

“Unearthed”

By Ava Jo

The excavation site echoed with the slam and bang of hard metal tools. Dia hefted her pickaxe over her shoulder, ignoring her labored breathing. The sun was beginning to rise over the bare Egyptian plain, and she was determined not to be above ground when the heat peaked. Her pick struck the solid ground. Not a single hollow thud rewarded her.

Dia got up and looked around, wiping a fevered hand across her moist, sun-tanned forehead. The other archaeologists were hard at work too, but there hadn't been a single shout of enthusiasm since yesterday, when they'd found an old buried pot. Even that hadn't been so exciting. Dia wished she'd known what she was getting into when she'd agreed to fly out and join the company two weeks ago.

She locked eyes with a short man in goofy green camouflage pants, and gave him a dirty look. He returned it with a cold gaze. She hated Sam since the moment she'd set foot on the dig site. She didn't know why. He just got under her skin in a way no one else could. She got up to find a spot farther from him, abandoning the dent she'd made in the rocks over the hours, and promptly tripped over a loose stone wedged into the earth. She went down in a tangled mess of flailing limbs and hit a hardened patch of grainy sand. But before she had a chance to feel the sting of the cuts on her elbow and the throbbing in her leg, she saw the jewel.

There it was, two inches in front of her aching chin, a dusty and chipped golden chain with an oval ring on the end. Set into the ring was a green malachite stone. Every archaeologist working in Egypt knew that green stones symbolized life and fertility.

The corners of her mouth turned up as she took in the full implications of the necklace. Precious jewelry didn't just fall from the sky—it had to come from somewhere, and what better place for an ancient Egyptian to bury their necklace than an underground burial site?

Dia propped herself up on her hands and knees, searching for any telltale cracks or lines that might indicate a secret opening. Her palms began to blister from the searing heat of the rocks, but her efforts were rewarded by a thin fissure in the earth that certainly wasn't natural.

She scanned the area, relieved when she found nobody looking her way. Everyone must have been too preoccupied with their digging. Slowly, carefully, Dia dug her fingernails into the crack and tried to widen it. Her breathing became soft and quiet. If *anyone* found out about this, the whole excavation company would whip into a frenzy and tear the area apart. They only valued the money they'd make. But Dia, she loved the antiquity itself. Her dream was to stand beneath the great pyramids, reveling in the pure history of the ancient tombs. That was why she'd jumped at the chance to come here all the way from her cold, dreary town in California's Sierra Nevadas.

Her parents weren't happy. They wanted her to be, "something useful, like a doctor," but she'd resisted. Finally, they let her leave when she made a deal with them: if she couldn't find anything important within a year, she'd return home. Since her time was halfway up and she hadn't found anything interesting, she was beginning to worry.

Dia kept prying. The fissure was now wide enough to wedge her hand into, and the sunlight could almost penetrate the musky darkness of the space beyond. If she could just get it wide enough to slip her thin body through—

“What are you doing?” came voice heavy with suspicion. Dia whipped her head around to find Sam staring at her, arms crossed. She gritted her teeth.

“I fell,” she said simply. It was only a part-lie—she *had* fallen.

“You just *fell* onto an ancient jade necklace—and your hands just *happened* to be prying that entrance slab open.”

“It’s malachite, not jade.”

“My point still stands.”

Dia sighed. “Fine. It’s some sort of ancient chamber. Happy?”

“Yes, actually.” Sam got down on his hands and knees beside her. “Huh, this entrance is made of limestone. Actually, it almost seems like it isn’t meant to be penetrated at all. How did they expect to get in and out?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never heard of anything like this before.” The irritation Dia felt toward Sam energized her enough to heave the cracked slabs apart, producing an entrance wide enough to drop through. She unhooked the flashlight in her belt, animosity toward Sam suddenly forgotten in the thrill of her discovery. A beam of light illuminated a dusty stone floor, maybe half a story below where they kneeled. Luckily, not too far to fall.

“I’m going in,” Dia said, sliding her legs toward the opening. “Maybe it’s some type of burial site—for thieves or grave robbers? That might explain the sealed opening. I doubt the ancient Egyptians would’ve wanted to revisit those people, although I don’t see why they wouldn’t just bury them in the sand.”

Sam shuffled around to block her. “You’re not going in without me.”

“Back off,” Dia said. “I found this place first.”

“Okay, do you want me to tell the others?”

Dia weighed her options. On one hand, she could tell Sam to go away and risk the other archaeologists crowding her find. On the other, she could just put up with him, and at worst split the discovery fifty-fifty. That was definitely better than nothing.

“Fine,” she said. “But I’m going first.” He moved away, and she was able to push herself off the limestone slab and into the cold darkness. The lurching sensation of free-falling settled in her stomach, and dust coated her clothing and hair within seconds. Then her feet touched the ground, and she rolled in a move she’d learned during physical training, absorbing the brunt of the impact. She scooted away, waiting for Sam to come falling down—hopefully right on his ass.

To her disappointment, he landed perfectly, albeit without the roll. She ignored him and flashed her light into the stone wall. There was absolutely nothing but more stone, barely five yards from the beam. She tried the other side. Same thing. A feeling of dread tickled her mind, telling her this wasn’t what she’d hoped for.

Sam seemed to be experiencing the same thing. When she shone her light on him, his eyebrows were scrunched up in doubt.

“This is odd,” he said, raising his light to the ceiling. “The chamber almost feels like—”

“—A false burial site,” Dia finished. “Dug near tombs to trap grave robbers.” He looked at her in surprise.

“How do you—”

A slow, grinding sound stopped him mid-speech. They both looked up, brows furrowed, a layer of clammy sweat covering their foreheads. Sam moved his light to the source of the noise.

“Oh, no,” Dia whispered. Nothing in her education had prepared her for a cave-in. This hadn’t been part of the plan! She could feel her muscles freezing up as a sense of fear overtook her. She could barely think. Somewhere inside a small voice was telling her to run, to rally herself and—

“Move!” Sam yelled, proving he was more prepared than her, as a huge chunk of limestone slab collapsed and fell toward them. He shoved her into the corner, right as the stone impaled the ground she’d been standing on.

More limestone began to fall. It turned out there’d been much more than they’d initially thought—layers and layers, all piled on top of each other, just waiting for a little extra pressure to finally give way. Dia sprung back into action, dodging a shard that fell toward her head. Tiny pebbles bombarded her skull and shoulders, but she was much more concerned about the big chunks.

Sam had made his way to a corner. He crouched there, hands covering the vulnerable part of his neck. He’d dragged a piece of limestone onto his back as some measly bit of cover. Dia despised having to copy him, but now was not the time for petty rivalries. She bolted to the corner and curled up. Booms and crashes shook the earth as the entire room caved in, leaving a dust-ridden space in the corner where they lay, weak and vulnerable.

Finally, it was over. The bangs calmed, the dust settled. Dia propped herself up against the wall and croaked out, “That wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“No,” Sam replied. “No, it wasn’t.”

They didn’t move for a few minutes, partly in fear of triggering another rockslide. Sam was breathing heavily, though, and the rough inhales were beginning to drive Dia crazy.

“Can you stop that?” she snapped.

“Stop what?”

“Breathing so hard!”

He scowled but did breathe a little quieter.

“So, what do we do now?” Dia asked, beginning to brush her tank top and shorts free of dust. She realized she was still holding the necklace in her clenched palm. She’d been holding on so tight that her hand had an oval-shaped, red indent where the malachite jewel had been pressed into her skin.

“Novice,” Sam grumbled. She wanted to slap him, but wasn’t sure she had the energy to.

They didn’t speak for another minute, until he finally found it in him to answer for real.

“We wait for help,” he said. “We can’t dig our way out of this mess, and even if we could, the surface is at least nine or ten feet up—higher than either of us can jump.”

“Hghm.” Dia bit her cheek, trying to keep the scream bubbling up inside her throat dormant. “So...I guess this necklace...was a dud.”

Sam took it from her hands without asking. “No,” he said. “It’s a real artifact—pretty valuable, too, I’d say. It must’ve come from somewhere else.”

Dia reclined miserably. “I can’t believe we’re stuck down here.”

“It’s your fault, not mine,” he pointed out.

“You didn’t have to come! I didn’t want you to in the first place. You just wanted to fill your wallet—or whatever all you idiots are after here in Egypt.”

“I don’t care about the money,” Sam snapped back. “I love the history—I wouldn’t expect you to understand, because I know what you’re after. Fame. It’s clear from the arrogant

way you walk around, like you're better than the rest of us and only you're smart enough to realize it."

What? Had she really come off as arrogant? No, he was just trying to get to her.

"I don't want fame. Or money. I just want to understand the culture. What these ancient people went through so long ago."

Sam huffed, dust-covered eyebrows raised in skepticism. "Yeah."

"You don't have to believe me. I don't care what you think I'm here for—we'll be out of this mess soon and then I won't have to put up with you anymore."

"This is what I'm talking about!" he accused, pointing his finger at her face. "You only care about yourself!"

"Maybe I'd care more if the rest of you showed that *you* cared in the first place."

"It doesn't always work like that. Sometimes you have to be the one to show the first kindness."

"Petty words, coming from you."

A blissful silence filled the chamber for a whole thirty seconds while they sat, seething like two four-year-olds who had argued over a toy. Dia's long black hair had unraveled from its neat bun, and it kept getting in her face and eyes. She pushed it back angrily. Finally, Sam spoke again.

"They'll probably be here soon. Someone had to have heard the crashes."

"I don't know. Most of them have got a screw or two loose."

Sam nodded thoughtfully. "Remember when Jenny held up a dead scarab beetle and claimed it was an offering from the sun god Khepri?"

“Yeah, and when Jeff refused the pyramid excavation offer he got because he had a fear of mummies? Was he even *thinking*, passing up a chance like that?”

Sam brushed a patch of dirt from his cheek, looking sort of dejected. “I wish *I’d* gotten a job offer.”

Dia glanced up at the fallen limestone. “Do you think we should shout? I doubt it would make our situation any worse.”

He shrugged dramatically, with an exaggerated, sour expression on his face, as if to say, *I guess, but I hate needing their help.*

At that moment Dia admitted that maybe he wasn’t as bad as she had thought, once she got to know him. But she would never, ever admit it. She got up, ignoring his stubborn refusal to ask for help.

“Anyone!” she called, voice echoing off the limestone wreckage. “Help! We’re down here!”

Sam still did nothing but run his hands through his dusty blond hair.

“What,” she said crossly, after a minute of yelling. “You just wanna stay here forever?”

He sighed, stood up, and joined in.

“You know, I’ve been thinking,” he said between breaths. “If this is a false site—” A deep inhale, another loud call, “—that necklace must’ve come from a real one.”

“Probably close by, too.” A new sense of urgency overtook her, sending a surge of energy through her body. “We need to get out and find it before the others do!”

“We?” he asked. Dia glanced over and saw that he was smirking. She shrugged, nonchalant.

“I know you’re not going to pass up a chance to see some dead Egyptians.”

“And buried treasure,” he added.

Dia crossed her arms. “I thought you weren’t in this for the money!”

His smirk grew wider. “Maybe not, but I won’t pass it up, either.”

Dia rolled her eyes, just as a large stone tumbled out of place. A ray of desert light shined through, illuminating their dusty, tired faces. The smell of hot sand permeated the thick muskiness of the ancient chamber.

“You guys okay?” someone called, shoving aside another boulder of limestone. The archaeologist stuck his face inside, peering at them with slightly amused blue eyes.

“Thank Ra it’s Liam,” Dia muttered under her breath. “And not Trevor.”

“Thank Ra?”

“Hey, I work with ancient Egyptian stuff. It was bound to start rubbing off on me sometime.”

“Still.” Sam shook his head. “But, you’re right. If it were Trevor, we’d never be able to get the smell of his onion breath off our clothes.”

“We’d probably have to pay to be rescued, too.” Another limestone slab went tumbling down, inches from Dia’s foot. “Hey, watch it!”

“Sorry!” Liam called. There was now a sufficient gap in the rocks to squeeze through. Dia went first, then Sam. She squinted as the bright light pierced her eyes.

A rope was sent down, and in five minutes the two were back up on the surface, catching their breath. They got up and scooted away a good twenty yards from where they’d fallen, settling down with loud thumps near a tall sand dune. Almost subconsciously, Dia took care to

walk more casually than usual—maybe Sam had been right about her coming across as arrogant. She was so stressed about her parents’ deadline that it was hard to concentrate on relationships with other people, but she was determined not to let that get in the way anymore.

Liam smiled. “Looks like you guys made up.”

Sam shrugged, rubbing his head where a red bump was beginning to well up from the raining debris. “Maybe. I still don’t regret putting that scorpion in her boot.”

“And I don’t regret replacing your stupid hair gel with mud,” Dia shot back.

“You did what?!” In a flash Sam was off toward the camp site. She snickered as he lost his shoe, and had to double back and retrieve it.

Liam grinned, then stopped. An excited look dawned on his face. His eyebrows raised, mouth hanging open. “What’s that?” he asked, pointing at something behind Dia’s back.

She shuffled herself around, breath catching at the sight of an even, carved square beneath the layer of sand pressing against her back. A secret entrance, hidden right in the sand dune. For a moment she didn’t dare breathe. She ran a hand over the smooth limestone tomb, tracing the weathered hieroglyphs with her palm, a soaring elation rising up inside her stomach. The markings were real! There could be artifacts, gold, maybe even mummies down there, and if there were, she’d be able to stay in Egypt! She didn’t realized she was grinning until she felt the pressure in her cheeks. She turned back to Liam, who still looked dumbfounded.

“Well?” he asked. “What did you find?”

Dia held up the malachite necklace cheerfully. “Just what I was looking for.”