

THE SECRET OF THE SACRED SCARAB



FIONA INGRAM



The Adventure Begins

Egypt! They were off at last. Adam's whole body tingled with excitement as he crammed the last few things into his suitcase. He could hardly believe he was going. His German shepherd dog, Velvet, lay on the bed with her snout resting on her front paws, her eyes forlorn. Adam scratched behind her ears.

"You know I'm going away, don't you, Velvet," he whispered. Her ears pricked up and her shaggy tail wagged.

"I'll miss you too. But I'll be back soon." Adam gazed at Velvet. "Sometimes I think you're the only one who understands me ... who really knows what this trip means to me."

Just then, his dad came into the bedroom. "Ready for Egypt?"

"You bet! I can't believe it's happening, Dad."

"You're a very lucky boy. Now, you'll behave with Aunt Isabel and Gran?"

"Of course. How can you even ask that?" Adam sputtered in indignation. He had just turned twelve and it made him feel so stupid when everyone still treated him like a kid.

His dad ruffled Adam's hair. "Just checking."

Adam heard his cousin, Justin, arriving with his parents. Adam's dad went to greet them.

"Hiya, Uncle Mike," Justin called as he bounded up the stairs with his usual loud thumps.

"In here!" Adam yelled over Velvet's eager barking.

Justin dashed into the room and leaped straight onto Adam's bed, which was covered in books and clothes. Velvet, eager to play this new game, jumped on top of him. For a few minutes, dog and boy tussled in a mixture of yells and barks, while books and clothes flew off the bed. Then Justin pushed Velvet away.

"That's enough, Velvet. I surrender. Phew, you need to floss," he panted.

He flopped back against the pillows, his arms behind his head, and whooped with excitement. Justin had recently turned thirteen. Now he acted as if he was not only older but also wiser than Adam. Like Adam, Justin had flaming red hair and masses of freckles. They looked so alike that people often mistook them for brothers. However, there were differences. Justin's eyes were a deep blue; Adam's were nut brown. Adam was lean and wiry, and built small for his

age; Justin was taller and stockier. They went to the same school in Durban, a seaport city on the east coast of South Africa, but Justin was in a higher grade. Both liked sports and played in the school cricket and rugby teams. They were also good students, preferring history and science to everything else. Their teachers had agreed to let them take time off from school on the condition that they wrote a daily report of what they saw in Egypt, and at the end of the trip each present a talk to his history class.

Justin let out another whoop. "All set to go?"

Adam frowned. "I guess so. But I keep thinking I've forgotten something."

"Don't worry. Aunt Isabel says if we don't have it, then we'll just have to get it when we reach Cairo. Wow, I still can't believe we're going. Aren't you *glad* to get out of school?"

"Actually," Adam admitted, "the best part is getting away from Wilfred and his bunch of creeps." Wilfred Smythe was the school bully who picked on Adam whenever he could.

"Is it that bad?" Justin had no problems with horrible Wilfred because of his bigger build and his expertise with his slingshot.

"It's bad." Adam couldn't help sounding miserable although he hated whining. "He rubs my face in the sand and calls me a little freckled rat. And it's only first term. How am I going to survive a whole *year*?"

Justin was indignant. "You should tell your dad."

"I can't. I want my dad to know I can do things myself." Adam shrugged. "Anyway, let's not talk about it. I don't have to think about that skunk Wilfred for at least a week."

Adam stared at Justin, who was wearing two bush hats, sunglasses, and a splodge of sunscreen on his freckled nose. That's not to mention the several layers of khaki clothes. Adam was wearing more or less the same thing, just not so much of it.

"Why are you wearing all that stuff? We haven't even left yet."

"I'm prepared for the desert and this is the latest gear. Anyway, I nearly didn't make it." Justin heaved an exaggerated sigh and rolled his eyes. "All because of my slingshot. There was a ... um ... very unfortunate incident with another smashed window next door. The neighbors complained to my parents even though I apologized. It was touch-and-go with Mom."

He waved the handsome culprit in front of Adam. "I'm bringing it with me. State-of-the-art weaponry."

Adam was impressed. "That's so cool."

Uncle Colin's voice echoed through the house. "Come on, guys. We're going to be late. We must leave for the airport now."

"Coming, Dad," Justin yelled. He leaped off the bed. "Ready?"

"In a minute," Adam said. "I want to say good-bye to Velvet."

"Okay." Justin raced down the stairs, jumping over the steps with loud thumps.

Adam sat on his rucksack. Velvet pushed her wet nose into his hand. He looked down at her mournful brown eyes and stroked her sleek head.

"Be a good dog while I'm gone adventuring, okay?" he whispered. Velvet whined and thumped her tail on the floor.

Ever since Aunt Isabel's invitation to spend a week with her and Gran in Egypt, Adam had dreamed of nothing but pyramids, camels, treasure, and golden desert sands. He longed with all his heart to have an adventure and to make an amazing discovery. He wanted to be somebody special, to do something so fantastic that everyone would want to be him. Looking up at the familiar poster on his bedroom wall, he saw the three famous pyramids at Giza under a blazing orange sky, with camels silhouetted on the distant horizon. His heart pounded so that he felt almost giddy.

That's where we'll be tomorrow. That's where something incredible will happen, I just know it.

His father came back into the room. "Nervous?"

"A little," Adam confessed. In fact, he was terrified. He'd never been on a plane before. He knelt down and hugged Velvet.

"Look after Velvet for me, Dad." Then he picked up his rucksack and thundered down the stairs, yelling, "Egypt, here we come!"

At the airport, their mothers fussed over last-minute details while their fathers checked tickets, passports, and luggage for the umpteenth time.

Adam's mother reminded him about his journal. "Remember, Adam, it's part of the agreement with the school because you'll miss a few days. Miss Briggs wants a daily record of your activities, including some drawings of the monuments to show you learned something from this trip."

"Sure thing, Mom," he said. Adam enjoyed drawing and was good at it so that part of Miss Briggs' instruction was easy.

Justin's mother checked his medical kit. Frowning, she inspected each bottle. "Let me see. You've got headache pills, runny-tummy pills, motion sickness pills, Band-Aids, ointment, and mosquito repellent."

She looked at Justin with an anxious expression. "Do you want to take the motion sickness tablets now, dear?"

"Mom, please!" Justin grumbled, clearly embarrassed by the attention. He snatched back the medical kit and shoved it in his suitcase. "I'm not even on the plane yet. Don't worry. I can take care of myself. I bet we won't even use anything."

The plan was for Adam and Justin to fly to Johannesburg, a bustling city about two hundred and fifty miles away, meet up with Aunt Isabel and Gran, and then catch the evening plane to Cairo. After trying to dodge hugs and kisses from their parents, the cousins were relieved when a smiling flight attendant took charge. Their mothers sniffed and wiped their eyes.

"I hate it when Mom gets all emotional," Adam whispered to Justin.

"Mine cried at the school concert," Justin whispered back in disgust. "It was awful."

They followed the flight attendant, trying to appear relaxed. The plane looked enormous and it seemed very high off the ground. Adam gritted his teeth and clutched the arms of his seat as the flight attendant finally checked their seat belts. His stomach churned with fear and

excitement at the sound of the wheels rumbling and the engines screeching. When the plane began to move it felt as though a giant hand was pushing him back in his seat. At last, they were airborne and on their way.

“I wonder what Aunt Isabel is like now,” Justin said.

Adam was puzzled. “What do you mean? We talk on the phone to her all the time.”

“Yeah, but we haven’t actually *seen* her for ages. The last time was when we all got together for Gran’s birthday. That was about a year ago. Another thing, Aunt Isabel usually travels alone because she’s always researching some story. I wonder why she asked us to come with her this time.”

“Who cares?” said Adam. “I’m glad she did. I’ve never been away before, like on a major expedition.”

Aunt Isabel was a journalist who jetted all over the world researching incredible stories. She was famous for never remembering birthdays until at least six months later and then sending fantastic presents to make up for it. They were rather in awe of their green-eyed, auburn-haired, unusual aunt who—when she was home—lived in an amazing old house filled with antiques and lots of animals, namely, four cats, two dogs, and a rather fierce Mallard duck called Charlemagne.

“Do you think she’s changed?” Justin’s forehead crinkled in a slight frown.

“Adults don’t really change,” Adam said knowingly. “They just get older. But I think she’ll be exactly the same as always.” He pulled a face. “Strict!”

A taxi cab was already waiting to collect them from the airport and drop them off at Isabel’s house. It was pretty cool seeing their names on a board and hearing someone say, “Adam and Justin Sinclair? Your cab is waiting.” When they arrived at the house, the housekeeper let them in. Isabel was out with Gran who had insisted on a hairdo before the trip.

Aunt Isabel’s home was the most fascinating place with wooden floors, decorated ceilings, stained glass windows, and lots of antique furniture. Their careful footsteps echoed as they explored the rooms with Toby and Fergus, Isabel’s two scruffy terriers, pattering behind.

Looking around in awe, Justin said, “This is amazing.” He stopped in front of another door. “What’s in here?”

They walked into a study with tall bookshelves covering the walls. Several volumes lay open on the desk. Aunt Isabel seemed to be busy with some kind of research. Given her line of work, this was not surprising. Adam saw a small brown object holding down the pages of a book. He picked it up.

“Hey, look at this. It’s a carved scarab.”

Justin was already absorbed in an album of old photographs. He looked up, and then came over to Adam and took the scarab. He stuck out his chest and posed with his hands on his hips.

“Now pay attention, boys. Let us examine the Egyptian scarab,” he said pompously, just like his history teacher, Mr. Sanders. He held it in front of him. “*Scarabaeus*. The scarab beetle was sacred to the ancient Egyptians.”

“Goodness me,” came a familiar voice from the doorway. “That’s impressive. I’m glad you’re coming along. Justin, you can be our guide.”

They yelled, “Aunt Isabel!” and flung themselves into her arms.

“Steady on!” Isabel laughed as she staggered back under their combined weight. “You’ll knock Gran over. She’s right behind me.”

Adam was relieved to see that Aunt Isabel hadn’t changed a bit. She was still dainty and pretty, with sparkling green eyes, and masses of wavy auburn hair. She hugged them both before turning them over to Gran’s warm embrace.

The entire family considered Gran rather eccentric, but Adam and Justin thought she was great. Gran loved bright red nail polish and lots of jewelry, and she constantly changed her hairstyle. Today she had a smart new look in a dark mahogany color with blonde highlights.

Justin whistled his approval. “Gran, I love the streaks.”

Adam agreed. “Yeah, Gran. You don’t look like an old granny at all.”

Gran patted her hair, looking satisfied. “Thank you, my dears. That’s just what I like to hear.”

Isabel looked them up and down. “My goodness. You’ve both grown so much, I hardly recognize you. Now, are we all set for Egypt?”

“I’ll get the tea.” Gran bustled off in the direction of the kitchen with Toby and Fergus trotting hopefully after her.

“Don’t forget the cake, Gran,” Justin called out as she disappeared from view.

Pointing to the open books, Adam asked, “Are you writing another article, Aunt Isabel?”

“Perhaps I am.” Isabel had a mysterious expression on her face. “Maybe something on this Scottish archaeologist.” She pointed to her desk where a newspaper lay open, half-hidden beneath the books.

“What archaeologist?” they chorused. Their aunt came up with the most incredible stories. Many of her articles had won her top awards for journalism.

As soon as Justin read the bold headline—“Controversial Archaeologist Sticks to Legend Claim”—he grabbed the newspaper. “That’s the guy who says there was an ancient Egyptian ruler called the ... um ... something king—I forget the name—and that there’s treasure still hidden away in a tomb somewhere.”

“The Scarab King,” Adam broke in. “Miss Briggs read us the article in history class.”

“Well,” Isabel said, “it’s an interesting theory, but none of the experts have found any important reference to this king. Looks as if he’s on a wild goose chase.”

Gran appeared in the doorway to summon them to tea. “What’s this about a goose, a scarab, and a king?”

Justin put on an air of importance as he explained. “Gran, we just did Egypt in history class. It was so interesting because there was a big article in the local newspaper about this archaeologist, James Kinnaird, and his controversial theories.”

“What’s contro—controv—?” Adam asked.

“It means he says what he thinks,” Isabel replied.

Adam was confused. “Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do?”

“Well,” she murmured, “I guess it depends who you’re talking to.”

Gran put her hands on her hips and then raised her eyebrows. “I’m just an old lady who doesn’t know anything so will somebody *please* explain.”

Isabel replied, “James Kinnaird is a Scottish archaeologist who’s always off on some fantastical quest or other. He says he’s made a sensational discovery about ancient Egypt that will rewrite history.”

She walked over to her desk and flipped open a large book, riffling through the pages until she found a map of ancient Egypt. “Come and look at this. Then it’ll be clearer.”

Everyone clustered around the desk.

“As we know,” Isabel continued, “Egypt was once divided into two parts, Upper and Lower Egypt. It’s plainly marked here.”

“I know,” Justin interrupted. “The two Egypts were united by a king called Menes and that’s when they started recording history and the Egyptian dynasties for the first time, right?”

“That’s quite right, Justin. However, Mr. Kinnaird believes the Scarab King lived long before that time, during what we would call *prehistory*. Not much is known about him, but there seems to be a popular legend about his treasure. It would be a major archaeological scoop for whoever found it. It would make a great story for the newspapers as well.”

“So how is this Kinnaird fellow involved?” asked Gran.

“About a year or two ago, James Kinnaird made this *his* quest, just about demanding that the Egyptian government allow him to search for the Scarab King’s tomb. He managed to ruffle so many official Egyptian feathers that he was almost deported. Finally, he got permission to set up an archaeological dig. It’s rather strange he’s been so insistent.”

“I thought the Egyptians were keen to dig up stuff from the past,” Gran remarked.

“Yes, I’m sure they are,” Isabel said, closing the book, “but recently there have been an extraordinary number of thefts of valuable artifacts from archaeological digs. Artifacts are being smuggled out of Egypt at an alarming rate. Mr. Kinnaird has pointed fingers at certain people in high positions in the Egyptian government, almost accusing them of stealing.”

“Hey,” Adam said, “this is a chance to look for treasure ourselves. We could make a discovery that’ll go down in history. We could be famous.”

Justin scoffed at him. “Don’t be stupid. If experienced guys like the archaeologist can’t find anything, how do you expect us to? Anyway, we’ll be on a tour. We can’t just go off and look for things.”

Adam glared at Justin. "I don't know how, but anything can happen in Egypt." He hated feeling put down like that. Justin could be quite mean at times. Since his birthday he had become really bossy, too.

Then Adam beamed hopefully at Isabel. "We *could* have an adventure, Aunt Isabel. Just a small one."

"Tea's getting cold," Gran announced. "And I'm starving. Enough talking. Let's eat."

They trooped into the dining room. While Adam and Justin began munching their way through a heap of pastries, Gran asked Isabel, "So what's happening now with this Kinnaird fellow? Has he made any progress?"

"That's the odd thing." Isabel began pouring tea into the cups. "He was on a dig somewhere in the desert. All hush-hush of course because he didn't want anybody to know where. He used to send weekly reports to his London office, but recently there's just been silence. No one has heard from his base camp in over a month."

"Maybe he's moved onto another dig," Adam suggested, licking a large blob of custard from his pastry. A wet nose nudged his leg. Then another wet nose nudged his other leg. He looked down to see Toby and Fergus gazing at him with hungry eyes. Adam surreptitiously dropped a few scraps under the table.

"No, he seems to have just vanished," Isabel said, handing round the full teacups.

"He could have been sick," Justin mumbled with his mouth stuffed full. He swallowed and then coughed. Bits of cake flew out of his mouth. He hastily dusted the crumbs off the table.

"Oops, sorry! I mean, isn't anyone going to look for him?"

"How?" Isabel raised her eyebrows. "The desert is so huge it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. Mr. Kinnaird was rather silly not to let the authorities know where he was going. Secrecy is one thing, but stupidity is another."

"There's definitely something fishy going on," Gran decided. "I think there's more to this than meets the eye. Mr. Kinnaird sounds like an experienced archaeologist to me. Foul play, that's what I say."

"Oh, Mother." Isabel heaved a sigh. "You've been reading too many detective novels again."

"Truth, as everyone knows," Gran huffed, "is stranger than fiction. How do you think writers dream up their plots? They just write about what people *really* do."

Adam's heart beat a little faster. A lost archaeologist and a gang of smugglers. Could this be an adventure already?

Isabel saw his excitement, although he tried to act normal.

"Just forget it," she warned him. "I know what you're thinking. We're not looking for trouble, lost archaeologists, or hidden treasure. We're going on a nice, safe tour with nice, safe people and that's all. Adventures only happen in books."

We'll see, Adam thought. Anything can happen in Egypt.