



RELIC QUEST

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PART 1
The Quest for the Mountain of Fire





LOST IN ARABIA **CHAPTER 1**

Saudi Arabia, 1988

As each hour passed, we had less water, and with each mile, less gas. Worse yet, it appeared we were straying even farther into the blistering Saudi Arabian desert. We desperately needed to find the paved road that cut across the northwest Saudi frontier. That illusive vein of highway would lead us the hundred or so miles back to Tabuk, to a hotel with clear, cool water and air-conditioning. I tried to drive the pickup onto a rise where I could get my bearings, but the two-wheel-drive Datsun couldn't negotiate the steep slope.

I slammed my boot on the gas pedal as if stomping harder would somehow give us traction. The threadbare tires spun without biting into the loose rock. I offered Larry, my traveling companion, a weak smile. His face was caked in grimy sweat, and I

could only imagine what I looked like. Larry said nothing. He simply stared at the incline and shook his head. Finally, I leaned forward and shut off the engine. The Saudi Arabian desert showed no mercy to novices like us.

We left the truck and stood on the loose desert soil.

“This worn-out truck will never make it,” Larry said, beginning to trudge up the sandy draw. There was nothing for me to do but follow. We crested the ridge together and surveyed the horizon. In every direction we saw desolate stretches of sand, bleak rocky bluffs, and high, barren mountains.

I pulled a topographical map from my shirt pocket and carefully unfolded it. I studied its contours for a long minute and surveyed distant geographical landmarks. “I know where we are,” I said.

“Really? Where?” Larry asked, craning his neck to see our position.

I wadded the map into a ball and proclaimed, “Lost, that’s where we are—lost.”

Far to the east, I saw the movement of wild camels. Beyond them, a small truck generated a billowing dust spout. The truck was headed our way.

“There!” I shouted, my voice raspy and parched.

Larry looked east and saw the welcome apparition. We trotted down the sloping wadi to our truck. I started the engine and jammed the gears into reverse. Cranking the wheel and gunning the engine, I hightailed it in the general direction of the rising dust cloud. The battered vehicle bounced along the rocky grade as we careened down to the thin, rutted wisp of a road. We soon met the approaching truck, which slowed immediately. Pulling alongside, we could see the driver, a nervous-looking Bedouin who peered

warily into our truck. He sat back with his arm resting on the window ledge and waited for us to speak.

I leaned out the window and blurted out, "Asphalt." I had heard other Bedouins use this term to describe the paved highway. The startled driver became even more baffled when Larry leaned across my side of the truck and used awkward hand gestures to communicate our dire need to find the blacktop road. For several anxious moments, the man pondered our plight. Dropping his arm from the window, he surveyed our beleaguered truck, scarred and dusty from its pilgrimage across the desert. His dark eyes seemed to brighten with understanding. Putting his truck in gear, he waved for us to follow and vanished in a fresh cloud of dust.

I whipped our truck around, steering a tight arc to avoid straying off the hard-packed grooves into shifting sand. I had already had enough of getting stuck to last a lifetime.

We followed the Bedouin across mile after mile of wasteland, through a broad canyon to an outpost in the middle of nowhere, nothing more than a few black wool tents and three mud hovels stuck onto the chalky cliffs. Two large, rusted water tanks, supported by a leaning wooden platform, were the only landmarks. Some words were painted in block print on one of the weathered wood planks, but sandblasting windstorms had long since rendered the lettering illegible.

As I stepped from the truck, a gust of hot wind swept sand into my face and pelted my sunglasses with grit. Bedouin men in drab robes squatted in the meager shade of the two tanks, seemingly uninterested in our arrival. The whole village had an otherworldly feel to it. Apparently, people came here from miles around to fill their tanks with gas, get water, and conduct their desert trade.

“Uh-oh,” Larry whispered. “This doesn’t look good.”

I turned to see six men walking toward us, brandishing battered rifles. I was shaken by the unmistakable anger in their eyes. These desert dwellers wore flowing Bedouin robes stained yellow by the harsh sun. I guessed that they were some of the frontier forces I had heard about, a kind of desert police who handled feuds and disputes between remote Bedouin clans. They had now caught two Americans wandering in the desert near a fenced military facility.

Larry and I were quickly surrounded and escorted to one of the huts. Patches of whitewash peeled from its crumbling daub walls. A rifle butt prodded us along until we stood before the hut’s darkened doorway. I instinctively stopped short, but a foot against my lower back propelled me inside. Turning in anger, I could make out only the outline of a man standing in the entryway, his robed frame eclipsing the blinding rays of the sun. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I heard the word *Jew* and felt warm spittle trickle down my cheek.

We were pushed to the ground inside the hut and awaited the worst.

A stocky man in frayed military fatigues pushed past the other guards and tossed a camel saddle on the floor. Dust rose in the stifling air of the dimly lit room. With an exaggerated huff, the man lowered himself onto the saddle and glared at me from a brutish, sun-scarred face like blistered leather. One eye, blood red and puffy, was swollen nearly shut, but the appraising stare of his good eye was unnerving.

Larry and I sat on the packed-earth floor, our backs pressed against a sweat-stained wall. Our socks, shoes, keys, wallets, and passports had been confiscated and piled in the middle of the

room. The rusted tin roof radiated triple-digit heat as thin shafts of sunlight pierced through random gaps and holes, further irritating my sunburnt skin. I lowered my head and waited for the questioning to begin—angry words shouted in a language I didn't understand. My answers—and Larry's—were equally incomprehensible to our captors.

A whipping wind whistled around the mud walls, blowing sand through the cracks and under the door. The air in the room was nauseating. An odor of putrefied mutton oozed from the floor and walls; it clung to my skin, invaded my nose, and mingled with my sweat-saturated hair. I had been fighting my stomach from the moment they had shoved us into this wretched place. I kept my breath shallow and rhythmic, battling the urge to retch.

Our Bedouin guards started in on us again, grilling us incessantly with unintelligible, mind-numbing questions. Although no one understood a word we said, they kept the interrogation going. The one word that I did understand chilled my blood. The men kept calling us Jews with vehement hatred. I studied the guards more closely. Their flowing, sun-faded *thobes* were stained with gun grease and dried sheep's blood. Strapped across their chests were stiff, cracked-leather bandoliers filled with bullet casings of various sizes though most were either empty or corroded. Traditional red-checked *gutras* scarves were wrapped around their heads and secured with rope headbands. They looked like extras from *Lawrence of Arabia*.

I glanced at Larry, but no conversation was needed. We were in deep trouble, and we both knew it. This was not a place of constitutional liberties for tourists gone astray; there would be no Miranda rights or attorney visits. Our next stop could well be the bottom of a

shallow, sandy grave—if they bothered to bury us at all. We were in forbidden territory in a culture closed to the outside world. We were trespassers, and the punishment for this offense could be severe.

We had come in pursuit of a great historical prize so alluring that we had decided to risk everything, but at the moment, I questioned our wisdom.

What made me think this trip was such a good idea? I had left my family at home, set aside my business—and for what? Was it really worth the danger, the pain, the risk? Was it really worth *this*?

I looked away from my red-eyed inquisitor and gazed through a crack in the wall. The sun was dissolving, silhouetting a solitary Bedouin shepherd against the deep blue of the darkening sky. At his feet, a small flock of sheep foraged for scant offerings of desert sage. Although I couldn't see it from where I sat, I knew that the blackened summit of Jabal al-Lawz, "Mountain of the Almond," towered above the distant range of brooding mountains. It held a mysterious relic of antiquity, an age-old secret. Just the night before, Larry and I had stood on that mountain, and what we had seen would change Bible maps and our own lives forever. Now all we had to do was live to tell the story.

For me, that story had begun ten years earlier on a quiet spring evening in Southern California when I answered a call on my police radio.