

PART ONE

Childhood

Little Peshmerga Girl

BAGHDAD

Saturday, July 8, 1972

In a country where Kurds are hated, I am a Kurd.

Although I was born and grew up in Baghdad, my heart belonged to Sulaimaniya. Baghdad was the city of my Arab father, and Sulaimaniya was the city of my Kurdish mother. Sulaimaniya is 331 kilometers north of Baghdad and is in Kurdistan. For ten long months of every year, from September through June, I plodded along in dusty Baghdad, dreaming of July and August, which I called the “happy months,” when I would leave behind the drab-brown plains of Mesopotamia to journey with my mother and siblings to the color-splashed mountains and valleys of Kurdistan.

I well remember one particular travel day in 1972 when I was ten. I was so excited about our trip that I was called a pest by my mother and siblings, who were getting ready for our departure. I felt ignored. But when my dear uncle Aziz, who had lived with us for several years, noticed me standing listlessly in the kitchen, he led me to stroll into the back garden where a flowering bougainvillea climbed our garden wall.

To help the time pass faster, he encouraged me to pick lemons and naranjas. We had a wide variety of fruit trees and berry bushes

in our back garden, including oranges, apricots, plums, naranjas, and dates. How fortunate I was to live in a land where luscious fruits grew like colorful jewels all around me. Of all the fruits, the naranja, an orangelike citrus fruit, was my favorite. When it was ripe, it was squeezed into juice and poured into ice trays to freeze. My mother would serve frozen cubes of naranjas in glasses filled with icy water and sugar while family and visitors lounged on the veranda.

I loved such occasions, acting as if I was all grown up as I crossed my legs like a lady and sipped the delicious drink, loudly interjecting my opinions into adult conversations. Because at ten I was the youngest child, and greatly loved, they pretended to take me seriously.

To my excitement, my older brother Ra'ad, who was eighteen years old and set to begin college in the fall, appeared at the back door and called out, "Joanna, go! Keep watch for the taxi."

Uncle Aziz nodded, holding out his hands for the fruit I had picked. Then I dashed through the kitchen where Mother and Muna, my fourteen-year-old sister, were preparing a picnic of chicken sandwiches and date cookies to eat while on the road. I skipped through the house to the front porch, standing first on one foot and then the other, impatient, willing the taxicab to arrive so we could leave for the bus station.

I kept a watchful gaze on the boulevard, wishing that we owned a car so that we could travel to the north in fine style.

The families of our al-Askari cousins all owned expensive automobiles. That was because they were rich. Unfortunately, we were poor. But even if we had been wealthy, my father would not have been permitted a license to drive a motorized vehicle because he was unable to hear the warning roars of automobiles, buses, and donkey carts that raced through the streets of Baghdad. My father had been deaf since childhood. His only means of transportation was an old blue bicycle.

I stared at his bicycle parked against the garden fence. How I longed to jump on that bicycle and ride away! But I was not allowed on it although my brothers were, with Ra'ad balanced on the back and Sa'ad perched on the front. I was envious of my brothers, but regardless of my pleas, such a thing was not considered proper for a girl in Baghdad.

To take my mind off the injustices of my life, I forced myself to concentrate on the city street in case the taxicab accidentally passed by our house.

It was fun to watch all the activity. The kaleidoscope of a Baghdad morning was in full swing. Human figures shimmered like a mirage, with men hurrying to reach the neighborhood café while harried housewives rushed to the market. Older boys were amusing themselves with marbles, calling out their negligible bets, while small boys shouted as they played hopscotch. There were few girls in public view because in those days respectable girls were expected to remain inside once the school year had finished.

I was thankful that Mother didn't oblige me to help with the housework, because I hated chores. Although she maintained the cleanest house in all of Baghdad, and my older siblings had specific duties, I was excused because I was the youngest.

"Salt! Salt!" The cry of the nomad camel driver drew my attention as he made his weekly pass through the neighborhood. Many were the mornings I had heard his hoarse cries while I curled up under the warm covers of my bed, so I stared at him with interest.

He kept up a steady bellow. "Salt! Salt!"

Dressed in a frayed gray shirt and worn brown trousers, he was a dark-skinned, craggy-faced man with arched eyebrows. A knotted rope of red and blue wool was looped from his arm around the long neck of a small camel. I instantly loved that camel, with her blond wavy coat and bowed lips curled into a smile, shuffling and rocking as if she were moving to the beat of a song. Her precious cargo was packed in rough cloth bags that swayed on either side. But when her master tapped her on the rump with his stick, she belched a rumbling complaint, and frothing saliva gathered at the corners of her open mouth.

"Salt! Salt" the hawker yelled as he puffed on a cigarette that hung from the side of his mouth. He raised his eyes to meet mine, plucking the cigarette out of his mouth as a hopeful smile crossed his face. His eyes widened and his head bobbed with anticipation.

I shook my head no and waved him off, aware that Mother still had an unopened bag of his salt in the kitchen. He shrugged good-naturedly and turned away, shouting, "Salt! Salt!"

My eyes were lured to a young peasant woman dressed in a billowy blouse, a colorful skirt, and a carefully twisted turban with a

large round tray balanced on top. White cloths were wrapped around her feet and ankles for protection from the heat.

I knew enough to see that she had come from the south, from an area of Iraq called the Marshes. Women from that region were known to be as beautiful as the landscape.

She was peddling buffalo cream stored in round wooden containers on the tray on her head.

I watched as she ambled out of a side street, a trail of mangy neighborhood cats at her shuffling feet. The cats darted from side to side, meowing expectantly at the scent of the fragrant cream. Despite her youth and beauty, she appeared weighed down with resigned despair.

I felt sorry for her, and if I had had money in my pocket, I would have purchased all the cream her buffalo could produce. I was pleased to see a customer approach, his outstretched palms indicating the quantity of cream he wanted to purchase. The unsmiling girl unhooked a thin steel needle hanging from her waist, reached over her head, and grasped one of the wooden containers. Then she used the needle as a tool to slice through the congealed buffalo cream.

The cats looked on hopefully, on the ready for any spills, but the girl was too skilled for such carelessness.

After dropping a few coins into the girl's waiting hand, the customer left with his precious purchase.

The cats around her feet increased in number, but the cream peddler didn't seem to notice them, or me, as she slunk past our front gate. I thought that her life must be very hard to be so permanently gloomy. Her petulant lips made that clear.

As she strolled away, I tried to imagine that young woman's life, so unlike my own, for I knew even then at my young age that Iraq was populated by a huge variety of people with vastly differing lifestyles and beliefs.

After World War I and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the British and the French resolved that three main geographic regions would be joined together to make up modern Iraq. The central part of Iraq was the largely limestone plateau where Baghdad was located. Although modern Baghdad was not considered a beautiful city, it did claim a unique and glorious past, boasting palaces, mosques, markets, and gardens.

Iraq's second region was the wet lowland plain of the south known as the Marshes, home to the sad-faced buffalo cream seller. A marvelous variety of fish, birds, and plant life was abundant there. An old Arabic text says that the distinctive landscape resulted from the aftermath of a devastating flood so powerful that mud houses melted back into mud while the land itself split into thousands of tiny islands. The survivors of the great flood lived in huts on boats called *mash-houfs*, pieced together with reeds and bitumen.

Iraq's third region, the north, famed for its many snow-clad mountains and lush forests, was a place of beauty with waterfalls and orchards. Because of its cool temperatures, many vacation resorts had sprung up in that area. While Arab Iraqis had simply referred to the region as northern Iraq, Kurds called the area by its true name: Kurdistan.

I searched the street once more for the taxicab and caught sight of a group of young neighborhood bullies, a gang of four boys near to my own age who always took great pleasure ridiculing me for being a Kurd. When our eyes locked, they began to leap about on their bare feet, jeering laughter interspersed with hateful chants, "House of the Kurds! Kurd Girl!" One particularly spiteful boy laughed the loudest, shouting, "*La! La!* Girl of the deaf and dumb!"

My eyes met his. For a moment his words drove all the power and feeling out of me, but my passiveness lasted only as long as it took me to sail off the porch. I shouted, "Hey!" barely pausing long enough to gather several loose stones from under Mother's sweet-smelling *yass* bush, which I tossed as hard as I could. I had never reacted in such an aggressive manner before, but recently I had resolved to be more like Father, a bold man who always defended himself, even if it meant a physical fight.

Unaccustomed to a girl who would defend herself, the boys were so startled by the turn of events that they instinctively turned and ran.

I hit one of the boys on his arm. When he shrieked, the others fell over their feet to avoid the same fate. How stupid they looked!

I laughed aloud, feeling enormous satisfaction as I watched those cowards run down the street. And they were running from a girl, which made it all the more sweet.

I had never felt so powerful. Never would they frighten me again. Never!

I was smart enough to know that I must hide my deed, for my family would be horrified for a daughter to behave in such a rough manner. I quickly rubbed the dirt off my palms. When I glanced up to make certain my tormentors had not returned, I saw that the taxicab had finally arrived.

“He’s here!” I cried out, running toward the house. I opened the door and shouted as loudly as I could, “The taxi driver is here! Come on!”

It was a mad dash with everyone rushing and grabbing suitcases from the front porch to pack in the taxi trunk.

The skinny taxi driver jumped from his taxicab. He shouted loudly as he directed the loading of our cargo.

Although Mother had taught me not to stare at people, I gawked at his brown face, so wrinkled and worn. His hands were gnarled, and he nervously rubbed them on his ragged, threadbare trousers. He was a poor man, I realized.

Truthfully, most people in Baghdad were poor. I glanced at Father, Uncle Aziz, and my brothers. Despite the fact that we were poor too, they were all attired in neat, clean clothes, free of tears or holes.

I glanced down at my bright pink dress. For the most part, Arabs in Baghdad wore dull colors, generally black or dark blue, but not we Kurds. We relished vivid colors. My pretty pink dress was freshly washed and ironed and smelled new, even though it was not.

Mother knew how to keep everything perfect. Mother kept her home and family so clean and tidy that it was possible that our enemies didn’t know we were poor; we certainly didn’t *look* poor. Perhaps our tidiness intensified their hatred.

The men were having difficulty closing the trunk. I helpfully pointed out, “This automobile is leaning to one side.”

The taxi driver saw what I saw and began yelling directions as he inspected the weight on the tires. Those tires looked thin, even to my untrained eye, but I decided to keep that information to myself. Mother might insist on canceling that taxi and calling another. I did not want our trip delayed another moment, as I had been eagerly anticipating the trip since we last left Sulaimaniya, a year ago in August.

When the taxi driver felt everything was secure, he slid into the driver’s seat shouting “*Yella, yella!*” Let’s go.

Mother and Muna joined me in the backseat. Uncle Aziz came around to my side and gently pushed me to the center. Although he would accompany us to the station, it had been decided that he would not go with us to Kurdistan.

In 1962, the year I was born, my uncle was a student in Sulaimaniya when he was arrested simply for the crime of being a Kurdish. The torture he endured changed his life forever. Since that time, he had been unable to cope with life in the north, where his imprisonment and persecution had occurred. That is why he had moved to Baghdad to live with his older sister, my mother.

Even years after his torture, there were occasions when something would trigger bizarre behavior, when my uncle might refuse to speak or to come out of his room. For years he was incapable of attending college or holding down a job. But he was a greatly loved uncle, always willing to join in silly games with me.

So he would remain behind in Baghdad without us, while we visited my grandmother Ameena, my aunties, and all my cousins in Sulaimaniya.

The taxi driver shouted loudly that he was in a hurry, that we must go. Ra'ad and Sa'ad quickly shoved into the front seat with the driver.

As the taxi pulled away from the curb, I remembered that I had forgotten to say good-bye to my father. My father rarely traveled to Kurdistan with us. He was not Kurdish himself, but even had he been, he would have stayed behind in Baghdad to work, never having enough money to join his family on vacation. Poor Father.

As we drove away, I twisted around until I could see his face through the window of the taxi, his brown eyes crinkling, his lips stretching into a smile. I stared back at his kindly face until he reached down to pick something from the ground. His scalp was exposed, his hair plastered down in some places and sticking out in others. He had obviously worked up a sweat during the loading of the taxicab.

Suddenly, I had a queasy feeling in my stomach, a flutter of unexplained apprehension over my father's well-being. But I quickly pushed that bad feeling aside as we made our way into the thick of midday Baghdad traffic.

Unlike most cities, Baghdad did not grow from a small village but instead was designed according to a master plan. The year was

A.D. 762 when Caliph Abu Ja'far al-Mansur was struck with the idea of creating a city of circled enclosures. His dream was for a circular city with three distinct enclosures on the west bank of the Tigris.

Caliph al-Mansur ruled from the innermost enclosure, the army was housed within the second enclosure, and the citizens lived in the outermost enclosure. But modern Baghdad had spread well beyond its carefully laid out circles, losing what charm it might have had.

With only a few main roads, Baghdad was chaotic as well.

Our driver nosed his taxi onto the thoroughfare, competing with hordes of people, donkey carts, cars, and minibuses to bully his way onto the main road.

Colorful billboards advertised Western products. Others touted the advantages Iraqis were supposedly enjoying under the current government of the Baath Party, the latest political party that had come to power during yet another government coup four years before, in 1968. I had overheard my brother Ra'ad jokingly call the Baathists the "comeback kids," because they had been in power once before, in 1963, but had been quickly deposed due to the disorder and malice demonstrated during their first attempt at governing. But everyone said the Baathists were now firmly entrenched.

Although I was too young to understand politics, I was aware of the destructive effects of the 1958 revolution that had caused deaths in my family and my father to lose his business. I was more attentive than most children my age, and I was aware of optimistic whispers regarding Iraq's new government. I knew that the adults wanted only one thing: an end to the confusion and upheaval that occurred each time there was a change of government in Iraq.

But on that sun-drenched July day so long ago, who could have guessed the heartbreak and terror that the Baathist government and Saddam Hussein would ultimately bring to all Iraqis? It was good that none of us were aware of the dreadful days coming.

In years past, our family had traveled by train from Baghdad to Kirkuk and from there to Sulaimaniya by car. But that particular summer of 1972 Mother said we must save money; thus, we were traveling by bus. Soon, we arrived at the Nahdha bus station in downtown Baghdad. More travel bedlam erupted as we piled out of the taxi and waited while Ra'ad, Sa'ad, and Uncle Aziz reversed all the work just accomplished, unloading and stacking our bags.

A porter appeared and for a small tip eagerly helped transport the luggage. We walked hurriedly to the designated area of the station where the minibuses to Sulaimaniya were parked haphazardly, awaiting passengers. Suddenly, we were confronted by one of the bus drivers, an older balding man with a thick mustache that was so long it drooped down on either side to his chin. He was extremely friendly, encouraging us to board his bus, claiming that he was such an experienced bus driver that he would cut an hour off the trip. Most important, he declared that children under the age of twelve could ride free.

We gratefully boarded that bus because money was always short.

I was very thin and small for my age, so there was no question that I was under age twelve. Muna was very petite and could have passed for twelve as well, but mother refused to lie about it.

We made a grave error in trusting that driver, but it would take time to reveal our blunder.

The well-worn bus creaked as we slowly pulled away from the station, and once again we weaved through the busy city streets. The bus lurched through the commercial area of Baghdad where most of the city's shopping bazaars and ancient souks and factories with tall chimneys were located. We were soon on Highway 4, a modern roadway to Kirkuk on our way north to our final destination of Sulaimaniya.

Although the bus could easily transport twenty-five people, only eleven people were on board. Mother and Ra'ad conferred about that oddity and Ra'ad queried the driver, but the man brushed off my brother's concerns with a wink.

"This gives us more room," Muna whispered with a hesitant smile on her face. She had a good point. My sister Muna was so timid and nervous that everyone in our family felt we must protect her. She was a twin to Sa'ad, who was her exact opposite in every way.

Sa'ad was dark skinned, physically strong, and personally forceful. Muna, on the other hand, was porcelain pale, fragile, and painfully docile. They were such opposites that many people accused us of mocking their intelligence when we told them that Sa'ad and Muna were twins.

I regret I was not there to witness the day when Muna and Sa'ad were born. It was such a thrilling incident that no one in our

family has ever forgotten it. I had heard the tale more than once. In Mother's third pregnancy, no one suspected that she was expecting twins, not even her physician. A few hours after Mother went into labor, a noticeably disinterested nurse appeared and presented my father with a hefty baby boy. While family members were mighty pleased at the birth of a second son, everyone soon grew worried when Mother continued shrieking from behind a pair of closed doors. When Mother's cries finally subsided, the same nurse, no longer indifferent, but suddenly possessed with so much energy she was wheezing from excitement, rushed from the delivery room and straight to my father with yet a second baby!

Everyone present gaped at the sight of a tiny bundle in the nurse's hands. The nurse loudly declared the new baby a twin to Sa'ad, who was a brother twice her size. No one could believe what the nurse was saying. Several Kurdish relatives from up north accused the nurse of playing a spiteful joke on our family just because Mother was a Kurd.

But they were wrong. Muna was *not* a joke. My sister was real, although she was such a miniature package that she had to remain at the hospital for several weeks. Even when Muna was discharged, the doctor refused to guarantee her survival. Mother was told to swaddle the baby's little body in strips of cotton for the first few months of her life to protect her translucent skin, so delicate that it bled when stroked. Swaddling was necessary for a second reason as well: there were no baby clothes in all of Iraq to fit an infant much smaller than a doll.

As the years passed, Sa'ad grew manly and forceful, his opinions known to all, while Muna was so bashful she rarely uttered a word.

I felt enormous affection for my sister from the beginning, comprehending that I must shield her from the cruel world, despite the fact I was younger by four years.

As soon as we left the city behind us, the passengers napped or gazed out the windows, but I was born with an inquisitive temperament, so I made it my business to inspect all the passengers.

Two Kurdish men were sitting quietly at the front of the bus. Their traditional costumes of turbans and distinctive baggy pants made them identifiable as our own kind. I wondered if they could be part of the romantic Kurdish freedom fighters, known as Peshmerga, that I had heard such stories about. But of course, even if

they were, they would have to conceal that fact. It was an automatic death sentence to be a Peshmerga in Iraq.

I couldn't stop staring.

The younger of the two was a gigantic man with the broad shoulders and thick arms of a weight lifter. But his wide dreamy eyes and kindly mien belied his physical power. A fringe of black curly hair escaped from under his turban at the nape of his neck.

The second man was small and wiry. I stared at his unusual sagging, creased eyelids. Nevertheless, he looked jolly, glittering with life.

The other four passengers were a couple and their two small children. By their attire I knew they were Arab. The husband was dressed in a dishdasha, a long shirtlike white robe worn by many native Iraqi men. His wife was wearing a black cloak over a blue dress. The children were dressed in Western-style clothing, and they stared in an unfriendly way at our Kurdish costumes.

Although Mother and I were the only two members of our family who routinely wore traditional Kurdish costumes, on that day all of us were wearing our best Kurdish clothes.

Ra'ad and Sa'ad looked dashing in their voluminous Kurdish blouses and wide trousers belted with sashes. Typical Kurdish caps, called *klaw*, were perched on their heads, and they wore sandals known as *klash* on their feet. The three females in the family were decked out in brightly colored Kurdish dresses. I was in my favorite shade of deep pink, Muna was in bright blue, and Mother was in sunny yellow. Our girlish heads were bare, while Mother's black hair was covered with a dazzling golden scarf with clinking silver coins sewn to the edges.

To be friendly, Mother offered the Arab children some of our date cookies. But their parents reacted as though the cookies were poisoned. They yanked on the hands of their children, telling Mother a curt, "*La! La!*" meaning "No! No!"

My surprised Mother fell back against her seat.

I was shocked by their rudeness, despite the fact I was old enough to understand a fact of life: most Iraqi Arabs hated Kurds.

Mother quickly recovered and offered her own children a few of the sweets. I felt so insulted by the strangers' reaction that I took enormous pleasure in munching on the cookies, loudly

announcing to everyone how delicious they were. I felt vindicated when I saw the Arab kids stare reproachfully at their parents.

In contrast, the older of the two Kurdish men looked around smiling and offered pieces of hard candy to all the children. The two Arab kids moved their little hands so rapidly that they blurred. They grabbed the candy, removing the wrapping and popping it into their mouths with such speed that their parents couldn't stop them that time.

I laughed out loud at the parents' surprised faces, and the two men laughed with me, even the one who was so quiet that he had not spoken one word during the trip.

I knew that the trip would take nearly nine hours. We were the only passengers traveling all the way to Sulaimaniya. The family of Arabs, we learned, would be leaving the bus at a small Sunni village an hour or so outside Baghdad, and the older of the two Kurdish men said that they would disembark at a village outside Kirkuk.

The day was miserably hot. A large fly buzzed around the bus, and I feebly swatted at it. Just as I drifted off, I was startled awake by the angry voice of the Arab bus driver. He had been so friendly before, I could only assume that the unbearable July heat had brought on a bad temper.

He shouted, "You! Kurds! Be quiet back there! Noisy kids give me a headache!"

I felt personally affronted. We hadn't made a sound. I arched my neck proudly and glanced at the Arab family. The husband and wife exchanged a calculating look.

I dug my fingers into my palms, itching to react, yet knowing I could do nothing with Mother and my siblings around. I looked hopefully at the two Kurdish men to see if perhaps they might defend us from this unprovoked attack, but their profiles were frozen stares, studying the landscapes we passed, obviously unwilling to get into an altercation with the driver. I was disappointed, but told myself that if they were indeed Peshmergas in disguise, surely they must protect their cover.

Before leaving on this trip we had been warned that life for Kurds in the north had become extremely difficult, even dangerous. The Kurds were always suspected of fostering dissent and civil unrest. New draconian laws had been passed by the government: If

a Kurd was found with a pair of binoculars, he would be hung. If a Kurd owned a typewriter without special permission, he could be arrested and tried. Cameras had always been suspect, but a camera with a zoom lens could cost a Kurd his life. Kurds could be arrested on a whim. An Arab might report a Kurd for criticizing the regime, and even if the report was untrue, the Kurd would be automatically punished.

My mother and older siblings shifted uncomfortably in their seats, but because we were Kurds and the discourteous driver was an Arab, no one dared to speak back.

The trip had lost its luster for me.

We soon arrived at a modest cluster of brown-brick houses on the outskirts of Baghdad where the Arab family took leave. They gathered their belongings, which consisted of two old carrying cases, and scurried past us without a glance. But they were effusive with gratitude to the bus driver.

My soul burned for revenge.

They lived in a modest neighborhood, typical for poor Iraqi families, where one-story concrete homes were the same color as the sand. Flat roofs exposed drying clothes and an assortment of rusted metal chairs.

Although I was pleased to see those unfriendly Arabs leave, I was disappointed that they left without knowing that my father was of the famous Baghdadi al-Askari family. Even years after the revolution, strangers we met were always awed by our family name.

We soon made another quick stop at a small, dirty gas station. As we neared Kurdistan, the gas would become scarce because as a collective punishment the government limited gas supplies to Kurds. The driver would have to look for roadside stalls where young Kurdish boys sold gas out of plastic jugs.

When the bus got back on the road, everyone dozed until lunchtime, when Mother and Muna woke us passing out chicken salad sandwiches and the Fanta orange drinks Mother had purchased at the gas station.

Both Kurdish men were grateful when Mother quietly insisted that they share our sandwiches. But the bus driver refused Mother's offer. He acted as though the sandwiches were contaminated, although Mother was the most fastidious housekeeper in all of Iraq.

Soon afterward the flat earth fell away from us when we passed over a metal suspension bridge that spanned a gorge. For the first time I could see the green beauty of a rising mountain range. We would soon be in Kurdistan, the one place on Earth that always made me feel confident and happy.

Even at that young age, I knew that I belonged there, and not in Baghdad.

"I love Kurdistan!" I announced to no one in particular, winning smiles from the two Kurdish men. The Arab driver produced a disgusted grunt but made no comment.

It was illegal to call northern Iraq by its proper name, Kurdistan. But I felt confident and brave because it was unlikely that a young girl like me would be punished. Besides, I knew that soon we would be at Grandmother Ameena's house, and this troubling trip would be behind us.

The bus driver became less cranky once we were in the cool of the Kurdish mountains. To my surprise, he turned on a tape recorder that filled the interior of the bus with rousing Kurdish folk songs and urged us all to sing along. Everyone knew that it was illegal to sing Kurdish songs that invoked nationalistic feelings, yet on occasion Kurdish folk songs could even be heard over Baghdad Radio. The oldest of the two Kurdish men pretended to sing along with the music, but I forgave him because I knew he was faking to keep the peace. But I certainly wasn't going to perform at the command of that rude man.

Within an hour the bus came to a stop and the two Kurds took their leave. Holding their hands over their hearts, they said their farewells, scrambling happily from the bus. They rapidly walked in the direction of a settlement clinging to the side of the mountain, the tops of the houses so low and close to one another that I believed that if I tried, I could use them as stepping stones up the mountain.

The bus moved on. By then we had been on that hot bus for over six hours. Weariness was setting in. But then the vehicle made an unexpected turn off the main highway, and the bus driver announced that we were stopping.

Mother quickly shouted a protest in Kurdish, "What? Where are you going?" Her question was ignored.

Ra'ad repeated Mother's words in Arabic.

The driver wobbled his head and lamely announced, "A pickup. A regular. He needs a ride to Sulaimaniya."

Ra'ad translated for Mother. Her lips turned down in a scowl. She was not pleased with the turn of events.

The road was unpaved, and the dust flew from under the wheels and into the open windows, causing everyone to choke and cough. Just as Ra'ad got out of his seat and moved toward Mother to confer further about the troubling situation, there was a shocking noise, a rattle of gunfire.

My forehead struck the seat back in front of me when the driver slammed on the brakes. Ra'ad stumbled backward but caught his footing. He fell back on the seat and gave an involuntary gasp.

I was frightened. I looked at Mother, who motioned, "Come, Joanna."

I rushed to her side, peering through the window. I spotted a group of armed men moving stealthily down a winding path. What was happening?

We heard shouts: "Off! Off the bus!"

The bus driver was the first to disembark, but we were quick to file out and follow him.

Ra'ad looked at Mother, whispering, "Bandits."

Bandits! Were we being robbed? My heart started beating hard and fast.

When we filed off the bus I saw five armed men. They looked at us angrily.

Many people in Iraq were living in hopeless poverty. Desperate bandits materialized from every part of society. Even Kurds could be guilty of highway robbery. But the men holding us at gunpoint were not Kurds.

Arab bandits would never have pity for us, even if they knew Father was a full-blooded Arab. In fact, such information would most likely make them hate us all the more, since we were dressed in Kurdish clothing.

One of the bandits started shouting at the driver. We quickly understood that he was in league with them. It was his task to travel around Iraq for the purpose of luring unsuspecting passengers to board his bus. Then he drove them to prearranged, secluded areas to be robbed.

But it was clear by their chatter that we were a disappointment. They were expecting more affluent-looking passengers.

For certain, those men were going to rob us. Suddenly, I could think of nothing but my beautiful black doll, brought back from London for me by my auntie Fatima. Auntie Fatima was the younger sister of my father, a brilliant woman who held a high government position. None of us had ever seen such a doll. She was made of black porcelain, with a perfect face and long lashes. Her dress was light green silk. Best of all, she even had matching underpants. The doll was so precious and unique that Mother said she was a collectible and put her in a box, saving her, she said, for "special occasions."

I had pleaded for days before Mother agreed I could take her to Kurdistan, to show her off to my Kurdish cousins in Sulaimaniya. Would the bandits take her from me?

I glanced up at Mother and from her worried expression I knew that she was anxious over more important things than my doll. Mother was frightened for our safety. She pulled Muna by her arm, moving her close to her side.

Ever since Muna was a young girl, many people praised her for her beauty, with her honey-blond hair, light skin, and perfect features. Perhaps Mother was worried that those men would want Muna for a bride, even though she was still very young.

Holding one arm firmly around Muna, I saw Mother throwing a meaningful look at Ra'ad and Sa'ad, signifying that they were to remain calm.

The bandits might well have believed my brothers a threat and capable of fighting back, especially Ra'ad, my older brother. Although he was not yet an adult, he was over six feet tall, towering a full head above the bandits. There was no way for them to know that my older brother was not a fighter and would much prefer to sit in a corner and study.

On the other hand, Sa'ad could create a problem. He was a big boy, too, but he was hotheaded and hardheaded. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him flexing and tensing his muscles.

But the bandits were preoccupied. They were furious with their partner, the driver, for delivering such a poor lot of passengers.

The shortest bandit, who was the obvious leader, suddenly had enough of our driver's smart mouth and menaced him with his

gun. The cowardly driver spun around, then made for the high bushes edging the dirt road. Recklessly, the bandit sprayed the road with bullets, terrifying everyone.

When the driver heard the popping gunfire and saw the bullets rising from around his feet, he skidded to an abrupt stop, swirled around, and shouted, "Hey! Hey!" Making conciliatory signals to his bandit friends, he slunk back.

I was so shocked that I stood with my mouth open. We were being robbed by a gang of comedians. Unfortunately, the situation was deadly serious.

The leader cursed him with a threat. The driver pointed out our luggage, eight crammed bags lashed to the top of the bus. "Perhaps you will be satisfied with those." He looked fiercely in our direction. "Surely these Kurds will have *something* of value."

My worst fears came true when the leader ordered two of his men to retrieve our luggage. They leaned their guns against the bus frame. One of the bandits then boosted the other on top before climbing up to join him, and they began tossing our bags to the ground. They leaped on the ground and opened the bags one by one, quickly searching for valuables.

I glimpsed at Mother to see her holding her hand to her mouth. My brothers and sister looked stricken as well, watching our personal items being strewn on the ground.

But nothing pleased those men. They were so disgusted at our meager belongings that they began to fling them aside.

The driver shrugged his shoulders. "They're Kurds. What do you expect? Precious jewels?" He glared at us as if we were to blame for the displeasure of his partners, as though we were poor on purpose.

One of the men demanded of Mother, "Where is your money?"

Mother fumbled with her bag and a few coins tumbled to the dirt. She never took cash to Kurdistan. Our family in Sulaimaniya always took care of all our needs.

Just at that moment my precious black doll was hurled to the ground. A cry escaped my lips as I rushed to pick her up, despite my mother's warning shout, "*Na!* Joanna! *Na!*"

I examined the doll. She was still in one piece. Other than a few scratches on her face and a little dirt on her clothing, she was as good as new.

The driver made an alarming movement in my direction, his hands outstretched, but I screamed, tucking the doll behind me. The leader of the thieves briskly ordered, "Leave her."

I slowly backed away until I was out of sight behind Mother, peering cautiously from her side.

After selecting the best of our clothes and the gifts purchased for our relatives, all six criminals piled in the minibus, complaining loudly about our poverty. We were a waste of their time.

I pulled on Mother's arm. "Mother?"

We were dismayed to see them preparing to drive away, leaving us on the side of the lonely road, abandoned to our fate. The driver sniffed at us one final time. "Stupid Kurds!" he yelled, mocking us for being so trusting.

I stared at the departing bus, the spinning wheels covering me in road dust. When it faded into the distance, I began to sob, just for the pity of it all.

Mother was so relieved that her children had escaped unharmed that she appeared unperturbed that we were deserted without transport, food, or water, in the middle of a dangerous mountain region where there might be wild animals.

Through my sobs, I studied the foliage surrounding us, fully expecting to see wolves, foxes, and wildcats coming for us. And snakes. Surely that rugged landscape was crawling with countless poisonous snakes. Since a mischievous cousin in Kurdistan had chased me with a snake two summers before, I had been terrified of them.

My mother and siblings stared at our things strewn across the dirt road. The bandits had left our three most worn bags, so we moved together like robots, repacking the few items left behind.

"Perhaps there is a village nearby," Mother offered, breaking the stunned silence.

"The main road is not far down the road," Ra'ad said softly, pointing in the direction from where we had come.

Sa'ad was so angry he could hardly speak. He grunted.

Muna, like me, began to weep.

Ra'ad and Sa'ad hoisted the three bags on their shoulders, and we formed a perpendicular line, walking in the middle of the roadway, avoiding the sides where the hard ground was stony and overgrown with tall grass and thistles. Convinced there were poisonous

snakes lurking on the side in those bushy stalks, I kept in the middle of the road, with two people on either side of me.

Soon, Muna stopped crying and sweetly volunteered to carry my doll, which was getting heavy.

The July sun was shining, so thirst quickly set in. My tongue was swollen and my lips parched dry. Our water supply had gone with the bus. There were plenty of mountain springs in Kurdistan, but no one volunteered to make their way through the thick undergrowth to locate one.

My mind began to play tricks on me, and I could think of nothing but the delicious grape juice Grandmother Ameena often served at her home in Sulaimaniya. It was poured over the pure mountain ice that was cut and delivered daily all the way from the tallest mountain peaks. Nothing in the world tasted better than that icy grape juice.

The chicken sandwiches long forgotten, I was hungry as well. I longed for just one bite of my grandmother's fresh baked bread and cheese stuffed with herbs.

Just when my legs started to tremble and I felt that I could not go one step further, we heard the noise of an engine. Were the bandits coming back?

Thankfully, we were in for a bit of good luck. A red tractor popped over the top of the hill. A farmer was perched on the driver's seat. Quickly, I recognized from his clothes that he was Kurdish.

The farmer appeared puzzled at the sight of us. He slowed without coming to a complete stop, idling his tractor engine. His eyebrows raised, he stared at us suspiciously. He demanded to know, "What are you people doing here?"

Ra'ad stepped forward to explain our situation.

The farmer's skeptical expression changed into sympathy. He questioned Ra'ad about our family background. It only took a few moments to discover the most marvelous coincidence: that Kurdish farmer was the uncle of Hady, the man who named me as a child and who had married Alia, my oldest sister. We were practically related!

The farmer jumped to the ground. "Come. Let me help you. Get on the tractor and I'll take you to my home." He kindly offered, "You'll spend the night as my guests." We were saved!

The farmer, Ra'ad, and Sa'ad found places to stack our luggage before the farmer said, "Everyone, find a safe seat."

How diversely we settled on that tractor. I twisted into a circle to curl next to Mother while Muna and Sa'ad sprawled on the tire covers. Ra'ad volunteered, "I'll sit on the tractor engine."

I knew my brother well. He wished to spare the rest of us from balancing on that hot place.

The farmer started the engine and we were off. Although the sun remained warm on our backs, there was a light wind on our faces as we rode splendidly away from that dangerous place.

I laughed aloud when I turned to look at Ra'ad. My brother was leaning forward like a horseman about to win a race.

Happy at last, I felt the breeze stirring my long hair, and as I tilted my nose high in the Kurdish air, it smelled like freedom.