

# **Death in the Catacombs**

**by Kelly Gardiner**

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# Death in the Catacombs

It's quiet down here. My shoes slap against the lino and the sound echoes along the hallway. Grey walls, grey floors, more like a hospital — or a morgue — than a library.

From beyond, there's a rattling sound, like a ghost dragging eternal chains. Or, which is more likely, Rex with the mail trolley.

'Morning, love,' he says.

'Anything for me?'

'No, sorry.' He doesn't want me to take it personally. 'Maybe tomorrow.'

'Fingers crossed.'

'You're all in early this morning.'

'Are we?'

'Even young Danny's in the office already. Like to get a head start, eh?'

‘We do,’ I say. The odd thing about archival research is that it feels like a race, even though you’re working through pages written a hundred years ago and, let’s face it, they aren’t going anywhere. ‘Best get cracking.’

‘Have a gorgeous day,’ says Rex.

‘You too.’ And the trolley rolls on. I wave and take the stairs down to the bowels of the building, where hallways twist and turn past dozens of locked doors.

It’s dead quiet in the Catacombs. I knock softly on the door to Manuscripts Storage. No answer. I push it open just a crack, and that’s when I see him. That’s when I see it all.

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‘What’s your role here?’

The people they’ve sent from Police HQ seem almost as shocked as me, but they get down to business quickly.

‘I’m a Fellow,’ I say.

‘You don’t look it.’ The detective taps her tablet. In this dim light, the screen gives her face a greenish glow.

‘A Research Fellow,’ I say. ‘I come in twice a week and plough through the papers of obscure nineteenth century novelists.’

‘Why?’

‘I ask myself that every week.’

Detective Collins smiles. ‘But really, why? You get paid for that?’

‘Not everything is about money, Detective.’

‘Crimes usually are,’ she says, ‘Money, fame or fury.’

‘Really? How fascinating.’

‘Back to the real world, if you don’t mind, Professor...’

‘If you insist.’ The real world is a puddle of dark blood, already congealing. A fragment of splintered bone. I don’t like it much. ‘No need for the Professor thing. Everyone calls me Cat.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I’m lazy and lie about in the sun a lot,’ I say, to save her the effort of making a joke I’ve heard a million times, ‘and also it’s my name.’

‘OK, Professor, speaking of which, do you have any idea why the victim would take a nap down here? There must be better places.’

‘Geoffrey is the least lazy person ever,’ I say, ‘so I doubt he was napping when it happened.’

‘The pillow?’

‘We use them for holding delicate materials, like older books with fragile bindings.’

Collins blushes. 'I see.'

'A library is a strange world,' I say.

'The whole world is strange,' she says, handing me her business card. 'It's why detectives exist.'

\* \* \* \*

'Geoffrey was a staff member here for decades — a senior manager, in fact, and highly respected. Libraries are — were — his life.' Doris is head of Acquisitions and Cataloguing and looks nothing like you expect a librarian to look, if you only see them on 80s TV shows. She tucks a strand of dyed cobalt hair behind one ear.

'Literally,' says the Detective.

I choose not to intervene about her use of the word, but cannot quite approve.

Doris sniffs but goes on. 'He retired a couple of years ago, but couldn't stay away from the place. So he came back as a volunteer.'

'Was he popular?' asks Collins. Good question. I like this line of inquiry.

'He was respected,' says Doris.

'I'll take that as a no.'

'Look,' says Doris. 'When he was in charge, Geoffrey undertook a major restructure — closed down the Burroughs Reading Room, introduced a mechanical book retrieval system. Lots of people were out of work. That's not the sort of thing that makes you popular.'

'But it's not the sort of thing that gets you murdered,' I say.

Detective Collins spins around. 'You still here? You shouldn't be listening to this.'

'It's all fascinating,' I say. 'I've read so many detective stories, but I've never actually seen one at work before.'

'This isn't some old story,' says Collins. 'And the only boffins I need around here are Forensics.'

'My knowledge may be purely theoretical,' I say, 'and confined to the methods outlined in nineteenth century fiction, but I'm happy to help.'

'Please don't,' Collins says. 'Go back to your office and I'll come find you. We may have more questions.'

'One thing I did wonder —'

'Professor, if you don't mind —'

I don't take any notice. 'You'll think me heartless, but when I first found Geoffrey, I was worried for a moment about whether blood had got on the diary.'

'What diary?' she asks.

‘Geoffrey has been transcribing the McAlister gold rush journal,’ says Doris. ‘It’s one of our great treasures, entrusted only to him.’

‘Right,’ says Collins. ‘And what’s your point, Professor?’

‘I didn’t need to worry,’ I say. ‘The diary wasn’t there.’

‘So?’

‘My God!’ Doris jumps to her feet. ‘The diary should be on the table.’

‘So perhaps,’ I tell Collins, ‘you’re looking for a thief, not just a murderer.’

They rush back downstairs, while I obediently wander to my office. Danny’s in there. Awkward. I wonder if anyone’s told him yet. Maybe I’ll let Collins do it. I don’t really want to discuss detail: the blood soaking the hair, the clawed fingers. And Danny is a details man. You can tell. He always wears a belt and pays someone to iron his shirts.

I try to walk by when he looks up from his laptop, and waves. Damn. I make the international sign for need-coffee-don’t-speak-to-me through the glass, but he mistakes it for the international sign for love-to-talk-at-this-hour and opens the door.

‘Morning.’

I murmur something vague. He follows me into the Fellows Lounge, chatting about the weather, as if it’s a normal day.

‘Oh for God’s sake,’ I say, pushing the button for a double espresso. ‘All right.’

‘Beg your pardon?’ Danny says.

I turn to face him. ‘I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but it seems I must.’

‘Oh dear,’ he says. ‘Sounds serious.’

The door behind him opens. It’s Collins, green eyes bright in the gloom.

‘There you are,’ she says. ‘We need to talk some more.’

‘Thought we might.’

She glances around. ‘This place is a rabbit warren.’

‘It certainly is,’ Danny says. ‘I’m always getting lost.’

‘There are many things in this library, Detective,’ I say, ‘but never rabbits.’

‘Detective?’ Danny startles.

‘Geoffrey is dead,’ I blurt, ‘and the diary’s vanished.’

‘Dead?’ He clutches at the edge of the table. You’d think a historian would be more used to bloodshed. Clearly we literature scholars are made of sterner stuff, perhaps from reading all that Dickens.

The Gaggia gurgles and splutters. Collins is explaining to Danny, which is a mercy, and getting his details. I sniff the milk. You can never be too sure.

'Someone hit him in the back of the head with a blunt object,' says Collins.

'Poor Geoffrey,' Danny says, over and over. Poor Geoffrey, indeed. I remember him in this very room last week, finger tracing lines on an old map.

I leave my coffee on the table and slip out the side door. Doris is at her desk.

'Find it?' I say.

She shakes her head. 'We've locked down Manuscripts, in case the diary's still in there somewhere, but the register shows Geoffrey checked it out this morning.'

'When?'

'Seven.'

'So early?'

'He likes to start before everyone else arrives.'

'And you let him?'

'It's Geoffrey,' she says. 'We can't stop him. God knows I've tried.'

Someone did.

'Was it just the diary he was working on?' I ask.

'Yes, for months now.'

'Who'd know about that?'

'Dozens of people. Everyone in Manuscripts. Danny and everyone he's ever spoken to about his Goldfields book.' She rubs her eyes, and there are tears on her face. 'I've already told Detective Collins all of this.'

'But what if we could figure it out ourselves?' I say.

'Oh, Cat. I can't. You know, I worked for Geoffrey for years when I first came here. He was pretty tough, but I learnt so much — everything. I can't believe ...' There's pain in her face, real pain. 'Who would do such a thing?'

'Disgruntled former employee?'

She shakes her head. 'That's what the police asked, but how would they get in here?'

How indeed? 'What about the security cameras?'

'They're reviewing all that,' she says, 'but nobody's left the building, and there are no cameras down in the Catacombs.'

'So either a staff member did it, or let someone in?'

'It's hard to believe, but yes.' Doris sniffs back tears. 'One of us.'

And it wasn't me. I stare at her face but she looks appropriately traumatised. Good. I mean, not good that she's traumatised, obviously.

‘The police are going to interview everyone,’ she says.  
 ‘Nobody’s allowed to leave. Mind you ...’ She waves a hand  
 at the half-empty desks around her. ‘There aren’t many of us  
 here yet.’

‘But when the library opens, there’ll be people everywhere.’

‘We may not open.’

‘So everyone who’s here has to stay, and everyone who’s not ...?’

‘Won’t be allowed in.’

Locked in the State Library. All my dreams come true.

Doris sniffs again. ‘Poor Geoffrey.’

‘Yes, of course,’ I say. ‘Poor Geoffrey. Back soon.’

I shove away the memory of the back of Geoffrey’s skull,  
 and go hunting the detective.

\* \* \* \*

‘Odd, don’t you think?’ says Collins. ‘A building full of  
 women, and who got to be in charge? The only bloke for miles  
 — Geoffrey. Then he retrenched a whole lot of the women  
 who worked for him.’

‘It’s not that odd,’ I say. ‘Apparently even in an industry filled  
 with brilliant women, men are supposed to be in command.  
 Like schools or hospitals — or the police force.’

She doesn’t take the bait. ‘So, have you noticed women  
 around here treating Geoffrey with hostility?’

‘No,’ I say. ‘But I have noticed him treating them with a  
 certain condescension.’

She raises one eyebrow. I didn’t know anybody could  
 actually do that. I try it but both eyebrows fling themselves  
 towards the ceiling in an unruly manner.

‘You think it was someone who used to work for him?’  
 I ask. I’ll practice the eyebrow move in the mirror when I get  
 home.

‘It’s a possibility.’

‘But it doesn’t explain the diary.’

‘No,’ she admits, ‘it doesn’t.’

‘Everyone who works here considers the collection to be  
 almost a sacred thing,’ I say. ‘They’d never steal from it or  
 damage it.’

‘Perhaps not,’ she says. ‘But someone has, and I have to  
 follow all possible leads.’

“‘Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains,  
 no matter how improbable, must be the truth.’”

‘Conan Doyle?’ she says.

‘Well done, Detective.’

‘I do read, you know.’

‘Let me guess — gritty Scots realism? Gruff coppers prowling the mean streets of Edinburgh?’

‘Actually,’ she says, ‘I’m more of a Dorothy L Sayers girl.’

Be still my beating heart.

‘So what would Lord Peter Wimsey do if he was here?’

I ask.

‘Not sure, but Harriet Vane would probably take tea with the Dean.’

‘We don’t have one of those,’ I say, ‘but we do have a State Librarian.’

‘That’ll do.’

\* \* \* \*

Eliza Flynn’s door is always open, or so she says, and it’s true today. She sits at a small round table, with Doris on her left, and rises when she sees us at the door.

‘Inspector Collins?’

‘Only a mere detective sergeant, I’m afraid.’ Collins sticks out her hand and Eliza takes it in both of hers and shakes it warmly.

‘Thank you so much for everything you’re doing for us,’ she says. ‘Though I’m terribly sorry you have to be here at all.’

She waves Collins inside then stares at me. ‘Thank you for guiding her to us through the labyrinth, Cat. Doris will show her the way back.’

She closes the door on me, with a gentle smile, as I try to nod wisely.

Fine. Be like that. People get so touchy when there’s a murderer on the loose.

I try to listen through the door but it’s no use, so I head back toward the office. Down the south staircase and through the deserted IT section. Eliza’s right, it is a labyrinth, especially at the moment, with endless building works happening. Library of the future, in the making. All new Scandinavian design with pale furniture and high-tech art installations. And new toilets, which is the main thing. Corridors everywhere are blocked off by sealed scaffolding, and the halls ring with the sounds of power tools. But not today.

I pause halfway across level four. We’ve all had to find new ways to navigate through the labyrinth lately. You try to drop in to Manuscripts to look through a collection of letters, only to find that the usual route is blocked. Instead of walking along two silent but familiar corridors, you have to go up one flight of stairs, cut through an office area you’ve never seen, where all those cheerful Marketing types are singing Happy Birthday

over cake, and then circle around the back of the stacks and down a different fire escape. It's excellent for your heart rate, but otherwise deeply inconvenient.

A thought swims through my mind and vanishes.

The lift bell dings, and it stops. The doors open, but nobody gets out.

That's when I remember there really is a murderer on the loose, somewhere in this building. Maybe someone I know. Someone close by.

What would Harriet Vane do?

Never mind her. She's a shadow of the great nineteenth century female sleuths. What would Nurse Hilda Wade do? The adventurous Miss Cayley? Brave Marion Holcombe?

They wouldn't stand about, slack-mouthed, staring at an empty lift, that's certain. Marion — or any of them, even Harriet — would step in, punch the button marked C for Catacombs, and let the doors close ominously in front of her. And so I do.

\* \* \* \*

'Sorry, Miss,' says the constable. 'This is a crime scene.'

'I know,' I say. 'I found it. And it's Doctor.'

'Pardon, Miss?'

'Oh, never mind. Has Collins come back?'

'No, Miss, sorry. She's upstairs somewhere.'

I glance along the corridor. No cameras.

'You a librarian, Miss?'

'Not me,' I say. 'I'm a sleuth, hot on the trail. I'm Irene Adler, outwitting Sherlock Holmes. I'm ... I'm an academic.'

His helpful smile fades. 'Right. Well, best get along out of here, Miss.'

'Doctor,' I say. 'Not Miss.'

'Sorry, Doctor. Doctor?'

'Watson.'

'Really? Like Lucy Liu?'

'Do I look like Lucy Liu?'

'No, not at all.'

Dignity somewhat diminished, I walk back along the corridor, my eyes scanning the floor, the walls, everywhere for clues. Damn my inability to watch all those nasty forensic crime shows on television — I did try once, but the autopsies were too much for me.

This is the perfect place for a crime, really, for all the reasons that also make it a perfect place to store lots and lots of things. On the left, opposite the showers, is where everyone locks up their bicycles. At 9.30 most mornings it throngs with

people in lycra. I saw Danny here one day in his bike shorts, sweaty hair, and bare feet, and never again felt quite the same respect for his *Approaches to Early Victorian Agricultural Implements* (Cambridge Scholars, 2001). Next door are the stacks of rarely accessed monographs (590-597: Zoology), and Large Pictures storage is down the end. There's no reason for anyone to be down here early in the morning, unless some enterprising patron has requested a book on cold-blooded vertebrates.

There can't be more than a dozen or so people in the building now. Surely the police won't leave us rattling around in a closed library all day. No, they'll round us up and take us to the station and take formal statements. Which means I only have a little while left to figure this out.

If I really was down here when the murder happened, there must be some way —

Oh Lordy. They think it was me. They must. It's the obvious conclusion to draw. I was down here alone. I'll be on the camera footage on the nearest staircase. I found the body. I could have done it — in fact, I almost believe it myself.

But I'd never hit anyone with an 1898 *Government Gazette*. They're precious. And of course I wasn't down here alone.

I run down the rest of the hallway, race around the corner

towards the mail room — and come face to face with Detective Collins.

'There you are,' I say, out of breath after a twenty-metre sprint. 'I didn't do it.'

'No,' she says, 'I didn't think you did.'

'Oh. Right.' I'm tempted to outline the many logical reasons why she should suspect me but think better of it.

'Have you talked to Rex yet?' I say instead.

'Who?'

'The mail man. He was down here with his trolley just before I found Geoffrey.'

'You think he's got something to do with it?'

'Heavens, no, he's the sweetest man alive,' I say. 'But he walks everywhere and knows everyone. If anybody saw anything out of place, it'll be Rex.'

'Thanks for the tip,' she says. 'And what are you doing back down here?'

'Helping.'

'Please don't,' she says. 'Why is everyone is trying to help this morning?'

'Oh, come on, Detective. You're in a building full of really brainy people, and you should make use of them. Librarians and academics exist to help people find information.'

\* \* \* \*

'It's not the same thing as detecting,' she says.

'I know, that's why you also need a literary historian.' I flash my most winning smile.

'Please,' she says, and her voice is weary. I wonder if this is the start of her shift or the end of a late night's work. 'Don't help. Any of you.'

'It's our civic duty,' I say.

She holds my gaze. 'Is that what it is? Because you all seem to be a little less horrified than you should be under the circs, and more thrilled to be part of a crime scene than normal people.'

'Normal is a social construct,' I say. But it's true. I sigh. 'You're right, of course. We all like solving tricky questions and our curiosity has got the better of us.'

'Killed the cat, remember?'

Something twists in my belly. I suppose it's fear, unfamiliar and swirling, and I don't like the feeling at all.

'I'm serious,' says Collins. 'There's a killer in here somewhere. I doubt they meant to murder anyone, so they're probably frightened and possibly dangerous. At least they're only armed with heavy books. But I don't want any of you roaming the corridors. Go back to your office and collect your things, and wait in the Fellows Lounge. The others are on their way there now, and I have officers posted just in case.'

The office I share with Danny is empty. I grab my laptop and bag, and a few papers to read in case we have to wait for hours. Everyone's in the Lounge, waiting, but the place feels weird, like a peak-hour train carriage stuck between stations. In the rain. Doris huddles in the corner, whispering to a couple of cataloguers. Danny sits at the hot desk, laptop open, pale hair falling across his forehead. Rex talks loudly to the cleaners and two security guards who don't usually get to do much besides report stolen bags and find lost children, so they're grilling him for details.

Eliza greets me with a bright smile meant to inspire confidence, but instead it jangles. And then clangs. She got the top job over Geoffrey, years ago, and forced his retirement. He wasn't the right cultural fit, apparently. It said so in the newspaper, and I wondered at the time who leaked the story. Another disgruntled employee?

And can you, I wonder, be grunted?

I never did drink that coffee. It's still there, cold, on the table. As I pour it out and make another, Eliza clears her throat and starts talking over the mumbled hum.

'Thank you, everyone, for gathering here,' she says. 'I'm sure you've all heard the dreadful news about poor Geoffrey.'

There'll be a time and place to pay our respects, but for today let's just acknowledge the awful loss of a brilliant man.' Tears glisten in her eyes. I'm glad she didn't have to see what I saw. I'm glad none of them did.

But at least one of them must have.

'The police are here, as you know,' she goes on. 'They're doing a sterling job, and I have every confidence in their ability. We will all soon be asked to make formal statements, but in the meantime, if you have any information or any questions, please don't hesitate to tell me.'

She pauses and gazes around the room.

Doris pipes up. 'How long are they going to keep us here?'

'I don't know, but I'm sure they'll move as fast as they can.'

Doris is pale and her hands are clenched into tight fists around a damp handkerchief, knuckles white against her floral frock.

Eliza gives her a reassuring smile, then sits down beside me, closer than I'd like.

'Tell me exactly what you saw down there,' she says.

I do, but in a whisper, so as not to freak out the others or alert the killer. I can't look at her while I speak but feel her gaze, and sense her shrink away at some of the more revolting details. It's not just a body in the library to her, not a crime scene — she knew Geoffrey for years.

'And that's all I remember.' I finish with an ambiguous flourish.

'So you didn't see anyone else in the Catacombs this morning?'

'No, only Rex.'

We both glance over at him. He's muttering to the security guys, over and over, 'What a terrible thing. I can't believe it happened here.'

A normal human reaction. Collins would approve.

'He didn't see anything unusual either,' says Eliza.

That's the point. Whoever did this, and wherever they went afterwards, it wasn't unusual for the library at this time of day. There are no pieces out of place, no cogs slipping, no unexpected movements.

Except one.

Or maybe two.

Come to think of it, why was Rex in the corridor at all? There are no offices down there.

I sidle up to him.

'It's horrible,' he says, and grips my hand. 'I'm sorry you had to see such a sight.'

I nod my thanks for the thought. 'Another moment later, and it might have been you who found him.'

'Not me,' he says. 'I never go in those catacombs. Thank goodness.'

‘So that’s not where you were headed?’

‘Nah,’ he says. ‘That’s just the only way to get a trolley to the East Wing at present, with all these works. Down, across, up again. Scenic route.’

‘Of course.’ I pat his hand. Good man.

Down, across, up. Down, across, up. Someone who knows all the shortcuts would go that way, but anyone else...

I text Collins. CHECK CAMERA FOOTAGE LEVEL 2 LIFT EAST WING. WATSON.

Then slip back to my seat beside Eliza.

‘I feel for Doris,’ she says. ‘I know they hadn’t been together these past few months, but still...’

What? ‘You mean Doris and Geoffrey were a couple?’

‘For years,’ she says. ‘Nobody was supposed to know, but naturally we all did.’

‘And they split up? Why?’

‘I don’t know,’ she says. ‘They’re very private people.’

So Doris might have a motive?

Eliza reads my mind. Uncanny. ‘Already considered and eliminated as a possibility,’ she says. ‘Not the type.’

‘Who is?’

‘Someone else.’

Is she trying to solve this too, or deflecting attention from her own actions?

‘Perhaps,’ I say, ‘we should put our heads together and see if we can figure it out?’

‘Not possible,’ she says. ‘You’re top of my list of suspects.’

I flop back in my seat. ‘Rubbish.’

‘Makes perfect sense,’ says Eliza. ‘You’re the only one who’s steeped in crime.’

‘*Fiction*,’ I hiss. ‘Crime fiction.’

She shrugs. ‘Takes one to read one.’

‘Don’t tell me you’ve never picked up a Phryne Fisher on your summer holidays.’

‘I do watch it on TV,’ she admits, ‘but only for the costumes.’ Sure.

I gaze around the room. How many of these people suspect me, too? I’m not one of them, not really. Just a visitor, here for a year and then gone again.

It’s like a small country town. You have to work at the library for thirty years before you’re a local. And even then, what do you get? Brains bashed out in a basement with half a kilo of newsprint.

Poor Geoffrey. My gaze falls on the table, the last place I saw him alive, tracing a finger across a map. An old map.

Nineteenth century. Roads and crosses and hills. Why do that in here, instead of at his usual post? And who might have seen him, besides me?

The door opens. It's Collins.

'Good news,' she says. 'We've found your precious McAlister diary.'

'What?' Doris starts from her chair. 'Where?'

'Never you mind about that,' Collins says.

'Where is it now?' Doris asks. 'We need to get it back to Conservation immediately to check it's not damaged.'

'Afraid not,' says Collins. 'We'll need to run it through Fingerprinting.'

'I beg your pardon?' Doris pulls herself up to her full height of five foot two. 'You are not dusting any kind of chemical powder over one of the state's most precious artefacts.'

'It's just an old notebook,' says Collins. 'It can't be more precious than a human life.'

'Just an old notebook?' Doris splutters. 'It's one of the most famous items in the collection.'

'Famous enough to steal, maybe, but not very effectively,' says Collins. 'At any rate, it's evidence in a crime so we'll keep it for now.'

'I can't allow that,' says Doris.

Interesting. Whoever took the diary hid it badly.

'Detective?' I call. 'May I have a word with you, please?'

'Sure.'

'Alone.'

She sighs. 'All right. Everyone else stay here.'

She ushers me into my own office as if it's hers.

'What now?'

'Just thought I could provide some background on the McAlister Diary.'

'I did Google it this morning, you know.'

'So you're aware it's not just an old notebook?'

She grins. 'Yeah. It's some kind of pirate treasure map.'

'That theory has long been discounted by historians,' I say. 'The notebook's real value is as a record of daily life on the Goldfields.'

'But that doesn't stop all those crackpots with metal detectors scouring the creek beds of El Dorado for McAlister's buried treasure.' Her grin fades. 'And it is a really good reason for murder.'

'But not by anyone here,' I say. 'To them, it's a precious collection item.'

'Not all of them,' she says. 'And not Geoffrey Graham.'

‘What do you mean?’

‘Turns out he’s been doing more than just transcribing old scribbles. He’s been hiring cars and driving up to El Dorado every weekend.’

I gasp.

‘What if he wasn’t transcribing?’ I say. ‘What if he was decoding it?’

Her eyes widen. ‘Then he knows, or soon would have known, where McAlister buried his gold. If it exists.’

‘Surely he must have found evidence it does.’

‘And someone else has it now.’

‘That’s why the diary was so poorly hidden,’ I say. ‘It’s not what matters.’

‘Meaning?’

‘What you really need to find is Geoffrey’s notebook,’ I say. ‘And I’ve a feeling I know where that is.’

Her phone dings and she checks the screen. ‘Your tip on the level 2 camera was a good one.’

‘And so?’

‘I suspect we’re on the same page,’ she says. ‘Let’s go.’

\* \* \* \*

Everyone looks up when we return to the Lounge. Doris is even more pale than usual. Rex is still mumbling. Perhaps he’s in shock. Eliza stands, waiting.

‘Shall we go with you now?’ she asks.

‘All in good time,’ says Collins. She turns to Danny. ‘It’s only Dr Marsh we need to speak to for the moment.’

‘Who? Me?’ Danny says. ‘Why?’

‘I think you know,’ says Collins.

‘What’s Cat been telling you?’ Danny says, his voice rising to a shout. ‘Whatever it is, it’s nonsense. You know these literary types. Imaginations run wild.’

‘I don’t really,’ she says. ‘But Dr Watson has been very helpful.’

She motions to the two officers by the door. ‘Take his bag.’

‘I didn’t do it,’ Danny says. He clutches his satchel to his chest, but he’s no match for the uniformed branch. One officer holds Danny’s arms while the other rips the bag away and throws it clear across the room. Collins catches it easily.

‘Would you care to explain yourself to these people?’ she says. ‘They’ve trusted you.’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ says Danny. He struggles against the officers’ grip.

‘Allow me, then,’ Collins says. She rummages in the bag and pulls out a thin blue notepad. It’s an utterly ordinary thing. Except there are bloodstains along the edge of the pages.

‘Geoffrey Graham believed he had found the location of McAlister’s old gold hoard,’ says Collins.

There’s a weird noise — Doris, sobbing.

‘I didn’t mean to kill him,’ Danny tells her. ‘I only hit him.’

‘I believe you,’ says Collins.

‘I just wanted his notes.’ Danny swings around to face me. ‘You’d have done the same.’

Would I? Perhaps. But I doubt it.

‘He wouldn’t give them to me,’ Danny says. ‘He didn’t understand — I don’t want to dig up the gold.’

‘Instead you wanted to be the one who published the secret?’ I ask.

‘Of course.’ Danny looks at Collins, a plea in his eyes.

‘That’s all. I swear. Publishing’s not a crime, is it?’

‘Depends,’ says Detective Collins, ‘on the story.’

## Kelly Gardiner

Kelly Gardiner’s new series is the time-slip trilogy, *The Firewatcher Chronicles*, which begins with *Brimstone*.

Her previous novel, *1917: Australia’s Great War*, was shortlisted for the NSW Premier’s Young People’s History Prize and the Asher Award. Kelly’s other books include the young adult novels *Act of Faith* and *The Sultan’s Eyes*, both of which were shortlisted for the NSW Premier’s Literary Awards and CBCA Notable Books; the *Swashbuckler* pirate trilogy; and *Goddess*, a novel for adults based on the life of the seventeenth century French swordswoman and opera singer, Mademoiselle de Maupin.

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