



LEE KELLY  
JENNIFER THORNE

THE  
ANTIQUITY  
AFFAIR

A NOVEL

“What a thrilling adventure, with sisters at the heart of it.  
A rousing, page-turning romp!”

—JENNI L. WALSH, author of *The Call of the Wrens*

## Praise for *The Antiquity Affair*

“What a thrilling adventure with sisters at the heart of it. When Tess and Lila take the reins—of horse and camel—their stories take off, brimming with cases of mistaken identities, cat-and-mouse chases, booby-trapped catacombs, first loves, encrypted clues, and a long-lost treasure that all want to get their hands on. A rousing, page-turning romp across Egypt!”

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**THE  
ANTIQUITY  
AFFAIR**

**A NOVEL**

**LEE KELLY AND JENNIFER THORNE**



HARPER MUSE

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*The Antiquity Affair*

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# **Dedication**

*To our fathers, who truly taught us we could be anything we wanted to be*

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MRS. LANGLEY AT THE HOME OF HER  
ESTEEMED SON-IN-LAW, DR. WARREN FORD,  
REQUESTS THE PLEASURE OF YOUR COMPANY

ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEBUT OF  
*Miss Lila May Ford*

SATURDAY EVENING  
THE SIXTEENTH OF MARCH  
NINETEEN HUNDRED AND SEVEN

AT TEN O'CLOCK  
IN THE EVENING

## Chapter 1

# Lila

*Riverside, New York City*

Lantern light glitters against the golden object in my hand. Such a curious thing. So small to contain such power.

My palms are dampening. It's time.

Our lady's maid awaits. I deposit the treasure into her outstretched fingers.

This comb was one of Mother's few effects to survive the great sell-off. She wore it at her first ball, and I shall do the same tonight to honor her memory, formally accepting the mantle of debutante, object of notice, sole hope of untangling the Gordian knot wrought by a series of fiduciary errors that have compounded of late into ever-tightening debts.

Margaret places the comb in my hair. Its spokes scrape against my scalp before settling in, frame shining and shell gleaming in the mirror, and there I am beneath it, porcelain skin, periwinkle dream of a gown, milky half-moon bosom, swan neck, brown hair swept up like a chocolate drop.

I look like a confection. Which is to say, exactly as ridiculous as all the other young ladies who've gone on to marry rich in the past few seasons. Whether I am comfortable in this costume, whether I feel it is truly me reflected in the mirror, is immaterial. I am picture-perfect. I have to be.

Grandmama sighs with approval behind me. Her plump figure has been buttoned over-tight into her gown, but far be it from me to point that out. I reach back to clasp her hand, setting my chin to the ideal nine-degree tilt. Practicing.

"Dear Lila." Her eyes crinkle. "You look so much like her."

I know I do. I only wonder how Father will react when he comes home. After the Pyramid of Cheops, the palace at Knossos, the wonders of Pompeii, will the sight of me register? If he does find shades of Mother in me, tonight may force him to remember a time before his life became bent

upon the pursuit of fortune and glory. If, that is, he even turns up in time to present me.

“Where is Tess?” I stand carefully.

Margaret waits beside me in case a curl falls. “I’ve not seen her, miss.”

“That girl is as bad as your father,” Grandmama tuts.

I take my sister’s absence as an excuse to break for the bedroom window. I open it a smidge for a breath of air.

From the garden below, I hear men’s laughter and then: “Pay up, gents!”

Mindful of my coiffure, I crane my neck out the window and stare, aghast, at my little sister—not so little anymore—squatting in the muck of the alley beside the string quartet we’ve engaged for the ball, collecting cash from their outstretched hands.

Gambling. *Tonight*. My indignant squawk echoes against the garden walls.

Tess looks up, her mouth falling open. “Hell’s bells, it’s not time already, is it?”

The musicians scramble inside, my sister flying in on their heels.

I wind myself back into the room. This family of mine. I could positively scream.

“I’ve located Tess,” I say. “Margaret, see to her, won’t you? She’ll need to rush.”

And rush she does, thundering up the steps like a stampeding cow. I glide from my bedroom to intercept her.

She has the cheek to grin when she sees me. “Look at you, Lila. You’re a regular Gibson Girl!”

“Is there no end to your vulgarity, child?” Grandmama hovers behind me. “Don’t listen to her. You look like a *true* Langley. An Astor. A Hendricks.” She winks. “You were made for this.”

Indeed, I was. Self-made. I have spent the better part of seven years devising and working toward a plan for financial absolution that entirely hinges on tonight—this place, this time. I’ve learned, despite my marked dearth of natural grace, to muster a waltz and a galop, perfected my posture, memorized every possible greeting from every possible guest, and crafted the most charming response to each, thousands upon thousands of equations.

In fact, the only variable I cannot solve for tonight is my family.

Tess lags in her progress up the steps, loath to come close. This is the way of things between us now. Back in the house on Madison, we shared a nursery. When she woke first, she’d slip into my bed for company, and when my mind whirred past control, she’d spin stories to send me to sleep.

We were the Fearless Fords, intrepid adventurers, traveling the world, triumphing over foes. Now she's a world traveler, well and truly, and treats me like her foe.

I cannot think why. It's not as though I personally banished her to boarding school abroad. That was her choice. She could have traveled to her desert jaunts with Father from here, but no. By the age of ten, she clearly preferred his company to mine, so when he took a position at Oxford, off to England she went. And here she is again, after more than a year abroad, making a show of how very grudging this visit is.

"Quick, Margaret, kindly stuff this mud lark into a gown," Grandmama orders. "Can't have Mrs. Hendricks catching sight of her like this."

The mention of *the* Mrs. Hendricks—society maven, arbiter of good taste, and if all goes splendidly, perhaps even my future mother-in-law—doesn't do much to calm my nerves.

Grandmama's eyes glide down Tess's body as she continues down the hall. "One of the swan-bills from Paris, I think."

Tess opens her mouth, irate.

"It can be a weapon of persecution tomorrow." Unattractive archness creeps into my tone. "Tonight can you just let it be a corset?"

Tess fixes me with a leaden blink. "She was right. You could be mistaken for an Astor."

I don't have time to parse the insult.

"And you should be ready by now." I laugh lightly. Everything for the rest of the evening must be airy as a breath.

"The invitation said ten," Tess grumbles.

"There may be early arrivals."

She shrugs. "So don't let them in."

I breathe slowly, reminding myself that it isn't worth explaining the nuances of social etiquette to Tess. She's declared herself an archaeologist, like Father, eschewing polish and parlors for sweat and scholarship. She doesn't even seem to grasp what a luxury it is to be afforded that choice.

"*Ru kaba leiten shora,*" she says.

Our childhood language. *You really do look beautiful.*

I war between delight that she still speaks Fordish so fluently and irritation that she would bring up the past at the very moment I am attempting to usher our family into the future.

"Thank you," I reply. In English.

The front door chimes. We both lean over the burnished balustrade, watching newly acquired household staff two flights down hurrying to answer. The extras we've taken on for tonight's ball are a necessarily cut-

rate crew, but in their numbers they do give the house an air of added wealth, essential for reeling in a husband who can actually provide said wealth.

A man's voice echoes from the entryway below and I abruptly regret the egg and cress sandwich I was persuaded to eat an hour ago. I press my hands to my cinched stomach, quelling my rising heartbeat, and turn to see Tess staring at me queerly.

"What?" I whisper, nudging her toward her room. "Go get ready! This will be Father. You won't want him to—"

"I suppose it could be," Tess says, turning oddly pale. She hastens to her room but can't resist tossing a comment over her shoulder. "I hardly think he'll care how quickly I can truss myself up like a Christmas goose," she says before Margaret shuts the door.

I peer once more over the railing, blinking away a wave of vertigo. It wasn't Father, just another servant. I wish he would get here so I can stop feeling as though lightning's about to strike.

When Tess arrived home this morning direct from school via the RMS *Lucania*, accompanied by a single chest of luggage, one dowdy Englishwoman who insisted on staying for lunch, and no signs of Father, I'd steeled myself for a public snubbing, but Tess reassured me. Father was coming from Cairo; they'd had to travel separately. No doubt he was exhausted from the sea journey and planned to unwind for a few hours at the Union Club. But today has ticked by without so much as a telephone call from the club, and I've had to keep reminding myself that it's not a slight; he is a busy man, a titan in the field of antiquities. Not that it helps one whit with our expenditures, but he did just discover a new tomb in the Valley of the Kings. It's in all the papers: "The Biggest Egyptology Find of the New Millennium."

Tonight it'll be me he's presenting to the world. It would be better, of course, if it were Mother—better all around if she hadn't died of a wasting illness eight years ago—and part of me wishes it were just Grandmama tonight. But the fact of the matter is, I do have a surviving parent, and it is proper custom for him to present me to society.

He does cut a presentable figure when outfitted in white tie. Perhaps he'll have cleaned his fingernails while he was at the club. And to be perfectly candid, his notoriety is more than likely the reason we've had quite so many acceptances to the invitations we issued for tonight's ball.

"Miss Lila." Margaret appears at my elbow to murmur low, "Your first guests have arrived."

I descend the helix of our steps to greet the two early arrivals, fellow

graduates of the Veltin School for Girls. They clap and coo at the sight of my dress, and I offer them gentle hugs, like we're porcelain dolls at play.

I took care in selecting tonight's coterie of intimates. Minnie and Violet are already engaged, thereby posing no risk of siphoning the attention of the select register of New York bachelors I intend to captivate tonight, a list capped by a rather unexpected name.

No less a person than William Hendricks has traveled down from New Haven to attend my ball. Quite the coup. Grandmama might have been in the Four Hundred in her heyday, but the Hendrickses have had money since it was first dispensed in lumps of metal, which naturally positions young William as my greatest prospect tonight. We've never laid eyes on each other, as he spends most of his time at Yale and summers in Newport, but his extremely important mother has rather abruptly favored my grandmother with her friendship. One week ago, Mrs. Hendricks personally dropped in for tea and laughingly inquired why her son wasn't at the top of our guest list. Grandmama, dancing around the obvious—we are not, in fact, in the inner circles of Hendrickses and Astors—extended an invitation to William and his mother on the spot.

In the days that followed, they became practically inseparable. I sat with my stitching as they discussed what an ideal match the two of us would make, how I'm just the type of bride Mrs. Hendricks would choose for her only son. I pretended not to listen as a voice much like Mother's resounded in my head. *If you become a Hendricks, the fortunes of this family will no longer rise and fall with every sandstorm.*

Mother married for love. Died regretting it. I cannot make the same mistake.

"Do show us around." Minnie gives my ribboned waist a squeeze. "I've never been invited into a Riverside mansion."

"It's like a country retreat," Violet chirps.

I decide it best to ignore the smug look that passes between them.

"A tour," I agree, and they brighten, following me from the entryway into the gallery, certainly the most impressive section of our otherwise underwhelming home.

And indeed, there are appreciative murmurs as the girls stop to take in what's displayed on our recessed shelves, the few finds of Father's that Grandmama determined were aesthetically neutral enough to have on display where polite society might peruse them. A carved Mehen board: supposedly mystifying, that ancient game, but compared to Carroll's *Game of Logic*, it was a laugh—goodness, I was seven, and it still took me only half a morning to suss out the rules. The stone falcon Father unearthed . . .

in Greece, was it? A glass amulet from some unfortunate South American tribe, most likely. “Curiosities,” Miss Veltin would call these objects, but only if you’re curious about them, which I most resolutely am not.

The truth is, I find them wretchedly distasteful. Not the objects themselves but our possession of them. These are pilfered things, spoils of bald theft, snatched from peoples in no position to argue because they’re dead or too poor or downtrodden or ensnared in political nets not of their own making to fight for what’s rightfully theirs.

Oh, I know it’s not correct for young ladies to dwell upon such things as politics, and I do try to keep my mind trained to the practicalities before me, but it proves such an effort at times to affect looking at the world through society’s hazy lens when I can see it all so clearly: my father, the great adventurer, is no better than a common burglar, and every braggadocious item he adds to this collection only fortifies the case against him.

“Are any of these cursed?” Minnie whispers to Violet’s giggles.

Had Tess been the one to make that joke, I would raise my eyebrows and volley choice words about falling prey to superstition. Instead, I laugh in just the right key, clutching my heart. “Heavens, I hope not!”

Bad enough that I have all these opinions. Far worse to actually voice them.

As we continue merrily onward, my eye catches on the news clipping from last month, now proudly displayed on the wall, that photograph of clustered, dusty figures standing in front of a low tomb entrance. Father poses second from the right, foot perched on a crumbled pillar as if to claim it. The man of the moment.

Violet peers up as we pass the back stairwell while Minnie takes my arm and casually says, “Is your father upstairs? We’re ever so eager to meet him.”

I turn, surprised by the sight of color blooming on the décolletage of my two school friends. They look like the girls who gather outside Broadway stage doors hoping for a glimpse of George Cohan.

“He’s getting ready at the club.” I manage to keep my voice light.

“How unconventional.” Minnie nods. “We’d expect nothing less.”

We peek into the kitchens, study, dining room; observe our faithful old butler directing staff in white jackets to set the table with borrowed china. I lead the girls into the parlor, now cleared of furniture, the quartet setting up for the dance that will follow drinks and dinner.

“So small.” Violet spins back to me. “An intimate gathering. Ever so much more fun.”

Her ball was at Sherry's with three hundred guests. We could never afford something so lavish.

"You know me," I demur. "I'm not one for crowds."

"Sweet, simple Lila." Minnie beams. "Your moment has come."

"*Tapen ku leinen?*" someone drones from over my shoulder. "*Illa rette zit quu si shoon.*"

*Simple and sweet? Not the sister I knew.*

I turn to glare at Tess. She's gotten ready in extremely short order. Her evening gown is a darker shade of blue from mine, perfectly fitted over that new French corset. To her credit, she's hardly wincing, and her face is clean and powdered, hair dressed. Only girls who've entered society wear their hair up, and I find myself frozen with envy at the sight of Tess's, curled, spilling around her shoulders. I will always have to wear my hair like this now. A chocolate drop. No going back.

"*Zit runtlet u shilla,*" I whisper. *Don't embarrass me tonight.*

"What in the dickens are you speaking?" Minnie mutters.

I twirl back, willing away perspiration. "A bit of nonsense. Have you met my sister? Tess, everyone, everyone, Tess."

Yes, it is an appallingly insufficient introduction, but my nerves are showing and I need to race ahead of them. I must be serene, poised, effortless, or all this is for nothing.

"Shall we see if we can snare some champagne before the receiving line?" I offer more smoothly. "We have only a few minutes . . ." *before my famous father arrives and the world stops for him.*

The girls begin to chatter and lead the way. I start after them, but Tess grabs my arm so hard that when she lets go, white imprints remain. I stare at them in dismay.

"I need to speak with you," she says, edging deeper into the now-empty parlor.

"Now?" I press my lips together. "Father will be here any minute and \_\_\_"

"I don't think he will, Lila." She swallows hard. "I don't think he's coming at all."

"You said he was at the club. Getting ready." My voice is hoarse. "Why \_\_\_"

Her words become a flurry. "I said he *might* come. I have no idea. He's been too busy to even send me a telegram, just that chaperone, Miss Nutter. Can you think of a more perfect name for a paid spinster—"

I speak over her. "You've been covering for him. All day. You lied to me."



A defensive glint lights up Tess's blue eyes. "It wasn't a lie; it was a guess as to his whereabouts. But then the day went on, and my guess became less and less plausible, and . . . I didn't want to be the one to cause you worry. You put up a good front, Lila, but I know how much he means —"

"You know nothing of the sort." Something unfamiliar, filthy and cold, courses up my corseted rib cage. He's not coming. I'm nothing to him. Our family, our struggles, nothing here has existed to him for years, only his mad pursuit of glory.

Of all things, tears stab my eyes, threatening to spoil my powder. I smile them away.

Tess steps back, like we're dancing. "Are you all right, Lila?"

"All right'? What a curious question. No one's here to see *me*, you know. They've come to gawk at Father, and he hasn't bothered to show up. But you'll do in a pinch." I reach for her puffed sleeve and clasp it tight, shaking her. "Do you want to give me away in his place? Go on. Change into a tuxedo. You're his puppet, aren't you? His instrument of chaos? Here to mess it all up for me."

Everything I'm saying is illogical, but it feels so good to say it, good and awful. To let it spill out, ugliness and all. Her eyes flare with temper.

"You call *me* a puppet," she snaps. "Look at yourself! All this needlepoint and gossip. You used to be smart; now you're just Grandmama's marionette, and it isn't you she wants, not a whit. She's painted you to look exactly like—"

I slap her. Without intending to.

I stare at my errant hand and start to cry, actual tears, impractical ones. Tess is cradling her face, but she still reaches for me. I swat her away.

Past the blur, I see carriages arriving outside. Throngs of voices rise in the front garden, a cheerful overture to the event. One hundred twenty-seven guests and I am not ready. I am standing here shuddering and snot-drenched and emotional. A debutante is not meant to be emotional.

"I shouldn't have invited you." I back away. "We both know you don't belong."

Violet steps into the doorway as I approach. "Lila? Mrs. Hendricks is here with her son and— Ye gads, what's happened to your face?"

I cover myself and run out of the foyer, into the servants' wing, through the side door into the cold March night, and around to the high-walled safety of the back garden, spooling myself back inward.

No one will find me here among the hedges. No one will see me swipe my eyes, rub my goose bumps, assemble myself into the shape of, yes,

*Mother*, the person I've been working to become my entire life.

No. Not entire. There was a time when I wanted something else.

That doesn't matter. Father doesn't matter. This is the night I turn our fortunes around.

My fingers stop shaking. I have nearly gotten my smile to stick when I hear a peculiar sound, a dry whistling issuing from the bushes.

I spin and see a figure so incongruous that I wonder for a moment whether I'm dreaming.

I'd just resigned myself to him not coming. This is his house, even if it was bought with the very last of Mother's money, so why is he hiding in the bushes like a criminal, dressed in a patched wool jacket and dusty hat like some vagabond?

"Lila," Father whispers, breaking my stupor. "You have to come with me. *Now.*"

He stretches out his hand. And some perverse instinct compels me to take it.

## Chapter 2

### Tess

I am compelled to take the steps two at a time as, behind me, Margaret pleadingly offers to “fix my face.” As if her primping and fussing could fix any of this. Why do I even attempt to cover for our father, to endeavor patching the threadbare scraps of this family? Lila has made it abundantly clear, for the past seven years, that she’d prefer to discard the both of us.

Desperate for a sanctuary, I hurtle down the second-floor corridor, beelining for the open paneled doors of Dad’s library. His study is my one solace in this house, the only corner where I actually feel at home, the sole room Grandmama hasn’t transformed tonight in her quest to ensnare a rich husband for Lila.

My heart loosens when I glimpse his display shelves from the hallway. His teeming collection of glorious relics from decades in the field and countless expeditions. Proof positive of a meaningful calling, grand adventures, a life well lived.

Once inside, I pluck his whiskey from the cordial tray and take a long, consolatory gulp from the decanter, though it does little to quell my flush.

To hell with society’s rules. I snatch the tray’s twin crystal stirrers and wrangle my locks into a hasty bun. Honestly, if my family cares so much about etiquette, why did Lila invite me to her ball? It isn’t the done thing to include girls who are not yet out—all my hallmates at Queen’s College confirmed as much. I’m sure Grandmama only wanted a scapegoat at the ready, should anything go wrong.

“Well”—I shrug—“at least I’ve finally fulfilled her expectations.”

I turn, ready to recline on Dad’s settee with the whiskey, when I see it—the new painting. A decadent, life-size, room-swallowing portrait of Lila, now hanging between the doorway and the portrait of Mother. And do my eyes deceive, or does the artist signature belong to the famed John Singer Sargent?

“Oh no. No, no, no.” My one place, my only Lila-free sanctuary in this

ghastly, suffocating house. Invaded!

I stomp toward the shelves, rooting past the Bes pectoral Dad received from the director of Egypt's Department of Antiquities. General Samy Pasha's gifted block statuette. The oil lamp, the ankh—until my fingers wrap around the relic I'm searching for.

Dagger from Thebes firmly in hand, I spin, thrusting my blade at the portrait in self-defense.

"Oh, don't flinch. I'd never really hurt you," I say, cheek still stinging from Lila's blow. "Though you obviously can't say the same."

Portrait Lila remains unmoved.

"Do you even know what this is?" I ask her, running my finger along the ancient bronze. "Silly question. Of course not. The only weapon you've ever wielded is a tapestry needle."

I stalk toward Portrait Lila until my eyes are inches from her cinched waist. The dainty parasol resting on her shoulder. Her custom Charles Worth gown's ruffled silk, cascading to the floor like a sky-blue waterfall. The same gown she's wearing tonight.

"I'll admit, once upon a time, I thought I wanted this too. Your grand society life. Grandmama's attention."

I gesture toward Dad's shelves. "But I've found far worthier pursuits than husband-hunting, thank you very much. Research. Discovery. Unearthing the past. I'm going to become a daring archaeologist, like Harriet Hawes and Marguerite d'Auteuil. Adventure is a far more valuable currency. What are you going to do with your life after you marry well, Lila? Play handmaiden to Mrs. Astor?"

I point the dagger like a fescue toward the highest shelf, the cornerstone of Dad's collection. His trio of limestone *talatats*: the tablets that launched his intrepid quest for the Serpent's Crown.

"I was there when Dad uncovered those stones. Mere steps away, with Alex, in the vestibule," I say. "Those tablets verified millennia of speculation; can you even comprehend the historical significance of that?"

A delicious shiver trills up my spine, as it always does when I reflect on the legends of the Crown. I can't help but set to pacing.

"The talatats confirmed that Pharaoh Akhenaten verily conquered the ancient city of Amarna. That the mind-controlling power of his Serpent's Crown was likely *real*. Akhenaten hypnotized thousands of people with the Crown—sparing only his mother, wives, and daughters, whom he assumed to be submissive already by nature of being women. But those clever Five Ladies managed to steal his powerful uraeus and hide it away."

My words come out in a squeal, so I steal a breath myself.