going.”

Adam nudged him. “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,” he retorted.

Justin was spot on. The kid was coming with them.

Aunt Isabel pounded up to them, pulling the little girl in front of her. Their aunt’s auburn hair was untidy and her face red as she gasped out her next few words, breathless from the effort of running and something else. Adam couldn’t quite find the right words to describe his aunt’s

state because he had never seen her like that before. Aunt Isabel was always in control, always so strong. Even when they had been kidnapped in Egypt and facing terrible danger at the hands of the ruthless Dr. Khalid, Aunt Isabel had been superbly brave and had stood up to Khalid with calm strength. Now she was wild-eyed and desperate. She knelt down in front of the startled cousins. Anxiety shadowed her usually serene green eyes.

“Boys! There’s no time to tell you everything. In fact the less I say the better.”

The cousins were instantly alert because there was so much at stake. The discovery of the First Stone had begun stirring the ether; now the remaining six Stones of Power must be found and protected before Dr. Khalid and his master got to them.

Aunt Isabel swallowed and tried to catch her breath. “This is Kim Maleka. She’s going with you.”

“But” Justin protested.

“No buts!” Aunt Isabel’s voice was stern with a steely edge to it. Justin blinked. There was a strange undercurrent he had never heard before. He subsided into sulky silence, not even trying to hide the resentment on his face.

“I can’t stop events now so just listen.”

With those dramatic words, she had their attention. Adam glanced at Kim. She seemed to be very uncomfortable, sensing Justin’s annoyance. Adam grinned, trying to be friendly; Kim gave a small smile in return.

Isabel spoke in a low voice, the torrent of words tumbling out as if she couldn’t speak fast enough.

“James has been hurt, badly hurt. He was in France on a field trip and something happened at the dig. We think it was instigated by í .” She didn’t finish the sentence but the boys knew immediately who she meant. Dr. Khalid must have survived falling into the abyss when the Scarab King’s tomb collapsed” just as Ebrahim had thought” and now he was on the move again.

Seeing their shocked faces, Isabel immediately made soothing noises. “Now don’t worry, James is out of danger but I must fly to Paris to see how he is, and find out what’s going on. Before he left, he said he had new information about the Second Stone and would tell us everything when he saw us.” She looked at their puzzled faces. “That’s not going to happen now, as you can imagine. The three of you will go on ahead and I’ll meet up with you later. Hopefully, James will be well enough to fly back with me.”

Adam found his voice. “But Aunt Isabel, we don’t know where to go í what to do.” He hated sounding so small and helpless but that’s exactly how he felt.

“Of course I’m not just abandoning you,” she smiled, giving him a quick, reassuring squeeze. “It has all been arranged, or I should say rearranged. James called Gran and left detailed instructions. I have them somewhere.” Isabel dug in her handbag for a crumpled piece of paper. She squinted at the spidery writing and even turned the page upside-down to see if she had it the right way up.

“I can hardly read this.” Isabel peered closely at the paper. “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 glanced at the three rather nervous faces in front of her and then made another attempt to decipher the squiggles.

“James is insistent you meet with an important person called í Humpleby Twiddle. Twiddle?”

The three children sniggered. *Imagine having a name like that*, was the thought that went through their minds.

“Imagine having a name like that?” their aunt wondered aloud. “I’m sure your Gran’s got it all wrong. Anyway, this person is a *paglibolopher*? Oh, she must mean a paleographer—that’s someone who studies old writing, I think—and he’s vital to the finding of the Scroll of the Ancients. Well, at least that part sounds right.”

Adam’s heart began to thump with excitement.

“So that’s it.” Isabel sounded much calmer now. “You’re to catch the flight to London, then take the bus to Oxford with this *er í Blobb* person. You’ll stay with Mr. *í um í Twiddle*, who is obviously a friend of James, until I tell you what the next step is. I’m sure it’ll all work out fine.”

Justin made a flapping motion with his hand to draw his aunt’s attention to the girl standing silently next to them.

“Oh yes, goodness me. Kim. You’re so quiet I almost forgot about you.” Isabel gave Justin a pointed look. “Justin, you’re in charge here because you’re the eldest.”

Justin had a funny, pained expression on his face as he struggled with the conflicting emotions of pride at being in charge and annoyance at having to baby-sit two younger children. Finally, 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 gave Adam one of her stares, brimful with meaning. Adam shrugged. *Trust Justin to want to boss us around*, he thought.

Isabel gave Kim a hug. “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.”

Both boys preened at their aunt’s words, especially when Kim widened her huge brown eyes and said in awe, “Really?”

“Really and truly.” Isabel smiled at the cousins. “They’ve even got the medals to prove it.” She handed Kim’s air ticket and passport to Justin. “Here’s Kim’s documentation. A flight attendant will look after you during the flight and this *Blobb* person will be there to meet you and take you down to Oxford.”

Isabel spoke seriously. “I know there’s been quite a drastic change of plans, but I trust you boys to see it through and make the best of things. Obviously, James thinks it’s important for you to meet this paleographer. I’ll be in touch as soon as I can.” She walked with them to the British Airways departure gate, hugged them all, and then strode off in the direction of the Air France gate.

The three children looked at each other. The boys didn’t know what to say. Kim looked so forlorn that all the sneering things Justin had thought of saying seemed nasty now and not funny at all. He decided to keep his remarks to himself. The silence was crushing. No one knew what to say first.

“This is a bit like a double whammy for you two,” Kim remarked.

The boys were taken aback. What could they say to someone who was obviously not welcome? She would just get in the way of the next adventure.

Kim continued, as if unaware of their embarrassment. “I mean, here I am, a girl, and guess what? You’re stuck with me. I guess I’ll mess up your plans. They sound rather exciting.”

Adam thought he saw tears glisten in her eyes despite her bravado. He knew exactly how unwanted she felt, so he broke the ice by sticking out his hand awkwardly.

“Hi there, Kim. My name’s Adam. This is my cousin Justin. We had an incredible adventure in Egypt a few months ago and that’s the reason we’re going to Scotland—well, Oxford first, it seems. You’re very welcome to come along.”

Justin mumbled hello, rather ashamed at not having done so sooner. He looked puzzled. “This is a stupid question, but where did you come from? We were at my aunt’s house a few months ago, before we went to Egypt, and you weren’t there.”

Kim gave them a shy smile as she shook hands with both boys. “I know. I’m sort of a problem kid.” She laughed at their shocked expressions. “Not *that* sort of a problem kid. I mean I’m having a hard time keeping up at school, so my mother—she works for Isabel as her housekeeper—asked if I could stay with your aunt and get some help with school and homework.”

“What’s the problem?” Justin asked, now remembering meeting Isabel’s housekeeper.

Kim looked a bit downcast. “I’m a grade behind already. 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 up. “Cool! I really want to hear about this adventure you had. Egypt sounds fantastic.”

Pleased to have an appreciative audience, Justin positively glowed and opened his mouth to say more, but a crackle of static interrupted him as a loudspeaker called their flight. They saw a smiling flight attendant heading in their direction—it was time to go.

Justin grabbed his suitcase. “I think we should get on board and then I’ll tell you all about it.”

Adam gave a wry grin: Justin adored being the center of attention. He slipped his hand into his pocket to feel his golden scarab. It seemed to give him the same sense of security as the real sacred scarab had done, even though it was only a replica. Adam wondered about that.

*Maybe it’s just because I got so used to it in Egypt,* he thought.

The cousins were familiar with air travel after their escapade in Egypt so they reassured Kim, who was terrified at this, her first flight, that it was highly unlikely the plane would fall out the sky. After the flight attendant had settled them comfortably, the boys told Kim the story of the secret of the sacred scarab, and how Dr. Khalid’s men had ruthlessly hunted and kidnapped them, and taken them across the desert to the Scarab King’s hidden tomb. They described the destruction of the tomb, and their discovery that the sacred scarab, which had turned out to be the First Stone of Power, was just the beginning of the quest to find the remaining six Stones of Power.

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

“So this means we’ll be involved in another adventure? I mean, because I’m with you I’ll get to be part of it?”

Adam and Justin exchanged uneasy glances, both feeling unsure about why Aunt Isabel had brought this kid along. Surely she knew that any danger facing them would include Kim.

Justin struggled for a tactful reply. “Well, I guess so. I’m not being horrible, but I really don’t understand why Aunt Isabel included you on this trip. She knows what we went

through in Egypt. Without exaggerating, I can honestly say there were several times when we could have been killed.ö

The three children were silent, and then Kim murmured, öI don't think she had any choice. My mom had to sort out a family problem, and the people who were supposed to look after me while Isabel was away said they couldn't at the last minute. I suppose it was easier to take me with her.ö

Adam had a sudden thought. öMaybe, if Aunt Isabel believed she was going to be with us all the time, she felt we'd be safe. But since James has had this accident everything is different.ö

Justin said briskly, öSo, it's just three of us now. You're quite little, Kim, so stay out of trouble and listen to what Adam and I tell you.ö

Kim glared at Justin. öI'm not so little, you know. I'm a small person in size but I'm actually fourteen. I just look very young.ö

Justin's face fell when he discovered Kim was only three days younger than he was. Kim then smiled sweetly at him. öBut don't worry, Justin, I'll listen to you. You can still be in charge.ö With that, she gave Adam a mischievous wink. He grinned back. Justin would have had hard time ordering a determined girl like Kim around.

When Justin went to the bathroom, Kim asked, öIs he always like that? So bossy?ö

öI guess so,ö Adam said. öBut that's just a cover. Justin actually has a kind heart and he's extremely brave. He saved my life twice.ö

öReally? That's incredible! How?ö Kim demanded.

öOnce when we were in the desert, trying to save someone from sinking sand. 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 the eldest, so don't worry too much about him.ö

Kim smiled. öAll right then, I won't. You keep talking about the sacred scarab. What did it look like?ö

Adam's eyes gleamed with pride. öI can show you.ö He took the scarab out his pocket and pressed the top of the head. Kim caught her breath when the jeweled wings opened.

öIt's magnificent. How can you own such a valuable thing? I thought you said you gave it back to your friend Ebrahim?ö

öYes, 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 having saved the real sacred scarab. Justin got an amazing snake stick.ö

Justin broke into the conversation. öDon't tell me you brought the scarab with you?ö He sat down next to Adam. öWhat for? What happens if you lose it?ö

Adam quickly retracted the scarab's glittering wings and put it back into his pocket.

öNothing. No reason. I won't lose it.ö

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

Adam blushed. öOkay, I brought it along because it makes me feel more secure.ö

öIt doesn't work, you know,ö Justin remarked. öIt's not like the real one.ö

öThat doesn't matter,ö Adam retorted. öI like it and I want it with me.ö

Justin shrugged. Kim looked puzzled so Justin explained, öThe 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, so this is just a replica.ö He glanced at Adam. öBut it's also quite valuable. I bet Uncle Mike and Aunt Jennifer don't know you brought it with you.ö

At the mention of his parents, Adam scowled. Kim hastily changed the subject, remarking that with their red hair and freckles the cousins looked like brothers. Adam pointed out that their eye colors were different—his eyes were brown and Justin's were blue—and that Justin was bigger built. The boys then began comparing their success on the sports field and the tense moment passed. Kim thought to herself that Justin was rather competitive and didn't like anyone else to be in charge but, for all their differences, it was clear the cousins were close.

*I suppose they must be,* Kim thought, stifling a yawn as she fell asleep, *especially if they've been through such dangerous times together.*

Early the next morning, the plane landed at Heathrow airport. They disembarked and retrieved their luggage with the help of the friendly flight attendant. She then herded them through passport control and finally to the exit gates with the words, "Off you go, children. I think I see the party who is collecting you," and a cheery wave good-bye.

Justin and Adam stared at the sign bobbing up and down in a sea of faces. It read Adam and Justin Sinclair. Dragging their suitcases, and with cautious expressions, the three children moved into the crowd surging through the exit. Immediately, a lanky youth appeared in front of them. He was about nineteen, tall, and very skinny, dressed in black jeans and a black T-shirt, with a white skull and crossbones on it. The most unusual thing about him was his shock of pitch-black hair that stood up on his head, in distinct contrast with his pale face.

He gave them a wide grin. "Hi, guys. My name's Benjamin Blott but you can call me—" He didn't get to finish his sentence because the three children chorused loudly, "Ink!"

He stared at them. "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." He shook hands with the three children and held Kim's hand a moment longer. "Hello, little lady," he said. "This is a surprise, since I wasn't expecting you as well, but welcome to England."

Kim gave Ink a shy smile in return. He picked up the two biggest suitcases. "Shall we go?" Not waiting for a reply, he strode through the milling crowd, leading the children to the bus station. Skipping to keep up with his long-legged stride, the trio ran after him, clutching their remaining bags. Ink bought three bus tickets and gave them to Justin. "You look like the eldest, so you're in charge."

Justin was so delighted to be recognized as such by an older person that he just beamed. Then, remembering his aunt's instructions he cried, "Wait! Aren't you coming too? We have to meet someone called Humpleby Twiddle, the paleographer."

Ink nodded reassuringly. "Yes, the Humph."

"The Humph?"

"Humphrey Biddle," Ink grinned. "He's my dad. I'm not going in the bus; I'm riding my bike." He pointed to a gleaming black-and-silver motorbike parked nearby, a magnificent Harley Davidson.

Justin was bowled over. "Wow."

Adam glanced at Kim. She shrugged. Neither of them could see what was so exciting about a motorbike. Adam rather admired Ink's skull and crossbones T-shirt instead.

"Like it?" Ink was amused by Justin's obvious admiration. Speechless, Justin nodded.

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

He put on his crash helmet and took a black leather jacket from one of the bike’s panniers. The children climbed on the bus and watched the huge bike roar off into the distance. Within seconds, Ink had disappeared from view. Justin lay back in his seat, quite dazed by the spectacular vision. Adam and Kim giggled quietly to themselves. 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, the children enjoyed the pleasant views of emerald green fields dotted with quietly grazing sheep and cows, distant villages, and a sapphire sky above. The air was moist and fresh, with gentle sunshine filtering through the windows to warm their arms.

Adam winked at Justin. “Better than Egypt?”

“And how?”

“Was it hot there?” Kim asked curiously.

“It was blazing,” Adam confided. “We couldn’t go outside without loads of sunscreen or else we’d have been fried.”

Kim frowned. “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 slowly. “When I think about it now, I’m sure I would have 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.”

The three children sat quietly, wondering what kind of adventure awaited them now. Justin and Adam thought about James’s letter again. Had the Second Stone really been found? But where should they begin looking for the Scroll of the Ancients? Which of the two items was more important in the quest? There was no time to ponder on possibilities because the bus had pulled up at the station, and the passengers were already starting to grab their bags and get off. Kim peered out the window and caught a glimpse of Ink perched on his motor bike, waiting for them.

“There he is,” she called to the others, suddenly relieved to see a familiar face. Ink waved and beckoned them toward a waiting taxi. Once the luggage was in the trunk, the taxi whizzed off. Obviously, the driver had been given his instructions already. The center of Oxford looked very charming, its narrow streets crammed with interesting shops, mediaeval architecture, and of course, the famous university colleges with their intricate carvings on the walls and their equally famous spires that stretched 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 the taxi window. “This looks like a fun place. Lots of mysterious old things here, I bet.”

“We’d better see what Aunt Isabel and James have planned for us first,” Justin replied, taking his role as baby-sitter rather seriously.

After a few twists and turns, the taxi pulled up outside a quaint thatched cottage that stood farther back from the road than the other buildings around it. It appeared to have a shop on

the ground level and, judging from the floral curtains fluttering in the breeze, living space on the upper level. Ink roared to the back on his bike and reappeared a few moments later to give the children a hand with their suitcases.

“Welcome to Humphrey Biddle’s Amazing Antiquarian Bookshop,” he announced with a small bow. “Prepare yourselves.” He winked at them and then rang the doorbell.

The door flew open and a stout little man appeared in the doorway, beaming a welcome. Dressed in a tatty old green cardigan and threadbare brown corduroy trousers, Humphrey Biddle rather resembled an elderly, rumpled gnome. He was balding, with fluffy white tufts clustered around his ears, and a wispy grey beard straggling down the front of his cardigan. Instead of glasses, he wore an old-fashioned pince-nez perched on the end of his button nose, and his feet were encased in extremely shabby bedroom slippers. His sharp grey eyes were piercing, as if they could see right through people. Adam liked him immediately. He 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 everyone energetic handshakes while hustling the children into the tiniest, most cluttered shop they had ever seen. It was an amazing bookshop, if you liked old books. Books! Books! Books! They were everywhere: teetering on the edges of small tables, bursting out of several glass-fronted cabinets, clustering in piles on the floor, or 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 scrolls everywhere that Adam was sure were very ancient, maps galore, and several yellowing globes of the world. The three children looked around slowly. It resembled an old curiosity shop, unlike any shop they had ever seen. A fine layer of dust lay over everything, like a thin gray veil. The shop smelled of old paper and history; it had what Adam described later in his journal as “the smell of antiquity.” Justin felt as though they’d stepped back a hundred years. Kim just stared, her brown eyes goggling at the sight. Adam was fascinated; he thought it was the most fantastic bookshop he’d ever seen.

Their host finally stopped bustling around to peer interestedly at his visitors. “Let’s all sit down,” he chirped, leading the way through the shop to a tiny parlor at the back, cluttered with loads more books and maps as well.

“Get cake and refreshments for the children, Ink, my boy,” he called, shoving several piles of books off the sofa to make room for the children. He patted the cushions invitingly, releasing a cloud of dust. Kim sneezed.

“Oops!” Humphrey Biddle looked apologetic. “Sorry. Never seems to be much time to dust. Miss Sudsbury is always complaining because I don’t let her get in here with the vacuum cleaner but no, I say í .” He shook his head determinedly. “I say to her, ‘Miss Sudsbury, 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 underneath him. “Dear me,” he squawked. “Bismarck? My apologies.”

A large, yellow-eyed marmalade cat shot out from under Humphrey’s rear and leaped onto the windowsill where, after shooting several scornful glances in the direction of the guests, it began washing itself.

Humphrey leaned forward, his eyes shining behind his pince-nez. “Such excitement,” he whispered. “What’s this I hear about the Second Stone?”