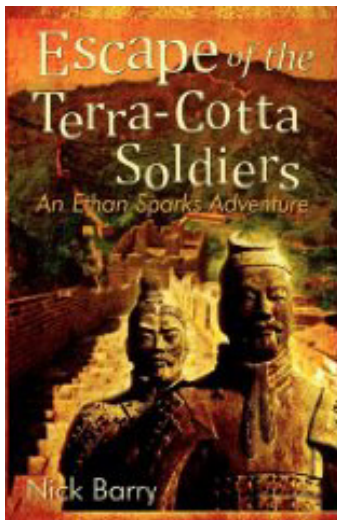




Escape of the Terra-Cotta Soldiers: An Ethan Sparks Adventure
by Nick Barry

Chapter One

When I was a little kid, I told my friends that my dad took a bullet in his hand and single-handedly brought down a ring of jewel thieves hiding in a cave in Syria. They'd stolen King Tut's crown and smuggled it out of Egypt on a garbage boat floating down the Nile. Dad caught up with them just before they could sell it to a Romanian prince.

The truth: My father was a geeky archaeologist who could find artifacts buried for centuries -- but he couldn't find his own butt, even if he had three hands and a butt map. The bandage on his hand was hiding a skin rash, not a bullet wound.

Now that I was fourteen (well... almost thirteen and a half), I was more concerned with my own rep. Adopting a cool attitude kept me from being tortured in middle school. It also annoyed my teachers. Oh, yeah -- they knew the name Ethan Sparks at my school.

But my dad was the most annoyed with me, so I had to pull out all the stops to get to come on this trip with him. And it was slick, how I did it.

He couldn't say no when I landed an assignment with *The Young Explorer* to write an article that featured his latest dig, in China. And now we're in a van loaned to us by the Chinese government, heading for the hotel we're staying at for our one night in Beijing.

I was shielding my eyes from the late afternoon sun when a flash of black caught my attention. A black motorcycle, its driver dressed entirely in black, zoomed past me and then slowed to hang out at my dad's window. I saw a glint of chrome that looked like a gun.

"Dad!" I shouted. "Gun! Gun!"

But Murphy, my dad's bodyguard, had already pushed my father down in his seat. Then, in an instant, a truck rammed the motorcycle from behind, knocking the driver off his bike. *Is he dead?* I asked myself. No, I saw him get up and limp over to safety. Our van lurched and sped on.

"No gun," I heard Murphy say.

I turned to face him. "But I really think I saw one."

"Just some chrome that could have been anything," the bodyguard insisted. "I don't really *think*. I *know*."

"Whatever," I said, causing my father to glare at me.

Abruptly, the van pulled up to the hotel. The team all got out and grabbed their bags as the driver unloaded them onto the sidewalk.

From the corner of my eye, I saw my father nod to someone at the end of the block. Turning my head, I caught sight of a bald man returning his nod, then disappearing around the corner. *Huh? That's wierd.*

While the others were busy inside, I snuck to the end of the block and peeked around the corner. It was an alley. No one was there.

Walking into the hotel lobby, I spotted my dad hiding behind a potted plant with weird pink blossoms that resembled cotton balls. He was reading a telegram.

The expression on his face looked troubled. I snuck up behind the big plant so I could read along with him. I couldn't believe what it said:

RED ALERT. MEET ME BACK OF HOTEL 3:30. YOU'RE IN DANGER.

Suddenly, he looked over his shoulder and was startled to see me there. His hand quickly covered the telegram.

"What's that?" I asked. "An important message? Something wrong?"

He shook his head without hesitation. "Nothing's wrong. Just a routine schedule change."

"Oh," I said, knowing that he was lying.

"Listen, Ethan." He quickly changed the subject. "Here's the key to our suite. The driver is meeting you out front at four to take you to Tiananmen. You have to change your shirt. Now hustle -- don't keep the driver waiting. We're all meeting back in the lobby at six to go to dinner. Stay on schedule!"

"Where you going?" I asked, flipping the key card in the air and catching it.

"Don't worry about me!" he snapped. "You just be where you need to be on time. Is this understood?"

I nodded, then pretended to walk to the elevators, keeping an eye on him in the surveillance mirror I have strapped to my backpack.

He shoved the telegram in his pocket and headed out the front door. I counted to sixty; then I followed him.

With my dark hair and eagle-brown eyes, I would easily blend in. And my swimmer's body lets me keep real low to the ground, while my great reflexes make it a cinch to duck into places. Oh yeah! I'm good at surveillance.

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