

THE MISSING BEDOUIN NECKLACE

BY FRANCESCA AMENDOLIA

Chapter One

Andy hauled himself up the last flight of stairs. Stupid, medieval, Cairo elevators were always breaking down. It was his one beef with living in Egypt. He staggered, panting and sweaty, to 10C and almost fell inside when his mother opened the door before he could get his key into the lock.

He was so hot that his glasses had fogged up, but he could still see that she was dressed for work, in a white long-sleeved shirt and tan trousers.

He saluted limply. "Hi, *Umm Andrew!*"

She glared at him. She hated when he called her that. But it was Arabic for Andy's Mother and she was his mother after all. "Okay, okay." He opened his eyes really wide and smiled with all his teeth. "Hiya Mom!" He said it like he was as all-American as apple pie and Indiana cornfields.

She rolled her eyes. "Well, I guess that's a bit better. I have to go back to the embassy for a few hours. Will you be all right here by yourself?" She let him push past her into the cool apartment. He dropped his bag in the corner and stood directly under the air-conditioning vent, letting cold air wash over him like a shower. He took his glasses off and wiped them on his shirt.

"I'm going out with Mido, remember? To his Uncle Karim's shop."

"Oh, right. Well, call me when you're ready to come home and I'll swing by and get you." She picked up her bag. "Do you need something to eat? If you leave now, I can give you a lift to Mido's place."

Andy shook his head. "He's waiting for me at school. I'm just going to change and then I'm going back."

"All right. Dad has rehearsal tonight so he won't be home until late."

"Bye Mom," said Andy.

"Yes, all right, all right. I'm going."

"Elevator's broken again!" he yelled after her cheerfully, and heard her groan before the heavy door slammed shut. Served her right for insisting they rent an apartment on the top floor. "Less dusty," she said. "Less noisy." Hah.

Andy stood for another minute in the fall of cool air, letting the sweat on his face and neck evaporate. Then he quickly changed out of his school uniform, grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator and left.

Andy crashed through the front door of building and waved to his friend, Abu Mohammed, who was sweeping the sidewalk in front of the building next to his. He ran through the streets of the tiny island neighborhood of Zamalek, dodging the donkey carts and *koshari* sellers, leaping curbs and broken chunks of concrete. He dashed across 26th of July Street, paying no attention to the cars honking at him. If he waited for a gap in the traffic, he'd be waiting all day.

Mido was waiting for him in front of their school, juggling his soccer ball from foot to knee and back to the other foot. He grinned when he saw Andy.

"*Ya walad!*" he yelled.

"Yo, bro!" answered Andy.

"*Yallabina!* My uncle says he'll drive us!" Mido pushed Andy into the black and white taxi, threw his soccer ball after him and leapt in. They took off at top speed, the tiny car rattling as it flew over the potholes.

"Uncle Rifaat was just getting ready to leave for work, but I got him to wait. Good, huh?"

"Well, it's faster than the bus," admitted Andy as they sped round a corner so sharply that he and Mido were flung against the door. Then the car turned the other way and they fell against the opposite side. They both laughed. It was better than a roller coaster. Mido's uncle laughed too, and put his foot down, cornering like a race car driver and speed up the ramp onto the bridge. The front passenger door flew open as he turned, and without slowing, Uncle Rifaat leaned over and yanked the door shut again.

Andy looked at Cairo flashing past: shiny BMWs with tinted windows; delivery boys on bicycles balancing large woven trays of bread on their heads; whole families in from the countryside, all balancing on one moped; tall apartment buildings pimped with grey air-conditioners; garish, hand-painted signs advertising the latest movies; rickety scaffolding wrapped in large pieces of cloth with brightly colored designs. It was a noisy, dirty, colorful soup of a city and Andy loved it.

Cairo was the fifth city Andy had lived in. He didn't count Washington, DC because when they were there, he mostly stayed in Virginia with his grandparents. His mother didn't like to stay home for long.

"I didn't become a diplomat so I could live in Washington," she would say. And then she'd pester her boss at the State Department for a new posting and they'd be off again. So far Andy had lived in Nairobi, Manila, Ankara and Moscow. Cairo was a lot better than Moscow. Andy hated being that cold. Also, he couldn't get the hang of Russian. It was a grumpy language. Not like Arabic.

The taxi veered around a donkey cart and pulled up hard, half on the curb, half off, under a rusting metal footbridge that led to the ancient market. A woman in a flowered

headscarf thumped the bumper of the taxi, scolding them for nearly running her over. Andy and Mido tumbled out and the taxi started inching off, Mido's uncle looking for passengers.

Weaving through the slower crowd, the boys ran up and over the footbridge. They paused at the top, as they always did, to take a quick look at Old Cairo, its ancient minarets and modern apartment buildings, both slowly crumbling. Then, they ran on and, leaving the burning sun behind, plunged into the shady maze of Khan El-Khalili.

* * *

"*Harami! Harami!*" Andy and Mido could hear the shouting before they even turned into Silver Alley. They glanced at each other and started running towards the noise, weaving through the crowds of shoppers and tourists.

By now, Andy knew the way. Not like the first time. He remembered how relieved he had been to follow someone who clearly knew exactly where he was going. Now, almost a year later, Andy could navigate the maze of the Khan almost as well as Mido. They squeezed through the gathering crowd and turned into a narrow passageway lined with jewelry shops. Windows stuffed with silver and gold glowed like treasure chests, but no one was looking at the windows now.

Instead, everyone was staring at a short, red-faced man. "Thief!" he shouted again and again, shaking his fists. Mido darted forward, Andy at his heels.

Mido tugged the sleeve of one of the onlookers. "Samir, what's going on?"

"Faizal's been robbed," the older man said shortly. "Third shop this week. The police should do something, but they won't. They don't care." He looked down his long

nose at Mido. "Your uncle's no better. He just laughs, says stupid people deserve to be robbed." Around them, Faizal's voice rose hysterically.

"Somebody should shut him up," another man growled. "He's scaring the tourists away. Business is bad enough as it is."

Someone else had clearly thought the same thing. As Andy and Mido watched, a couple of people gently wrestled Faizal back into his shop and shut the door behind them. The sudden silence lasted only a couple of seconds before the usual din of Khan El Khalili came sweeping in to fill the empty space.

"Show's over," said Samir, his thin face unsmiling. "You on your way to your uncle's shop?" The boys nodded. "Tell Karim I said to be careful. He's got just as much to lose as the rest of us."

Andy pushed his glasses up a sweaty nose and watched Samir disappear back into his shop. "What was all that about?"

Mido just shrugged. "Dunno. Maybe Uncle Karim knows something about it. Come on." He headed towards the shop next door to Samir's.

The boys banged through the door, startling the customers. Tourists, probably American, Andy decided. Over their heads, Uncle Karim winked at the boys and they knew immediately that he was bargaining, and pretending not to speak English all that well. They grinned at each other. They knew their parts. Any questions about the robberies were going to have to wait.

"Can I help?" said Andy in his company voice.

Uncle Karim smiled broadly. "Yes yes! Andy is, how you say, my assistant, yes? Mido, go get tea. You want tea? *Mazbout?* Okay. *Ya Mido! Imshi!*"

Mido dropped his soccer ball behind the counter and vanished back out into the Khan.

Andy walked towards them and held out his hand. "I'm Andy. Maybe I can help?" He smiled his best, sweetest smile. It wouldn't fool his mother, but it fooled almost everyone else.

"Oh wow, that would be great," said the woman, shaking Andy's hand. "You're American, right?"

"Right," said Andy, "but I live here. What sort of thing are you looking for?"

"Well, I wanted something Egyptian," she said, leaning forward.

"Yeah," said her husband. "Not this stuff."

Andy glanced at what Uncle Karim had been showing them. It was a silver necklace, glowing dully in the dim light of the shop. Each link was a heavy bead, carved into a curving shape that let it fit the next bead perfectly. It had a pendant, a large disc etched so intricately that it looked like lace. Even Andy, who didn't care all that much about jewelry, could see that it was special. It was also completely not what the customers wanted.

"Best silver," said Uncle Karim at his heartiest. "Good price. Best in Khan."

"Whatever." The man waved his hand dismissively. "Where's the good stuff, you know, scarabs and all that?"

"We wanted a present for our granddaughter," the woman added. "Maybe one of those things with Egyptian writing? You know, all the pictures? Maybe saying her name?"

"Of course," said Andy. "Come look here." He led them to another cabinet. Over his shoulder, he said in Arabic, "You knew they wanted Pharonic stuff, Uncle Karim."

Uncle Karim shrugged and acted like he was annoyed. "They all want Pharonic. Scarabs and cartouches. You deal with it, Andy." He sat down heavily in a chair and closed his eyes.

"What did he say?" asked the man suspiciously.

"He said I should show you these," said Andy bringing out a tray of pretty turquoise scarab beetles. The tourists gasped appreciatively and bent over the counter. Mido came back with glasses of tea but the tourists had already happily bought several scarabs, a shiny silver bangle and ordered a cartouche with their daughter's name on it in hieroglyphics. Andy promised the cartouche would be ready the next day.

"Can you get someone to deliver it?" the man asked. "We're staying at the Nile Hilton."

"Of course," said Andy, and wrote down their details. Then Uncle Karim got up and waved them off with loud goodbyes and thank yous, yelling after them cheerfully as they walked away.

He came back and serenely took a glass of tea from the tray. "Well done, Andy," he said in beautiful English. Uncle Karim had spent ten years at boarding school in England and sounded like the queen. "Have some tea."

"Why do you bring out the Bedouin jewelry when you know they want souvenirs?" asked Andy. The tea was sweet and very hot. He sipped it carefully.

"Keeps them happy. They think they had to bargain hard to get the 'good stuff' as the man said, and it makes for a good story when they get back home." He spread out his hands. "It's the show, boys. You have to put on a good show."

Mido giggled and his uncle glared. "Don't be rude," he said. "I'm telling you the secret to doing business and you're laughing." He shook his finger under Mido's nose. "If

you think I'm going to let some fool boy sit around my store picking his nose then you're as dim as...as Samir."

Andy nudged Mido. "Ask him," he whispered.

"Oh right! Uncle Karim, when we got here, Faizal was outside his shop, yelling about being robbed. And Samir said that..."

Uncle Karim opened his mouth as if to interrupt, but then closed it again as another customer entered the shop, a tall man with dark hair and a pale, sweaty face. Uncle Karim's face went from stern to smiles in an instant.

"My friend! How did it go?" He got up to shake the man's hand.

"Pretty good. How are things here?" The man glanced over the room. His blue eyes looked disapproving and Andy wrinkled his nose. His mother was always warning him about jumping to conclusions, but he didn't like this man.

"Fine, fine," Uncle Karim said. "Quiet as a mouse. Sit down. Give me your bag. I'll just put it back here to keep it safe. So. Did you find anything worth your while? Or are you ready to admit that I and I alone can sell you the best jewelry in Cairo?"

The man's lips twitched. "You know me, Karim. I can find treasure anywhere."

"Yes, but why dig for it when it's right here in front of you? Look!" Uncle Karim reached for the heavy silver necklace he had been showing the tourists when Andy and Mido arrived. "You'll appreciate this. Very special piece. Nineteenth century, solid silver. Handmade."

The tall man blinked, his face bright and interested.

Andy wasn't interested though. This wasn't half as fun as playing shop with the tourists and clearly Uncle Karim wasn't going to tell them anything about the robberies until his customer left. He cleared his throat loudly and stared at Mido.

Mido raised an eyebrow and then tilted his head towards the back of the shop. Andy nodded. There was a backgammon board in the back room and a refrigerator with cold drinks. They could wait for Uncle Karim there. Andy headed through the curtained doorway, Mido on his heels.

"Boys, wait!" said Uncle Karim, but Andy had already stopped short, his heart pounding and his throat dry. The room wasn't empty. A hunched figure crouched in the dimness, glassy eyes glittering. It yowled and Andy leapt backwards, crashing right into Mido and bringing the heavy, velvet curtain down on top of both of them.

copyright Francesca Amendola