



*The* LOST  
JEWELS

A thrilling treasure hunt across centuries

KIRSTY  
MANNING

Bestselling author of *THE JADE LILY*

PRAISE FOR  
*The Jade Lily*

‘Kirsty Manning weaves together little-known threads of World War II history, family secrets, the past and the present into a page-turning, beautiful novel. Her talent for researching and writing a seamless dual-narrative story with characters reflecting tragedy and trauma lived, and survived, will enthrall and educate. Her approach and style to the multiple cultures and countries reinforces that humanity will rise above evil. *The Jade Lily* is a story rich in the elements of plot, characters, and unselfish love leading to hope: the last thing to die.’

—Heather Morris, author of the bestselling *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*

‘A rich and entertaining story, with plenty of drama, thrills, tension and romance . . . Even when you think you’ve guessed the ending, *The Jade Lily* will take all your assumptions and turn them on their head, sweeping you away in a wash of colour, drama, and the power of love and friendship that spans generations and continents alike.’

—*The Weekly Times*

‘A fascinating, charming novel, deft and moving.’

—*Good Reading*

‘A great deal of the pleasure of reading *The Jade Lily* comes from the lush sensuality of her descriptions of food, cooking, gardens and healing herbs. The two Shanghais—one modern and cosmopolitan, the other old and filled with fascinating traditions—are both brought to vivid and compelling life. Utterly sumptuous.’

—Kate Forsyth, author of *The Beast’s Garden*

PRAISE FOR  
*The Midsummer Garden*

‘Ripe to be plucked for a screen adaptation, this mouth-watering debut novel—meticulously researched and crafted—raises the bar in contemporary and historical fiction coupling . . . our heroines are compelling, passionate and admirable.’

—*Australian Women’s Weekly*

‘This is a rich, sensual, and evocative novel, fragrant with the smell of crushed herbs and flowers, and haunted by the high cost that women must sometimes pay to find both love and their vocation.’

—Kate Forsyth, author of *The Beast’s Garden*

‘An evocative, lyrical tale of the search for identity by two unforgettable women, separated by history . . . A fictional *Eat Pray Love* that all lovers of food and wine will devour.’

—Sally Hepworth, author of *The Secrets of Midwives*

‘Given the passion of Kirsty Manning, the ease at which she slips into the quintessential lifestyle of the author, and with another novel in the works, there is no doubt *The Midsummer Garden* will not be the last we see of her.’

—*Herald Sun*

‘I absolutely loved *The Midsummer Garden*. The dual time frames, strong female leads, the picturesque locales, the historical grounding and rich food references sold this reader.’

—Mrs B’s Book Reviews

Kirsty Manning grew up in northern New South Wales. A country girl with wanderlust, her travels and studies have taken her through most of Europe, the east and west coasts of the United States and pockets of Asia. Kirsty's first novel was the enchanting *The Midsummer Garden*, published in 2017. Her second book, the bestselling *The Jade Lily*, was published in 2018. Kirsty is a partner in the award-winning Melbourne wine bar Bellota, and the Prince Wine Store in Sydney and Melbourne. She lives with her husband and three children amid an old chestnut grove in the Macedon Ranges, Victoria.

*The* LOST  
JEWELS  
KIRSTY  
MANNING

  
ALLEN & UNWIN  
SYDNEY • MELBOURNE • AUCKLAND • LONDON

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are sometimes based on historical events, but are used fictitiously.

First published in 2020

Copyright © Osetra Pty Ltd 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher. The Australian *Copyright Act 1968* (the Act) allows a maximum of one chapter or 10 per cent of this book, whichever is the greater, to be photocopied by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to the Copyright Agency (Australia) under the Act.

Allen & Unwin  
83 Alexander Street  
Crows Nest NSW 2065  
Australia  
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100  
Email: [info@allenandunwin.com](mailto:info@allenandunwin.com)  
Web: [www.allenandunwin.com](http://www.allenandunwin.com)



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978 1 76052 810 2

Set in 11/16.5 pt Minion Pro by Bookhouse, Sydney  
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press, part of Ovato

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



**MIX**  
Paper from  
responsible sources  
**FSC® C009448**

The paper in this book is FSC® certified. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

# Prologue

LONDON, 1666

*The smoke was so thick she had to draw her apron across her mouth. Her long plaits were singed black from falling firedrops. They'd need to be chopped off; Mama would be furious. But she had made a promise to Papa—she had to see it through, even though the roar of flames raced through the narrow cobblestone streets.*

*No-one would be missing her yet. Mama would be passing under London Bridge in the longboat with the baby, both wrapped in heavy woollen blankets to protect them from the embers raining down. The girl had begged, then pushed mother and baby into the overcrowded boat as barrels of oil and tallow exploded behind her, promising she would jump in the boat behind.*

*'Think of the baby. Papa would—'*

*Her words had been whipped away by the searing easterly and the boat was swallowed by the haze as it left the dock. Onshore was chaos as families unloaded trunks and leather buckets filled*

*with their most precious goods. Horses snorted with terror and threw their heads back. Hooves clanged against cobblestones. The beasts' ears were pinned back with fear.*

*The girl was grateful her mama and little Samuel were gone.  
Safe.*

*The flustered captain had braced his leg against the timber wharf to steady the boat. He'd held out a hand to the girl, but she'd stepped backwards into the smoke and shower of embers, turned on her heels and ran.*

*She'd kept running uphill—away from the Thames—until she could make out the line of St Paul's steeple, tall and grey against the orange sky. The cathedral's stones exploded like gunpowder as she fought her way through the panicking crowds streaming towards the river.*

*Her steps slowed now as she trod carefully, looking down to avoid the rivulets of lead and shit flowing over the cobbles. She put a hand out to feel her way along the walls. Her fingers trailed across rough timber beams as her boots crunched over broken glass.*

*The girl had lived and played in these streets and lanes all her life and she counted them as she passed. Ironmonger, King, Honey, Milk, Wood, Butter . . . then Foster Lane.*

*Almost home.*

*The two buildings flanking hers were engulfed in red flames. Men with rolled-up sleeves were trying to douse the fire with paltry buckets of water. The fire hissed and roared up the walls and across the wooden shingles, as if laughing at the people below.*

*'Get away—'*

*'It's too late—'*

*The Lost Jewels*

*‘—dray to Blackfriars—’*

*‘—St Paul’s is afire—’*

*It was too late to turn back. Not when she was so close to home.*

*Not when she’d promised Papa . . .*

*The frenzied chimes of St Mary-le-Bow’s church drew her closer, and she inched through the thick smoke. When she felt the familiar wrought-iron number beside her front door, she threw herself against the door and forced it open.*

*As horses cantered past and people scrambled to climb onto carts headed for the docks or beyond the city walls, nobody paid any attention as the girl slipped inside number thirty-two.*

*Her chest was burning, as if with each breath she was drawing the fire deep into her lungs. Tears formed, but she wiped them away with her filthy sleeve. Now was not the time for self-pity.*

*Instead, she fell to her knees and crawled over the blue Persian carpet in the entry hall and into the tiny room beyond—Papa’s special workshop.*

*Quick as a lark, she removed the key tied to a ribbon around her neck. She kept it tucked under her clothes whenever he was away on one of his trips, like a talisman to sing him home.*

*The firestorm surged. Heat poured in through the smashed windows and the open front door. The thunk of timber beams and collapsing houses surrounded her. The shingles atop her own roof started to smoulder and whistle. Time was running out.*

*The girl unlocked the door and hurried down the narrow stairs.*

*Stepping into the chilly cellar she felt a moment’s relief; it was so calm, so quiet, after the tumult of the streets.*

KIRSTY MANNING

*She squatted to find the tell-tale bump in the dirt. It was their secret and she had to retrieve it; she knew Papa would understand. She'd promised him she would look after Mama and little Samuel, but the coins hastily wrapped in Mama's shawl wouldn't last long. She mumbled a quick prayer, then seized the shovel stowed in the corner and started to dig.*

# *Chapter 1*

**DR KATE KIRBY**

BOSTON, PRESENT DAY

Luxury magazine editor Jane Rivers had been the one to offer Kate the trip to London for the Cheapside story.

The call had come when Kate was sitting at her desk in the library of her unrenovated Boston brownstone, sipping hot chocolate sprinkled with cinnamon and shivering under a grey woollen blanket with a heater blasting at her feet. Technically, her parents still owned the house—it had been in the family for four generations—but no-one wanted to live with the draughts and the damp, musty smells of yesteryear.

No-one except Kate.

The study was her favourite room—and the only one she'd sealed and finished. It was grand, but comfortable, with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lining three walls, her great-grandfather's

desk and a peacock-blue sofa that Kate slept on far more often than she cared to admit.

On the wall opposite her desk was a framed bill of sale for the first steamer her great-grandparents had bought back in 1914: the SS *Esther Rose*, named for her great-grandmother, Essie. On the desk itself sat a framed photograph of her glorious three-year-old niece, Emma, squeezing her King Charles Spaniel, Mercutio—terrible name for a dog, but Molly had insisted. (Kate’s sister had very strong feelings about secondary characters in Shakespeare’s plays.) Beside the photo was a journal Kate had begun four years before. She didn’t write in the journal anymore; she hadn’t, in fact, after the first nine months. But she couldn’t bring herself to throw it away either, or to put it in a box with other keepsakes from that year.

Now this call. ‘Can you be in London next Monday for a huge investigative feature? We’d need you there for at least a week, I think. I realise it’s short notice . . .’ Jane’s voice was all East Coast vowels and courtesy, but there was a hint of a plea.

‘What’s the job?’

‘It’s the Cheapside jewels.’

Kate’s skin started to tingle. ‘Finally! Who’d you bribe?’

‘I promised the cover and both gatefolds in exchange for the exclusive. We want to cover this before *Time*, *Vogue* or *Vanity Fair* get to it. The Museum of London just finished re-cataloguing and some restoration of the jewels last week. It will be the final chance to access this collection before the museum relocates to West Smithfield in a year or so. Advertisers are already bidding. De Beers, Cartier . . . the lot.’ She paused, delicately it seemed. ‘There’s, ah, a ton of interest and cash this side of the Atlantic—our

competitors will be livid. The CEO and chairman are tripping over themselves—they're sure this series will bring people back to the print magazine. Gemstones look so much better in print than onscreen.'

It was true. A beautifully lit photo printed on good-quality stock was the next best thing to actually touching the jewels. But the method of reproduction was only a secondary concern for Kate. It was the story itself that compelled her; the urge to deep-dive into history and pluck something original from all the facts that had been overlooked—or forgotten.

'Now, I'm about to go into a meeting, so is it a yes or no?' pushed Jane. 'I have a big budget, and I don't need to tell you how rare that is these days. But for this series I've been authorised to cover any travel required.'

'You mean in addition to London?'

'Well, I take it the jewels didn't start their life there. So diamond mines, for a start.'

'I get it,' said Kate. 'I could really cover some ground.'

Jane chuckled. 'Thought you'd appreciate that.'

'Thanks. And thank you for thinking of me.'

There was an awkward pause.

'Well, the suits upstairs were actually pushing for the Smithsonian's Jocelyn Cassidy, but the Museum of London weren't keen on that idea . . . and I understand you know the museum's current director, Professor Wright, from Oxford?'

'Of course.'

'She tells me your research in this area is unparalleled. And the last piece you did for me—on Bulgari—was excellent. It was an unusual angle, but I liked that. It was quirky.'

‘The artistic director would only agree to be interviewed over lunch. Ridiculously long lunches. It was actually my duty to eat pasta and drink a carafe of Chianti every day for a week.’

‘Can’t promise food this time, I’m afraid! Just priceless jewels. So, what do you say? We need to move quickly on this.’

Priceless jewels . . . and the Museum of London, Kate thought to herself. ‘I have a few things on my plate at the moment,’ she hedged. ‘Let me take a look at my calendar and call you back.’ They finished the call, with Jane promising to forward what information she had on the collection.

Kate leaned back in her chair and gathered her curls into a ponytail, tugged the blanket tighter around her shoulders and sipped the rest of her cocoa as she compiled a mental list of things that would have to be done before she left for London. There was an insurance report due in the next fortnight for her Swiss client. Scattered across her desk was a series of photos of some archival pieces Cartier was planning to show in Paris during Fashion Week. Underneath that was the synopsis for her post-doctoral fellowship at Harvard, due next month. Right at the bottom was a brown envelope stamped with a silver fern containing her divorce papers. She needed to sign the papers for Jonathan’s lawyer then move on. Everything had been settled—everything except her heart. Kate sighed and reached for the envelope then withdrew her hand. *Later*, she promised.

Instead, she picked up the synopsis, screwing up her nose at the number of red annotations, each representing an error she needed to fix. After a moment, her eyes were drawn to some fine black-ink sketches she had stored in archival glassine envelopes

to protect from air and dust until she moved them back into her filing cabinet.

The first was of two little girls with their heads together, laughing. They wore identical tunics and aprons, and they both had messy plaits tumbling over their shoulders. The second sketch was of a cockerel standing proud, and the third was an exquisite jumble of roses, rings, necklaces, oranges and grapes, all overlapping so there was hardly any white space on the page. On the flip side was some kind of herbal recipe written with a childlike scrawl:

*2 spoons honey*  
*pinch of thyme leaves*  
*ground peppercorns*  
*squeeze of lemon (fresh)*  
*(Add to boiling tea, or water)*

The last sketch was of a brooch, or perhaps a button, shaped like a rose. Gemstones were studded at the centre and along the petals. Kate had no idea what kind of stones they were—without colour there was no way to tell—but the design was similar to images of Elizabethan buttons she'd come across while doing research for her doctorate. Buttons that were in the Museum of London . . .

She turned over the envelope and admired the lines of sinewy limbs and loose plaits. Both girls had dimples and dark hair—like Essie, Kate and all the Kirby kin. Would Noah have grown up with these same dimples pressed into chubby cheeks? Her bones ached for the baby boy who'd never drawn breath. She pressed away tears with her palms and studied the little girls.

Kate had found the drawings among Essie's private papers in the filing cabinets she'd inherited with the brownstone. Her parents had dismissed these sketches as little more than Essie's private doodles. After all, they were scratched across neat columns—as if hastily written in a bookkeeping ledger; Essie had insisted on doing the bookkeeping for the fledgling shipping company she had started with her husband. Her parents had thought they should be discarded, but Kate couldn't bear to part with them. She liked to imagine her youthful great-grandmother doodling in the margins in a quiet moment, wild curls wrestled behind her ears, cup of steaming Irish breakfast tea beside her as she looked out across the busy shipyards.

Hearing the ping of an incoming email, Kate put down the sketches and clicked her computer screen on. The email was from Jane and, as promised, there were a number of attachments. Kate opened them one by one, scrolling through a series of newspaper clippings from 1914 heralding the launch of a jewellery exhibition at the newly minted Museum of London.

**ANTIQUÉ JEWELLERY ON DISPLAY AT THE  
LONDON MUSEUM**

*Secret Hoard of Elizabethan or Jacobean Jewels Added to  
Priceless Collections*

**MYSTERIOUS JEWELLERY HOARD**

*Romance at Every Turn at London's Museum*

**SECRET UNEARTHED**

*London's Buried Treasures*

**TREASURE TROVE IN CENTRE OF LONDON**

*Workmen's Extraordinary Discovery*

*The Lost Jewels*

She scanned the clippings, noting descriptions of the media frenzy and the crush of the crowds at the museum. She picked up her phone and called her editor.

‘Hello, Jane. I’m looking at the articles about the 1914 exhibition now. Thanks for sending these through.’

‘Good! You can see details about the discovery were vague.’

‘Weren’t the jewels found in 1912? I wonder why it took two years for the collection to be announced to the public.’

‘Who knows? I’m hoping you can find something new there.’

Kate sat back in her chair and scrolled through the clippings once again, almost forgetting she was on the phone until she heard Jane ask, ‘So will you go to London? I need to know now . . .’

‘Oh!’ The chance to research the provenance of the mysterious Cheapside jewels was certainly tempting, and—she glanced once more at her great-grandmother’s sketch of the brooch or button—perhaps she might have an opportunity to do a little personal research on the side. ‘Okay,’ she said. ‘I’m in.’

‘Great.’ Jane sounded relieved. ‘Professor Wright will be available to brief you and the photographer on Monday at nine a.m. Does that work for you?’

‘Sure, thanks.’ Kate was about to ask who the photographer was, when Jane cut her off.

‘Monday it is then—nine o’clock at the Museum of London. Email me your passport details and I’ll have my assistant book your flight and a hotel near the museum. Choose a handful of key pieces. Go tight. I want origins. You have a month to file.’

‘But, Jane, nobody knows the origins of—’

‘Exactly. I want you to uncover the stories nobody else has.’

## Chapter 2

LONDON, PRESENT DAY

Why would someone bury a bucket of precious jewels and gemstones and never return?

It was all Kate could think about as she scrawled her signature on pages of disclaimers and security forms at the research desk of the Museum of London.

‘Dr Kirby, we expect you to wear this lanyard at all times,’ the receptionist informed her with the crisp efficiency of a prison warden. ‘This gives you access to our viewing room—accompanied by security guards, of course—for today only, after which the jewels will be returned to our storage vault. Does that give you enough time?’

‘I hope so. If not, will you let me take them home?’

The receptionist chose to ignore Kate’s lame attempt at a joke. ‘You’ll have to take that up with the director. Take the service stairs down to the basement, please. Professor Wright is waiting for you.’

‘What about the photographer?’ Kate asked.

‘Your colleague will be joining you shortly. We are just trying to find somewhere to put his . . . gear.’

The young woman tapped her pen on the desk in apparent irritation, but couldn’t completely hide the whisper of a grin. Kate sighed. She knew instantly who the photographer assigned to this story was—she’d seen this look a hundred times.

‘Mr Brown?’ The receptionist waved a security guard over. ‘Please escort Dr Kirby downstairs.’

The guard led Kate downstairs into the basement, each of them tapping their lanyards on locks in the stairwell to gain access to the next level.

The museum stairwell felt more prison than museum, and it took a few minutes for Kate’s eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. With every step taking her deeper underground, she imagined murky layers of Viking tools and plague pits pressing up against the concrete foundations. Slicing through the middle would be red ash from when the furious Celtic queen Boadicea set the city ablaze. Debris from the Great Fire and the Blitz would be scattered among the top layers of soil.

Now it was all blanketed by the Museum of London, with its tunnels, pipes and cables linking the museum to neighbouring skyscrapers. You had to hand it to London: she was the queen of reinvention. For more than two thousand years, London had picked herself up and raised her fist—like the defiant Boadicea—at anyone who tried to quash her.

London also buried her secrets deep in the layers of damp bog. Kate needed to uncover at least one of them.

‘Here we are,’ said the guard as he keyed a code into a number pad on a steel door and shoved it open with his shoulder. ‘After you, Dr Kirby.’

Kate stepped through the door into a fluorescent-lit, low-ceilinged room that was part laundromat and part middle school science lab. Rows of tables covered in leather and velvet dissected the room and a pair of women in lab coats peered into microscopes or manoeuvred pieces onto felt-backed mounts. Pieces Kate recognised from the articles Jane had sent.

‘Dr Kirby—Kate. At last! Welcome.’ The elegant museum director crossed the room with her arms outstretched. ‘I trust you had no problems signing in.’

‘It’s great to see you, Lucia,’ Kate said, beaming as she stepped into the older woman’s embrace.

Lucia Wright’s dark hair had the faintest silver threads at the temples and her body—toned and lithe from years of marathon running—seemed almost waif-like in her navy Chanel suit. Kate rested her head briefly on her mentor’s shoulder and breathed in her jasmine perfume—a blast of summer in this sterile room.

When they drew apart, Lucia put a maternal hand to Kate’s cheek.

‘You look . . . well,’ she said softly, a strange alloy of pride and sympathy in her gaze.

Kate broke eye contact and glanced across at the security guard, who seemed a little bewildered by this familiar greeting.

Ten years ago, Professor Lucia Wright had supervised Kate for her PhD in Medieval and Elizabethan history at Oxford and the pair had become friends. It had been Lucia who had recommended the young historian to private collectors in Hong Kong

and Dubai, as well as several industry publications, after she graduated. Whenever Lucia was stateside and Kate was home in Boston, they would meet. It had been a little over four years since they'd caught up in person. Neither had had the slightest premonition back on that sunlit morning over espressos and panini that Kate's life was about to implode . . .

Turning to face her mentor once more, she said, 'I'm fine.' A half-truth. A lump started to form in her throat. She smoothed the curl at her temple back into her ponytail.

'When Jane called to say she was hoping to commission you to write the exclusive piece I was thrilled. You deserve this . . .' Lucia tilted her head to the side. 'Make no mistake, Kate—you were granted access because your research work is the best. I know you will give these pieces the coverage they deserve.'

Kate swallowed and met her mentor's eyes with a silent thanks. A shadow on the far wall caught her eye. She glanced across the room, straining to see the fine gold and enamel floral chain a dark-haired woman was stitching very precisely onto a velvet-lined board.

'We have the handful of pieces you requested laid out for you in the locked room next door. Hard to narrow it down from over four hundred items, isn't it?' Lucia gave a sympathetic smile. 'The photographer is running late, I'm afraid. He came straight from Heathrow. Front desk is just trying to work out what to do with his surfboard.' She tapped her left foot in frustration as she looked at her watch.

'The photographer is Marcus Holt, I gather?' Kate tried to keep her voice even, but Lucia caught her rolling her eyes.

'You know him?' Lucia's eyes met Kate's and she cocked an eyebrow.

Everyone knew Marcus Holt's reputation as an energetic photographer who shot cover stories for every prestige publication, from *Vogue* to *National Geographic*.

'Of course! Jane introduced us a couple of years ago at a jewellery fair in Hong Kong. We've worked on a few stories . . .'

Kate shrugged. 'He's Australian,' she added, as if that should explain everything.

Lucia's eyes met Kate's.

'He's very relaxed . . .'

'Clearly!' Lucia looked at her watch.

'He doesn't just get it done, he brings out the beauty—the magic—in his images. Marcus sees things other people miss.'

'Excellent. Hopefully you'll discover something new while you are in London.' Lucia's brown eyes twinkled with encouragement.

There was no need to mention the sketches tucked neatly into the back of her notebook. Not yet, anyway.

'Hope he gets here soon. I have to be at a board meeting in thirty minutes, then in the city for the rest of the afternoon trying to convince our major donors to chip in for this new site. You're coming to the party tonight at The Goldsmiths' Company, I hope?'

'Of course,' Kate replied. 'Sophie sent me an invitation as soon as I told her I was coming to London.' She heard a card tap, a security beep and a click as the door unlocked.

'Professor Wright. So sorry I'm late.' The tall photographer strode into the room, black camera bag flung over one shoulder. He took Lucia's slender hand in his and beamed. Uncombed sandy hair just brushed his shoulders and his dark eyes shone. 'I'm Marcus Holt. Thrilled to be here. Thanks so much—'

Lucia cut him off briskly as two pink apples appeared on her cheeks. ‘Happy to have you.’ She gave a little cough to clear her throat. ‘And you know Dr Kate Kirby, of course.’

‘Of course! Hello, Dr Kirby.’

He turned towards Kate and gave her a quick peck on the cheek, his unshaven face abrasive against her skin. He smelled of sweat and salt water.

She eyed his crumpled linen shirt and couldn’t help herself. ‘Did you surf here?’

‘Might as well have. Delays at Heathrow . . .’ He dropped his smile for a moment, eyes apologetic. ‘Hey, I’m really sorry to keep you waiting.’ He casually swung the camera bag onto the table and grabbed a second bag from the security guard. ‘Thanks, mate.’

Lucia was back to business and keen to be on her way.

‘Now let me introduce you to our team.’ She beckoned to the pair of women who had paused in their work at Marcus’s arrival. ‘This is Saanvi Singh, conservator of jewellery,’ Lucia said, introducing the dark-haired woman. ‘And Gayle Woods, curator of medieval arts.’

Marcus and Kate shook hands with each.

‘I was in Geneva last year—your paper on medieval brooch restoration was amazing,’ Kate told the conservator. ‘I’ve been quoting it ever since.’ She smiled. ‘Hope you don’t mind if I pick your brains while I’m here. I’ve got a big list of questions to ask.’

Saanvi blushed and nodded.

Lucia beamed at Kate. ‘Sounds like we got just the right person.’ She turned to Marcus. ‘Jane assured me you two make a great team.’

‘We do,’ said Marcus, smiling. ‘As long as I do exactly what Dr Kirby here instructs.’

Not for the first time, Kate was struck by his easy manner and casual, just-off-the-beach charm. He was comfortable around couture designers and jewellers, but equally attentive to academics and journalists.

‘Now, I can’t let either of you touch any of the jewels,’ Lucia warned. ‘I know you’ve signed the paperwork and all the non-disclosures, but I just have to make that very clear.’

Kate nodded then looked at the photographer.

He shrugged. ‘Sure,’ he agreed.

Kate’s heart started to race as Lucia keyed in the code to enter the safe room. Who knew what stories she was about to uncover? When most people looked at a gemstone or a piece of jewellery they saw astonishing beauty and exquisite devotion from their creators. Love and hope. But her job as a historian was to look past the shimmer and try to work out how each piece was made—and, importantly, why. It was up to her to join the dots between the craftsman and the recipient. Sometimes she found a trail of broken hearts and betrayal. Even murder. It was a puzzle Kate never tired of trying to solve.

She took a deep breath to steady her pulse as she stepped into the vault. Her eyes jumped between three rows of tables covered with velvet displaying ribbons of enamelled gold necklaces, to pools of sapphires and turquoise, from a row of gold buttons and diamond rings to the biggest emerald she’d ever seen, sitting atop a pedestal. The hairs on her forearms stood on end.

‘Boom!’ said Marcus as he entered the room with his camera bag. ‘I get how that person felt when they found the first diamond rough glinting in the light. Gets me in the guts every time.’

‘Me too,’ said Kate as she steadied herself against the closest table with her hand. She didn’t dare admit that sometimes her first glimpse of a famous jewel she had longed to see could be disappointing. Like meeting Tom Cruise and discovering he was much smaller in real life. Or when David Beckham started to speak with a high-pitched voice. How could reality ever compete with the retouched glossy images presented to the world?

But there was no disappointment this time.

Saanvi shot Kate a knowing look and ushered her across to the far table. ‘Hard to believe this collection was buried sometime in the 1600s.’ She waved at the enamel necklaces. ‘Those are pristine. They’d never have survived this long if they’d been worn. The enamel would have rubbed off, and the gold and jewels been sold or reworked and reset. If we start over here, I’ve laid out some of the pieces you requested. The rest are in the room we were just in for checking before they are packed back into storage. Here . . .’

Kate stepped to the edge of the velvet-draped table, angled the light and leaned down using the eyepiece she pulled from her kit bag to study a pale cameo—a Byzantine pendant. The catalogue image hadn’t prepared her for the soft drape of the robes, the repentant tilt of a head.

‘White sapphire?’

‘Yes. It’s St Thomas. This taller figure with his hands raised is Jesus, proving to his apostle that he was nailed to the cross.’

‘Then rose again.’ Kate longed to run a finger across the relief of St Thomas and the contours of the gold mount. Instead, she reached for her notebook and pen and started to take notes.

*The Incredulity of St Thomas—most famously painted by Caravaggio.*

She paused . . .

Here, in the relief of a translucent sapphire, Kate felt witness to something intimate and tender.

*Top of pendant is a single natural pearl—piety and hope.*

*Trust and devotion. Unconditional love and hope.*

*A talisman for someone to wear close to their heart?*

She imagined the Byzantine jewellery workshop crammed between stalls selling squeaky white cheeses, lemon-scented honey cakes, toasted pistachios and syrupy sweetmeats in front of the Great Palace in Constantinople. The lapidary craning over the gemstone in a sliver of light from his open window, whittling away the grooves with a tiny chisel and hammer to carve the hairline before polishing it on a stone wheel.

‘Who’s that?’ Marcus pointed at the teardrop pendant from the far side of the table as he set up his cameras and spotlights.

‘Doubting Thomas,’ said Kate.

‘Aren’t we all?’ he quipped as he screwed a wide lens onto his camera. He’d angled the lights over the jewellery, and a dark shadow obscured his face. There were stress lines at his eyes and across his brow.

Kate turned back to her work and scribbled *Doubting Thomas* in her notebook, and circled it.

Doubt was never far from her shoulder. Each day she asked, ‘What if?’ in essays and articles. Her life was consumed with questions of the past. Her ex, Jonathan, had said as much the day he’d left her for New Zealand two years ago. He’d decided to take a different path to healing—apparently Kate was no match for pristine mountains and endless fly-fishing.

*The Lost Jewels*

‘Katie,’ he’d said with his typical surgeon’s plainspeak, ‘you spend all this time travelling around the world chasing other people’s stories. When you’re home, you’re hiding in that library wallowing in the past, looking at other people’s treasures. When are you going to look up?’

But Jonathan could never understand what a joy it was to spend hours deep in books and archives, studying precious jewels that whispered secrets from long ago.

At the opposite table was a trio of cameos made to be worn at the neck: a Florentine portrait; Queen Elizabeth in Spanish Armada-style; and an intricate carving of Aesop’s fable ‘The Dog and the Shadow’. These spoke of seventeenth-century London. Home to immigrants and travelling artisans and craftsmen who crisscrossed the oceans and travelled silk routes, laden with wooden chests and saddlebags filled with spices, seeds and gold.

‘Kate?’ Marcus had finished setting up.

He stood in front of a cluster of emerald pieces gathered together, glinting and drawing the eye like a line of showgirls.

An emerald watch, a salamander brooch and a parrot cameo. Saanvi picked up the salamander in her gloved hand and held it up under one of the spotlights. The creature had been picked out in circles of emeralds soldered together with gold links. Kate wanted to poke her fingers into the tiny mouth dotted with black enamel because she was certain she would feel teeth. The brooch was turned over to reveal twin curved pins to secure the salamander to a hat, and more flecks of black enamel on a white belly that looked like the finest strands of hair.

‘The mystical creature who rose from the fire, the salamander,’ said Saanvi.

Kate tilted her head. It was one of the collection's most iconic pieces, five hundred years old, and yet she didn't know what to make of it. It was trying to tell her something . . . but what?

Marcus pointed at the hexagonal emerald watch as big as a baby's fist. 'I'll shoot this first. I've never seen an emerald so big. Is it Colombian?' he asked.

Saanvi nodded. 'Muzo. I can't believe this stone didn't splinter when they carved out the inside for the watch. We think the watch parts could have been made and assembled in Geneva.'

Kate sucked in her breath. It was the most spectacular and audacious pairing of craftsmanship and imagination she was likely to see in her lifetime. If anybody ever asked her again why she worked as a jewellery historian, she'd simply point them to this exquisite emerald-cased watch. She copied the precise dimensions from Saanvi's catalogue and then jotted down some questions.

*Was emerald cut in London? What cities would it have passed through?*

*Royalty or wealthy aristocrat?*

The next display was a series of bejewelled enamel buttons, together with some enamel necklaces with flowers: roses, bluebells and pansies.

Kate leaned over the last four buttons, gathered in a separate velvet box, and checked to see that Saanvi and Marcus were busy setting up the shot for the emerald watch. While the photographer moved to his bag to grab a different lens, she slipped the clear envelope with Essie's sketches from the back of her notebook and held it beside the buttons.

'Where'd you get that picture?' asked Marcus as he came up behind Kate's shoulder. 'It's the same button, isn't it?'

*The Lost Jewels*

Kate flinched and put her index finger to her lips as his eyes widened in recognition. She'd spent years trying to access these buttons at the museum, and the picture did appear to be similar to the jewels in front of her.

Essie—or whoever had drawn Essie's pictures—had captured the likeness. The spirit. Kate imagined a line of these beauties down the back of a prim Elizabethan gown, or used to tether a gentleman's cape as it flew behind him atop a galloping horse. Her great-grandmother could have seen a button like this anywhere. There was no proof that Essie's sketch was of a Cheapside button.

Marcus's eyes flicked across to where Saanvi was setting up a shot in the lightbox, then to Kate as he sucked in his breath. He mouthed, 'Sorry,' and raised an eyebrow.

Kate shrugged and slipped the image back into her notebook, hoping he would get the hint.

As Marcus left her standing beside the buttons, she realised that matching this picture to them didn't prove a thing. The buttons were similar, that was all.

She glanced at the emerald watch and thought of Essie. Her great-grandmother had had the Irish gift of the gab and would sing Kate to sleep in her nursery with wild tales of leprechauns and faerie queens. She spoon-fed her folklore and history with every mouthful of colcannon.

But Kate's favourite was the tale of a mysterious man who bewitched Essie with his emerald eyes in Cheapside.