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Originally published in 1997 as *The Treasure of Timbuktu*.

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Designed by Melinda Schumacher

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Palmer, Catherine, date

A kiss of adventure / Catherine Palmer.

p. cm. — (HeartQuest) (Treasures of the heart ; 1)

ISBN 0-8423-3884-5 (sc)

1. Africa—Fiction. 2. Tuaregs—Fiction. 3. Kidnapping—Fiction. I. Title. II. Series.

PS3566.A495 K57 2000

813'.54—dc21

00-056768

Printed in the United States of America

06 05 04 03 02 01

9 8 7 6 5 4



O N E

“Nothing happens.” Tillie Thornton slipped her hands into the pockets of her pale blue cotton skirt and frowned. “You know what I mean, Mama Hannah? My life here is always the same, day after day. What am I doing?”

“You are walking through the market with me to buy some fruit and perhaps a good yam.”

Tillie glanced at the elderly African woman—her companion, caretaker, and best friend since her mother’s death so many years before. Never tall, Hannah lately had taken on a pronounced stoop, as though she were always walking into a strong head wind. Tillie knew that the old woman had spent her youth carrying hundred-pound loads of firewood, and that beneath her bright yellow scarf Hannah’s forehead bore the indentation of the leather strap that had steadied the burdens.

But Tillie suspected her *ayah’s* stride had less to do with weighty cargo than with an unfaltering sense of purpose. Hannah never varied from obeying the God-given command to look after her *totos*, the four Thornton children placed in her charge. Shoulders bowed and neck arching forward, she strode Bamako’s dusty streets with no less determination than a mother hen with chick in tow. At twenty-five, Tillie was certainly no fledgling, a fact that mattered not at all to the older woman.

Hannah's high cheekbones, ebony skin, and large earring holes testified to her Kikuyu heritage, yet she was every bit a mother to the four ivory-skinned siblings she had reared. Practical, pedantic, God-fearing, and blessed with a wry sense of humor, Hannah had been the serene eye in every storm that had whipped across the family through the years. There had been many.

“When the whirlwind passes, the wicked is no more,” she liked to remind the children, “but the righteous has an everlasting foundation.” Solomon's proverbs were nourishment to Hannah, and she doled them out like precious cups of water to the thirsty.

Looking over a box of yams in the Bamako market, the old woman squinted and tilted her head first one way and then the other. “Small and mealy,” she pronounced. “Come, Tillie. We shall search until we find better yams. The Lord will not allow the righteous to hunger.”

A heady scent, sweet and overripe, saturated the dry air in the marketplace. Rows of stalls displayed pyramids of fruit and vegetables, sacks of yellow and white corn, lumps of peanut paste, rocks of salt, heaps of fragrant herbs and spices. Like fat black raisins, flies seeking moisture stuck to everything.

While children played in the folds of their skirts, women in flowing dresses and heavy necklaces haggled over prices of silver filigree rings, amber beads, carvings, woven blankets, and cotton fabrics printed in bold patterns and brilliant colors. Their good-natured bartering mingled with the squawks of scrawny chickens and the bleating of tethered goats.

Unable to put aside her nagging discontent, Tillie touched Hannah's arm. “I know where I'm going today, of

course. How could I not know? It's always the same. I know I'll fill this basket with bananas and coconuts. I know we'll walk back to the house and cook supper. Tomorrow morning, I'll get up and drive out to the compound to check on my neem trees. I'll talk to my gardeners, prune the trees, plant the three new species that were flown in from South America, eat my lunch—"

From down the row of stalls a swift dark movement caught Tillie's eye, and she broke off. As she turned, the shadow darted behind a pyramid of long green plantains.

"What was that, Hannah?"

"What, *toto*?" Her companion glanced about the market, then shook her head. "Your peace has been shaken by the disturbance last night."

"Disturbance? Someone tried to break into our house, Mama Hannah! If I hadn't thrown my shoe at the window and scared him off—"

"God watches over us, doesn't he?" The elderly woman smiled, her face softening into a familiar grid of gentle lines. "'The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runs into it and is safe.' Your unease disturbs me far more than a thief at the window, Tillie. You always wanted to help people, and now you are. Planting trees to hold back the Sahara sands and put food in the mouths of the hungry is a good thing."

Tillie stopped, her basket of woven palm leaves dangling against her skirt. How could she explain the turmoil in her heart? At her feet, dust from the dry street settled onto her sandals and bare skin. She sucked in a deep breath of arid, ninety-degree heat and brushed at the flies dancing about her face.

Lifting her head, she searched for a way to make Hannah understand. Above her, two-story houses—crumbling whitewashed memories of Mali’s long French occupation—blocked what little breeze might drift from the Niger River a few city blocks away. Laundry strung overhead from balcony to balcony hung motionless in the still afternoon.

“Yes, planting trees is a good thing,” Tillie acknowledged finally. “I can’t deny that.” Though the capital city lay in the Sahel, a zone just south of the Sahara Desert with the river to provide fish and irrigate crops, she knew the threat of famine always hovered. The few native kapok, baobab, and shea trees that studded the shimmering landscape seemed to cry out in thirst.

“But, Hannah,” she went on, “is this God’s choice for me?”

“Once you thought so. I remember how your eyes shone when you tore open the letter from the Pan-African Agriculture Council. When you read that you had been given a job in Mali, you cried, Tillie. Even your father smiled at your happiness.”

“And when you agreed to come here with me, everything seemed exactly right. I’d prayed so hard to find something useful to do with my life, and I felt sure this job was the last piece in the puzzle. My plans all made perfect sense.”

“*Your* plans? ‘Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but the counsel of the Lord, it will stand.’”

“I thought coming here was God’s plan, too. What could be more logical?” Tillie let her basket drop at her feet and held up her left hand to count in the African way Hannah had taught her. She wrapped her little finger with her right hand.

“First of all, I grew up in Africa. Even though Kenya is on the other side of the continent, I knew I’d adapt to life in Mali better than I ever did to college in the States.” She gripped her ring finger. “Second, I speak three African languages. I felt sure I could learn another.” The middle finger disappeared. “Third, agroforestry is my passion. Holding back the desert with trees to help people grow food was the perfect vocation.”

“Then what troubles you?” The elderly woman took Tillie’s hand and cupped it inside her own dark chocolate fingers. “You have always been the surest of the four *totos* God gave me to bring up. You are calmer than Jessica, bolder than Fiona, and more faithful to the Lord than Grant. What is this distress I see in your eyes?”

Tillie picked up her basket. “Oh, Hannah. I’ve been here almost a year, and I’m sure I haven’t touched a single life. I’m not even certain my trees will grow. PAAC won’t let me drive up north to choose planting sites until I’ve finished all my experiments down here in the capital. I’ve told them Bamako has different soil from Timbuktu and the rest of the Niger River basin, but they—”

Again, a quick movement snared her attention. The shoppers in the market moved as languidly as the stifling air, but someone . . . something . . . didn’t feel right.

“Did you see that?” Tillie whispered. “Over by the sandal stall. Someone’s following us and then hiding when I look up.”

Hannah touched a yam. “It is not every day a white woman with long golden hair walks through Bamako market. Probably a curious child is tagging after you.”

“Maybe.” Tillie scrutinized the stall a moment longer.

“Anyway, I don’t see how I’m supposed to spread agro-forestry techniques to the people of Mali unless I can spend time with them. My employees have taught me only a smattering of the language because they want to practice their English all the time. And then there’s Arthur. . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“A Christian man. A man who wants to marry you, Tillie.”

“I’ve prayed about Arthur Robinson until I’m blue in the face. I just can’t make up my mind.”

“Your mind?”

“I mean I can’t read God’s will in this. What does he want me to do with my life?”

“He wants you to walk in him one day at a time.”

“Easier said than done.” She flipped her braid over her shoulder as she bent to inspect a stack of mangoes. Selecting one, she held it up to the late sunlight and pressed her thumb against the flesh to see if it was firm.

Hannah tugged on the green leaf-spikes of a pineapple. Dressed as always in a colorful cotton shift and narrow belt, with a bright scarf covering her hair, the old woman seemed as much at home in the middle of Mali as she had been in Kenya, so many miles away. How did she do it? Where did that peace come from?

“Do you think God wants me here planting trees and helping people?” Tillie asked.

“I think he is the vine and you are only a branch. If you remain in him and he remains in you, you will bear fruit as big and sweet as this.” Hannah held up an enormous ripe pineapple. Her face broke into a warm smile, brown eyes crinkling at the corners. “But apart from Christ, Tillie, you cannot do a thing.”

Tillie set the mango back on its pyramid. Her own words echoed. *I've been here almost a year, and I'm sure I haven't touched a single life.* Could her failure to bear fruit, her inability to make a difference in the lives of those she touched every day, mean she had grown apart from Christ?

"God will work his purposes in Mali whether you are here or not," Hannah said as she set the pineapple in Tillie's basket. She picked up a coconut from another pile. "With him acting through you, you can do anything. But you have to learn to bend like the coconut palm."

"I know you're right. It just seems like nothing ever happens."

"Something is happening now."

Tillie swung around. A dark figure slipped behind a door. "I'm telling you! There he is again."

"It is only Arthur."

"Arthur? No, it's—" She turned to find Hannah gazing in the opposite direction. At the opening to the market, a tall man in a crisp gray business suit lifted a hand in greeting.

Tillie let out her breath. "Yes, here comes Arthur. But, Hannah, someone's in the shadows down at the other end of that stall."

"A street urchin looking for a pocket to pick." She added the coconut to Tillie's basket. "Poor child."

Tillie watched Arthur's progress, noting his frown as he skirted a tethered donkey on his way down the long, straw-littered aisle. *In spite of his training in diplomacy, he never feels comfortable in the poorer sections of the city,* Tillie thought. *He's so much better suited to his air-conditioned office in the British embassy.*

During the past year, Tillie had come to enjoy her

adopted home. Ever adventurous, she went on lone expeditions, exploring the back alleys of Bamako, drinking cups of steaming, sweet, mint coffee on street corners, trying on the strange silver rings and necklaces sold by street vendors. She had made it her business to absorb every scent, every sound, every taste of Mali's fascinating desert land.

"Matilda!" Arthur caught up with her and swept his hat from his head. Light brown hair scattered across his damp forehead. "The guard at your house told me you'd walked down to the market. I've had some wonderful news."

"Let me guess. You've figured out who was stealing rare books from the library in Timbuktu and selling them in London?"

His mouth hardened. "Not yet, but we're close."

"You got the reassignment you'd applied for?"

"Indeed I did." His face beamed. "I'm to be transferred back to England in less than a month. I'll work in downtown London. Television, cinemas, warm baths, the tube . . . humidity!"

Tillie laughed. "I could do with a little rain myself."

"Could you?" He searched her eyes. "Tillie, I've come down to the market because I have something important to talk to you about. This position is the answer to my prayers in more ways than one. May we speak in private?"

Knowing exactly what he wanted to discuss, Tillie glanced at Hannah. The older woman was pulling her little cloth money pouch from her bodice. As usual, Hannah looked as though she hadn't heard a word. Tillie knew better. Hannah heard everything, her sharp brown eyes missed nothing, and her lips were ever ready to voice her opinion.

“Please, Tillie.” Arthur took her hand in an uncharacteristic public display of affection. “I’ve come all this way to speak with you. I must have your answer.”

She gulped down a bubble of air. *Think . . . pray . . . run . . .* “I’m sure I saw some tree-shaped carvings in one of these stalls,” she managed to mutter. “Umm . . . Hannah, would it be all right to separate for a few minutes while Arthur and I look for carvings?”

“Give me the basket. I will meet you at the house at suppertime.”

“I hate to leave you alone after what happened last night and . . . and everything.” She searched the street for signs of the person she felt sure was following them. “You’ll be OK in the market by yourself?”

“I am always OK. You know that.” Dismissing her with a wave, Hannah went back to counting out coins to pay for the produce they’d chosen.

Yes, Hannah was always OK. Slipping her arm through Arthur’s, Tillie turned him away from the main market area. She needed time to think. Would it be disobeying God to reject Arthur’s proposal?

It did seem they’d been thrown together by a divine hand. Like two pale birch trees in a forest of hardy African baobabs, they never could have missed each other here in Mali. They found they had much in common. They both enjoyed travel, reading, playing Scrabble, gardening. They liked to sample exotic cuisines and collect indigenous art. And they were Christians.

But could she really imagine being *married* to Arthur? Upright, uptight, oh-so-British Arthur, with his business suits, Eton ties, and polished shoes. Arthur with his Dicta-

phone and two-pound, leather-bound daily planner. Could she marry a man who ran his life by a strict schedule when she had always followed her heart?

It didn't feel right, but maybe feelings weren't all that important. "'Trust in the Lord with all your heart,'" Hannah would say, "'and do not lean on your own understanding.'"

Oh, Hannah. Why is trust always so easy for you and so hard for me?

"Darling?" Arthur had pulled out his planner and was flipping through the pages as they made their way between the stalls. "I see I'm to be back at the embassy in twenty-seven minutes for an engagement. I've so little time, and really, we must talk. I'll come back to the market another day and get a carving for you, shall I? I'll bring it with me when I pick you up for our dinner this weekend."

"I want a kapok tree, and you won't know what they look like. Come on. You can talk while we walk."

He shrugged in resignation, and they edged between rows of stalls stacked high with blue-black dates, green plantains, dried fish, yellow papayas, and bananas. Arthur was a rock of stability, a reminder of the security Tillie had longed for since her mother died. Hannah had provided that stability for years—but where Hannah's loving determination had been an anchor for Tillie's drifting family, Arthur's persistence felt like manacles she couldn't wait to escape.

"I must know what you're thinking, darling," he said, stepping over the carcass of a goat. "I'd appreciate not being kept in suspense about this."

"I was thinking of the day we first met. That party at the embassy. Remember?"

“How could I forget?” Arthur’s pale blue eyes went almost green in the slanting sunlight. “You, in that black dress with your hair hanging loose about your shoulders. Your arms tan and your legs long and slender. I thought I’d died and gone to heaven.”

“Do you remember what we first talked about? Those stories you told me?”

Arthur shook his head and grinned. He caught the heavy golden braid that snaked down her back and gave it a tug. “What stories are those?”

“You told me the history of Mali,” she reminded him, a little irked that he’d forgotten. “You talked about the wonderful old library in a mosque in Timbuktu. You described the ancient books someone has been stealing, and you told me how you’re helping the Malian government track down the thieves. You told me about the Tuareg tribesmen who used to raid the salt caravans on their way to Timbuktu. The ‘blue men.’ You said you’d even met a Targui once. And you told about the British explorers who came here to trace the Niger’s course.”

“Mungo Park and that lot?”

“Yes, Mungo Park. Don’t you remember? I was so thrilled, I could hardly go to sleep that night. The stories were about Africa—Africa at her rawest and most beautiful.” Her troubled eyes searched his face. “I was sure you loved Africa as much as I do, Arthur.”

His smile was indulgent. “I think I actually told you those things to frighten you. Perhaps I thought you’d look to me for protection while you were here. How little I understood you in those days.” He paused and gazed at her. “When I began to realize how comfortable you were in Africa, my

first thought was to change you, to remake you into a version of myself. Instead, you changed me. I've learned to appreciate the people here. I'm even used to the heat. I honestly can say I know now why God brought me here. I was led to you."

Understanding his confession—but hardly comforted by it—Tillie looked away to watch the women, all dressed in heavy black-veiled burkahs, complete their transactions for the day. Chickens flopped at their moorings, unaware of their impending fate. Mangy brown dogs rooted in small piles of trash and rags in hopes of finding a bone or a scrap of meat.

Tillie worried her lip between her teeth, glancing almost absently across the sea of faces—until she saw a small shape dart behind a booth. She frowned and silently voiced a prayer for protection. Curious in spite of her nervousness, she felt half-inclined to investigate. Arthur would have a fit over that. She tugged him toward an aisle between the stalls.

"Of course, life in London could be rich as well," he was saying. "Think of it. Breakfast in a tea room. The smell of fresh bread baking. Beautiful dresses in glass shopwindows. Churches with proper ministers, songbooks, and organs. A flat with a television, a laundry, a well-stocked kitchen. Can you see it?"

Tillie could, and she wasn't at all sure she liked what she saw. They stepped into a narrow cobblestone street, nearly empty of Bamako's usual odd assortment of old trucks, bicycles, and oxcarts. Sagging houses leaned toward the street. Wooden and iron balconies hung lopsided overhead.

Tillie glanced into open doorways at the lounging grand-

fathers and children who stared as she and Arthur walked by. She lifted a hand to wave at a little girl peeking at her from behind the trunk of a scrubby palm. Again, she sensed movement behind her. She stiffened and whirled. A small ragged figure darted into an alley. She caught her breath and grasped Arthur's hand.

"What is it, darling?"

"Let's get out of the market." She started away from the passage where the figure had vanished.

"Matilda!" He protested as she pulled him along. "What about those tree carvings you were so determined to find?"

"Later." Annoyed with herself even more than with him, she dropped his hand and hurried down an alley alone. As she emerged onto the next street, she caught another glimpse of the scurrying little figure, now moving in the shadows on the other side. Her heart beating in rhythm with her footsteps, she watched as the dark shape slipped into a tiny fabric shop.

"Darling, for heaven's sake." Arthur caught her wrist and pulled her up short. "What can you be thinking of, rushing about in this heat?"

"Someone's following us," she whispered.

"Who? Where are they?" Scowling, he peered across the street.

Tillie nudged his elbow and pointed with her chin in the direction of the hidden figure. "I keep seeing someone in the shadows. At the marketplace . . . and now here."

"Don't be ridiculous, darling! No one's following us. You've let your imagination run away with you."

"It's not my imagination. I wouldn't doubt it's the same scoundrel who tried to break into the house last night and

rob us. I'm going to put an end to this nonsense." Lifting her chin, she started across the intersection. At that moment, a ragged child flew into the afternoon sun. Like a fluttering bird, he flung himself onto Tillie. She staggered under the impact, groping for a handhold and finding nothing but the boy's scrawny shoulders.

As they struggled to regain balance, he grabbed her face with bony little fingers and pulled her ear to his mouth. "You are Tree-Planting Woman?" he whispered in broken English. "You are Tree-Planting Woman?"

"Arthur!" She pushed at the child's hands. "Get him off!"

"I'm trying!" Arthur wrestled with the clinging boy, grasping at flailing arms and trying to pin kicking legs.

Tillie broke loose and stumbled backward. The child flew at her again, grabbed her braid, and shouted out his question. "You are Tree-Planting Woman?"

"Ow! Yes, I plant trees!" she gasped. "In the PAAC compound. Pan-African Agri—Ouch! Let go! I plant trees, OK?"

In the next instant, the boy threw his arms over her head, tossing something around her neck as he did so. Then he dodged out of Arthur's grasp and bolted away down the street. Tillie lurched toward Arthur, her pulse hammering in her temples as she grabbed for his arm. "Arthur?"

His expression stopped her. Arthur, his cheeks drained to pale white, gazed into the distance. "Tuareg," he mouthed.

Rags flying behind him and thin black legs churning, the little boy ran toward a tall, white single-humped camel. "Amdu!" the child shouted. "Elkhir ras!"

High on a large leather saddle sat a man, all but his dark eyes veiled in indigo blue cotton. Two multicolored silk

sashes crossed his chest and ended in rows of tassels at his hips. Wearing a stone bracelet, a silver ring, and an elaborate wrought-iron key, he carried a wicked-looking spear, a steel broadsword, and a large, decorated-hide shield. A small dagger was strapped to his arm above the elbow.

“*Enkar!*” he snapped at the boy as he reached down and yanked him onto his dromedary. “*Io!*”

“Tuareg,” Arthur repeated dully. “Here . . . in Bamako.”

As the boy’s excited cries filled the air, the Targui suddenly lunged forward. “*Tek! Tek!*” he commanded, dark eyes on Tillie as he spurred his camel.

“He’s—he’s coming after . . . me!” she screamed.

“Don’t run!” Arthur threw one arm around her and pulled a pistol from his jacket. He leveled it at the charging Targui, but before he could fire, the camel rammed into him. The weapon clattered across the street.

Strong charcoal-hued fingers snaked around Tillie’s arm and jerked her into a dragging stumble beside the loping dromedary. As the Targui lifted her into the air, a battered Land Rover with a canvas roof rattled around the corner. Spooked, the camel skittered and stopped.

“*Tek! Tek!*” the Targui shouted and flailed at his beast with the reins as he struggled to maintain his grip on Tillie.

“Help!” she screamed. “This guy’s trying to kidnap me!”

The Land Rover swerved toward the balking animal, then slowed as it drew alongside. The driver dove at Tillie, wrapped an arm around one of her legs, and pulled. “This way!” he shouted. “Hop into the truck!”

“Are you crazy?” she shrieked. “Let go! You’re . . . you’re tearing me in half!” Suspended between the white camel and the Land Rover, she spotted Arthur. He had

retrieved his gun and was aiming it at the Targui. As Arthur fired, the warrior dodged, and Tillie was jerked from his hands.

An iron arm locked around her waist and threw her into the Rover. Blue sky whirled overhead, and she glimpsed the rough stubble of a beard and a tangle of black hair as she slammed onto the vehicle's steel floor behind the two front seats. She rolled onto her knees and lunged for the open side.

"Arthur!" she bellowed, thrusting her head and shoulders out of the opening.

"Get back inside! You want to tear your head off?" The driver reached behind, grabbed her, and held her down with one rock-hard arm as he steered through the crowded street. Coughing and choking back hot rage, Tillie watched as Arthur ran after the Land Rover.

"Matilda! Stop! Get out of there!" he cried, his features contorted. "Darling!"

The Targui had regained control of his dromedary, and it moved past the Englishman, gaining on the Land Rover. As the vehicle swerved around another corner, Tillie tumbled and bumped against solid flesh.

"Hang on, lady. We've got the Tuareg on our tail!" The driver stomped on the gas pedal. His thick black hair whipped at the corners of his grin as he glanced at her. "Grab that hand strap over the window, and don't let go."

"Take me to the United States Embassy!" Tillie demanded above the roar of the engine. She clutched the strap he had indicated as the Land Rover hurtled down a hill toward the Niger River. Anger boiled through her, but she knew enough to be afraid, too. Maybe this had some-

thing to do with Arthur's investigation of the manuscript thievery ring in Timbuktu. Or maybe it had to do with her work for PAAC.

Either way, it was far more adventure than she had bargained for, and she wanted out.