

# DUSTING DOWN ALCUDIA

*A Nina Esposito Adventure*

D A NELSON

Sample Chapter



## Prologue

“TELL me about Aelia’s necklace again!” “Oh, you don’t want to hear that boring old story again, Nina.” “I do! Tell me papa!”

“All right,” said Antonio, his dark eyes twinkling brightly. “Once upon a time, a thousand years ago in the time of the first Roman Emperor Augustus, in the Roman town of Pollentia on the island of Mallorca, where daddy grew up, there lived a girl called Aelia. Aelia lived with her widowed father, Quintus Livius Cato, in a villa in a beautiful part of town. Quintus was the chief lawman and very important. When it came the time for his daughter to marry, he wanted only the very best man as his son-in-law, so he went on a journey to the mainland to find his only daughter a groom. But Aelia had other ideas. While her father was away, a Roman legion camped nearby and in charge of the legion was a handsome General named Marcus Scaevola. When Aelia saw Marcus for the first time, her heart fluttered and she knew that this was the man she was meant to marry. Marcus felt the same about her and began wooing the beautiful noblewoman. After several weeks of courting, Marcus asked Aelia to marry him. She didn’t hesitate in saying yes – but there was one problem. Marcus had to

ask Aelia's father for permission so the couple were forced to wait until he came home."

Nina's father always paused here for effect.

"Tell me what happened next!" she squealed.

Antonio smiled and continued: "On his return three months later, Mettellus was angry with his daughter. Didn't he, as her father, have the right to say who she should and should not marry? And who was this Marcus Scaevola anyway? What were his prospects? However, when he saw how much his daughter loved the dashing General, his heart melted and he gave them his blessing. The couple were very happy and began making plans for a lavish wedding in the spring. Until tragedy struck; the Emperor called Marcus back to Rome. He and his men were to go and fight the Numidians in Africa, they had been causing some trouble. It was called the Jugurthine War. Marcus managed to return to Mallorca to see Aelia before he left. He presented her with a necklace so beautiful that it took her breath away. It was made of pure gold and had the most beautiful amethysts Aelia had ever seen. He had commissioned it for their wedding day but decided to give it to her before he left for the war. He made her promise she would wear it every day until he returned to marry her."

"Why did he do that papa?" the little girl asked.

"So, she would not forget him," replied her father. "Marcus went off to war and Aelia waited and waited for him to come back. As promised, she wore the necklace every day and she never forgot him. Days, weeks, months went by and still she waited. Then word came that the General had been killed in battle. Grief-stricken, Aelia lay down on her bed, her necklace around her neck, and died right there and then of a broken heart.

“Fearful that his daughter’s body would be disturbed by robbers and her necklace taken from her, Livius buried her in a secret grave. Since then, many people have tried to find it. But she had been hidden her well. To this day, no-one knows where Aelia and her necklace lie.”

## Chapter 1

NINA flopped into her aisle seat and clipped her belt around her slim waist. Made it...just! She sat back and caught her breath, her face flurid from running. She felt uncomfortably sweaty – ‘glowing’ as her mother would have put it – and her legs were a little shaky from the mad sprint from the taxi to the check-in desk to the terminal. She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. In for three...out for four, just as her yoga teacher had taught her. She felt her body slough off the creeping anxiety of the last manic hour and when she opened her eyes again she was relaxed and ready for the journey ahead.

The plane was packed, but she barely noticed the chatter of her fellow passengers - holidaymakers sparkling in their new clothes and haircuts - choosing instead to drown it out by planning the days ahead. She was excited and scared and elated all at the same time. Her stomach flipped as she thought about what she had to do. It was not going to be easy and she knew she had to get a grip of her emotions if she was to carry out her mission and achieve her goal. She must not lose her head to the romance of it all...failure was just not an option.

The plane’s engines whined into life, ready for take-off. Nina felt a thrill jolt through her body like a shock of electricity.

This was it...she was really going to do it.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking...” And to think, Nina had nearly missed the redeye. Her alarm clock had failed to go off and had it not been for the anxious calls of her flat-mate, Gracie, she might still have been in her cosy Chelsea bedroom dreaming of Aelia’s treasure. Thank God for Gracie! She was a little scatty at times, but she had never let Nina down in all the years she had known her. Nina trusted Gracie with her life. They had met when Nina moved down from Glasgow to London to take up a job at the British Museum. Gracie, fresh out of a doomed relationship with a long-haired heavy metal musician, was looking for a flat-mate; Nina, a flat. They hit it off and soon became firm friends despite Gracie’s penchant for bad-boy boyfriends and cheese and strawberry jam sandwiches. Nina smiled when she thought of her and was grateful Gracie was such an early riser. Without her, Nina knew she would not have been on this flight.

She was feeling a bit more comfortable now or as comfortable as one could feel in the tight confines of ‘cattle class’. The cabin crew took up their positions at the front, middle and rear to take disinterested passengers through the safety display. Nina placed her handbag under the chair at her feet as instructed and prepared herself for the flight. She had a lot to do when she landed and wanted to think things through.

“Sleep in, Dr Esposito?” a familiar voice drawled in a New York accent.

She turned to see who had spoken and was shocked to be confronted by the handsome face of a smirking Jay Reynolds.

“Dr Reynolds, how nice to see you again,” she lied, quickly composing herself. She had not seen him since...since... She managed the bare minimum of a smile. “Now what is a man

like you doing on a holiday flight to Mallorca? Hardly the type of place you're normally seen."

"Same reason as you, I suppose," he grinned. His soft blue eyes were startling in the sunlit cabin.

She flinched. Did he know? How could he know? A flutter of panic dipped from her chest to the pit of her stomach. She was not sure what was causing the sensation: fear that he knew what she was going to Mallorca for, or the distant memories of a nearly-begun love affair swarming into her head like an invading army of ants. She blushed.

"And what's that?" she said, voice controlled, lips tight.

"Going on holiday of course."

He sat back lazily, legs stretched out as far as they could, arms behind his blond head, studying her.

"More like a busman's holiday," he admitted. "Going to see a man about an artifact in Palma."

"Anything I should know about?" she asked coolly before she mentally punished herself for letting him think she was interested.

"Nothing you need to worry your pretty little head over, Nina, honey," he schmoozed. "It's too small for you to be interested in. I'm sure you've got much bigger fish to fry."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" She was beginning to feel the strain of being nice him. She was letting him get to her, she knew it, but she could not help herself. He was so... so...infuriating. She could not stand the man. Putting aside what he had done to her, he was just so insufferably smug. She did not know what she had seen in him all those months ago when she had thought him charming. Charming! Sickening more like.

"Just that I'm sure you'll be too busy enjoying your holiday,

topping up your tan and supping the local vino to be bothered about work,” he answered with a smirk.

A scowl brushed her face. She opened her mouth to retaliate, thought better of it and turned away. He was nothing to her... nothing. He did not exist. She did not have to look at him or speak to him if she did not want to. She leant down, fished her novel out of her bag and began to read. She would just ignore him and he would go away. She could hear him chuckling from the other side of the aisle and twisted her body away from him.

The engines of the plane revved to an almost deafening roar. “Oh, looks like we’re for the off,” he said loudly, settling more into his seat.

No shit Sherlock, she thought and fought the urge to say it. Lips pursed she looked at her book. She would not speak to him again. She had too much to think about. He was just an irritant she would have to put up with for the duration of the flight and then she would be rid of him. Even though her eyes were fixed on the words on the page, the ones she had read at least twice, she knew full well he was trying to catch her attention. He did not say anything, but she could feel the heat of his eyes on her neck, willing her to turn around. She tried to ignore him, but he was making her skin prickle. She put down the book and tried to look like she was concentrating on the safety talk. She turned.

“What?” she asked briskly.

He laughed.

“Hope you have a good holiday,” he said quietly, “...and, if there is anything you want me to get for you, just let me know.”

“I don’t think so, somehow...”

He grinned: “Be careful now. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do...like losing an artifact!”

Before she could answer him, Jay lay back in his chair and closed his eyes, haughtily signalling the conversation was over. She scowled at him. That man was impossible. He was always impossible. The last time she had seen him was six months ago in Venice when she was on the hunt for a rare Roman perfume bottle to add to the collection at the British Museum. They had been staying at the same hotel, met in the hotel bar and she had been flattered by the attentions of this interesting and handsome man who shared her interest in antiquities. Then she had stupidly allowed herself to relax and she told him she was there on a buying trip. He was too and before they went to their separate rooms they agreed to meet the following afternoon to compare buys. The next morning, thinking no more of it, she contacted the seller, turned up at the agreed meeting place and found that Jay Reynolds had pipped her at the post. He had offered a ludicrous amount over the asking price and snatched the bottle for a private collection. Exasperated, furious with Reynolds and herself, she immediately returned to London empty-handed to explain to her museum bosses how an experienced archaeologist like her could be gazumped by the notorious Dr Jay Reynolds. She glanced over at him then angrily pushed back into her chair. He was ignoring her now. He was... insufferable!

The rest of the flight passed uneventfully. Breakfast was served along with the morning papers, and Nina soon found herself lost in the day's news. Reynolds continued to lie against the back of his seat, eyes closed, appearing to sleep, and stayed that way for the entire journey, leaving Nina in peace to think about the days ahead.

She was flying out to Mallorca to try to unravel a mystery that had fascinated her since childhood and thwarted generations

of archaeologists before her: the whereabouts of the legendary Aelia's Treasure, a necklace of fabulous proportions and incomparable beauty. Reputedly forged by the best goldsmiths in Rome, decorated with the biggest and brightest amethysts, the necklace's current resting place was a mystery. Nina pulled a tattered leather-bound notebook from her bag and, keeping it out of Jay's eye-line, opened it. Written by the eminent archaeologist, Joseph Harper, in the late 1970s, she was positive it held enough clues to would lead her to the necklace. Just like Harper before her, she was sure of its existence even if the rest of the world was not. Harper had been slated over his fruitless search and that was something Nina was going to put right.

The handwriting was clear and firm; strong prose written by a strong personality:

*3rd September, 1979*

*I've returned to Alcudia once again. Mary was angry that I wanted to 'waste more money' as she put it but as I explained to her, my search would give her and Jack a holiday abroad. She calmed down when I told her I had booked us in to the best hotel in C'an Pastilla. There's a swimming pool and night entertainment. Just what she and the boy need.*

*I am hoping to drop in on Juan Sebastian Gomez. As chief curator of museums and artifacts for the island authority he may be able to provide a greater insight into the legend of the necklace. He, of all people, must have some thoughts on the matter as to whether it is still buried on the island. And if so, where it might be? I hope this is not just another wasted journey...*

How pertinent that was to her own trip. She had come into

possession of Harper's notebook after his death three months ago, at the age of 81. His widow had gifted his papers, artifacts and personal belongings to the British Museum. There the notebook had lain in a drawer for a couple of weeks before Nina had accidentally stumbled over it during research for another project. Her heart leapt as she recognised its significance. After years of watching Harper on television and reading everything he had ever wrote, here was his own notes in his own hand on the one project he had failed to complete: the search for Aelia's necklace. She went to her boss.

George Rayburn sighed when his best archaeologist and researcher bounced into his office, Harper's notebook in her hand. It was the end of the week, he was tired and the last thing he needed was Nina Esposito in his office with another mission she "just had to go on".

"This is a sign, George," Nina gushed, placing the notebook carefully on his desk, "a sign. I was meant to find this notebook. It was hidden under a whole load of journals Joseph Harper's widow had donated to the museum. How long has this been lying there for? Didn't anyone check for gems like this? If I hadn't been looking through them it might never have come to light. Well, at least not for many years. I was meant to find it and I'm meant to find Aelia's treasure. You've got to let me go to Mallorca to search for it. You have to!"

"I see you've found it then," he said quietly.

And that is the worst thing that could have happened, his expression said. Nina had a reputation of being a bit of a Pitbull when she got something between her teeth. She was not one to let go of anything easily.

"I can't believe my luck. Harper's notebook! That man is a god to me. More than a god! Like Indiana Jones - "

“I was going to talk to you about this - ”

“Travelling the world uncovering new civilizations. Oh, I’ve worshipped him since I was a girl...”

“But I haven’t had the chance...”

“I read all of his books. He’s responsible for me becoming interested in Ancient Rome! You could say he’s responsible for me coming to work here.”

“Miss Esposito! Sit.”

She threw herself into a chair, clasped her hands on her knees and stared at him expectantly, her eyes shining.

George did not seem to know where to start. What he had to tell Nina was explosive. He was straight with her. “For your information, we did look through the notebooks and that was looked at, but we just don’t have the resources to follow through. Not yet.”

He continued: “Look, this is a long shot, but Nina a contact of mine in Madrid has uncovered papers written by an 11th century priest known as Padre Cornelius. They talk about the legend of a Roman noblewoman being buried with a fantastic treasure close to Pollentia. There are only a few lines, but he could be talking about Aelia. As you are aware, everything we do know about her comes from Mallorcan folk tales and stories, so it’s rather a leap of faith.”

“Yes, but this might be the first time we’ve ever found written evidence that the necklace might actually have existed,” she said, barely able to breathe.

And that would mean Joseph Harper’s theories were right. She knew it!

“Well, we don’t know for sure...” George began.

“But, surely with the help of Joseph Harper’s diary and Padre Cornelius papers, we’ve got a good chance of finding it. You’ve

got to let me go to Mallorca,” she said, her voice quick with excitement, her hands shaking with nerves. “I’ve got to find it. It’s got to be me.” She stood up. “Please say you’ll send me. You’ve got to let me go, George.”

“Hold on a minute,” he said, “I’ve got to get the permission of the Board before I can let you go anywhere. You know what they’re like. They may think it’s all a waste of time and money. Let’s face it, if Joseph Harper failed to find it, what makes you think you will?”

“If what you say is true, then there’s a tomb somewhere in northern Mallorca that’s just waiting to be found. And I can find it, George.” She was determined she was going. “I have to do this. I have to do this for Joseph Harper, I have to do this for the museum and most of all I have to do this for myself.”

George looked steadily at her. “I’ll try my best to persuade them,” he said.

Three agonising days passed before the Board met to take the decision. It was all Nina could do to stop herself from emailing the members personally to plead with them. As they met in the museum’s huge boardroom to discuss the proposal, she waited outside. She hoped and prayed their decision would go her way. She begged every god (ancient and modern) she could think of to let the Board come out in her favour. Yet when the meeting finally ended, when they finally spilled out of the boardroom, when their eyes would not meet hers, she knew what was coming next. George broke the bad news to her. “Why won’t they sanction the trip?” she snapped. “Are they mad? Don’t they know what this will do for the reputation of the museum? This could be the find of the century.”

“I know, Nina, you don’t have to tell me...” he began.

She grabbed him by the shoulders and looked him straight in the eye.

“You’ve got to persuade them to let me go.” She was having difficulty controlling her disappointment, stopping the tears that threatened to fall. “I’ve got everything else I need. All the documentation is there. Harper’s notes, all the clues are there. I’m sure of this, George. I will find the necklace.”

“Nina,” he said, releasing himself from her grip. “I tried everything I could but they were adamant. They said they needed firmer evidence that the necklace even existed before they would pay for you to go and look for it. I’m sorry. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got another meeting to go to.”

He started to quickly walk away, his feet pit-patting on the tiled floor. She caught up with him.

“Have you any idea how important this is to me?”

He gave her a sympathetic, knowing look, the type her mother gave her when her first boyfriend finished with her at the age of 12. This time, there was no amount of chocolate digestives that were going to put this one right.

“I know your late father used to tell you the story of the necklace when you were little. I know how special finding it would be to you,” George said, “but my hands are tied.”

“Are they?” she snapped, anger flashing in her eyes. “Or are you just too chicken to stand up for your staff?”

She was standing still now, hands on hips. Defiant.

“Now hold on just a minute!” He turned to face her, his nostrils flared with irritation. The colour rose in his cheeks. “If the Board says no, it’s no. I can’t do anything else.” He strode angrily away, head high in indignation.

“Well, I can,” she whispered to herself.

Back in her office she booked two weeks holiday and a plane ticket to Palma. If the museum would not back her, she would back herself. Armed with Harper's notebook and with her late father's tale ringing in her head, Nina was confident she would break this mystery once and for all. How could she fail? The story of Aelia and the necklace is real, she said to herself, and I'm going to prove it.

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