

SAPPHIRES AND SECRETS

A 1920s
COZY MYSTERY



KITTY GORING

INVESTIGATES

ELLA STRIKE

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BOOK TWO



ELLA STRIKE

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DEAR READER,

London in the 1920s is a glamorous and exciting city, but danger and death are never too far behind.

Join Kitty Goring and her group of Bright Young Things in the adventure of a lifetime as they race to catch a killer who lurks amongst them.

Each book in this series is a cozy period mystery that features our plucky heroine and her scrappy little dog, Scottie, who are aided in their investigations by a group of eccentric and lovable characters.

This book was written in the UK and edited in UK English. Therefore, some spelling and grammar will be different from US English.

CHAPTER 1



The Rolls Royce Silver Ghost crunched to a stop on the gravel drive, and I adjusted my hat for the fifth time, nudging it to what I hoped was a fashionable angle. Beside me, Jimmy fidgeted with his cufflinks, his expression teetering between excitement and terror.

"Stand up straight, both of you. And stop fidgeting. It makes you look nervous," said our mother sternly as she stood ramrod straight, looking rather regal in her mauve silk dress embroidered with tiny seed pearls at the cuffs and neckline.

"I *am* nervous. Terrified, in fact," said Jimmy with an audible gulp. "What the deuce am I going to do, Kitty?"

"Language," hissed my mother, but Jimmy merely rolled his eyes, which earned him a quick slap on the arm.

"You'll be fine, brother dear. Only, try not to say anything...*Jimmy-ish*," I whispered.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked indignantly.

"It means don't ask if they've ridden elephants to school, and don't call the princess 'Your Worship'," I said severely.

Jimmy frowned at my words, then brightened and shot me a grin.

"But what if she likes a bit of humour?"

Before I could respond, the car door opened, and a footman helped out an elegant man in a perfectly tailored suit. Prince Vikramjit Singh of Dinpore emerged with an air of quiet authority, brushing nonexistent dust from his sleeves. A moment later, his wife - Princess Noor - followed, stepping gracefully onto the gravel like she might float away if the breeze dared to catch her. She wore a simple drop-waist ivory silk dress with a chiffon overlay, and her only jewellery was a string of pearls around her neck and a pearl bracelet on her gloved wrist.

This was *not* what I had expected when I imagined an Indian princess. I had expected yards of gauzy fabric and a king's ransom in jewels. But Princess Noor dressed like... well...me. That is, she dressed like I would if I could afford to wear Lanvin or Callot Soeurs.

A woman, who I could only assume was her maid, got out of the smaller car that followed the Rolls and expertly balanced a couple of hat boxes in one hand and two large jewellery cases in the other. I was amused to see her standing at attention behind the princess while burdened with so many cases.

"Welcome to Merivale Manor!" Jimmy announced, striding forward and extending a hand with all the pomp of someone greeting a reigning monarch. "It's a pleasure to host such illustrious guests."

The prince clasped Jimmy's hand with a polite, if slightly wary, smile.

"Thank you, Sir James. My wife and I have heard much about your estate."

There was an awkward silence as Jimmy and I shared a nervous glance. What exactly had they heard?

It couldn't have been anything good because Merivale Manor had not shone at its best lately, what with a spate of robberies and murders in the recent past. Lord Huntley had strictly forbidden us from mentioning either, but it was possible they had heard some gossip about it.

I waited for Jimmy to introduce our mother as etiquette demanded, but he seemed struck speechless. So I did something that would have my teachers at the very expensive finishing school I attended in Lausanne wailing in despair.

"Not too much, I hope," I interjected, stepping forward with a nervous smile. "We're delighted to have you both here. I'm Katherine Goring, but everyone calls me Kitty. May I introduce my mother, Lady Charlotte Goring?"

Of course, I had to introduce myself before I introduced my mother, even if it was a huge breach of etiquette. I'd look like a fool if I introduced her and then waited for her to present me.

Mother shook hands with the royal couple graciously and threw Jimmy a sharp glance to remind him that as the host, it was up to him to take charge of the conversation.

"Er...please call me Jimmy. Sir James makes me sound... well...old," he said, with another of his boyish grins.

Before Prince Vikram could reply, a high-pitched bark shattered the dignified atmosphere. My Scottish terrier, Scottie, darted from the house like a furry cannonball, tail wagging furiously as he charged toward the royals.

"Scottie, no!" I cried, but it was too late.

He made a beeline for the prince, enthusiastically sniffing at the hems of his trousers before he jumped up and put his extremely muddy paws on the prince's pristine clothes.

I gasped in horror and tried to pull him away, but Scottie was determined to make friends with the new visitors. To his credit, Prince Vikram remained composed, though his brow twitched in mild alarm. Princess Noor, however, shrieked with laughter, which made her seem far more human than I had first believed.

"Kitty! Get that beast away from the prince at once," cried Mother loudly, even though that was exactly what I was trying to do, and she could see it.

"It seems we've made a friend," said the princess, crouching down to scratch Scottie's head. He turned his attention to her gleefully, and I groaned with embarrassment as he covered her beautiful ivory dress with his muddy paw prints.

"I'm so sorry, Your Highness. He's usually... more restrained," I said, my cheeks turning warm. "I don't know what's come over him. Scottie! Get down, you beast!"

"Oh, you don't have to apologise," Princess Noor replied with a warm smile. "It's lovely to be greeted with such enthusiasm."

Jimmy grabbed Scottie by the collar and tried to pull him away from the princess.

"Down, boy! I've told Kitty to have trained him properly, but she doesn't listen to me," he grumbled, holding the wriggling dog at arm's length.

"That's because we've only just got him. I want him to settle down into the family and feel loved before we begin to train him. The poor boy was abandoned by his previous owner when I came upon him," I explained.

"Does he always welcome guests like this?" the prince asked his tone teasing but not unkind.

I sighed heavily because this muddy ambush was not the elegant, graceful welcome I had hoped to extend to the royal couple.

"Only the truly special ones, Your Highness," I said glumly.

As we led our guests into the manor, I offered to have Princess Noor's gown cleaned professionally, but she laughed it off kindly, which was a bit of a relief since I didn't know how to explain such a laundry bill to the Foreign Office. They scrutinised every bill related we sent in as if we were planning to bankrupt the Crown over a single visit.

Lord Huntley, who was one of my mother's oldest friends, had asked us to host the royal family of Dinpore, an Indian princely state, for a couple of months as part of their lengthy tour of Europe. In addition to paying for their stay at

Merivale Manor, the Foreign Office had requested Jimmy and me to help ease Prince Vikram and Princess Noor's entry into London society for a handsome compensation, of course.

Excited at this chance to make some money doing what I did best, I had planned for everything. Fresh flowers in the guest suites, a meticulous menu approved by Cook, and a full supply of the prince's favourite brandy to keep him agreeable. What I hadn't planned for was my brother trying to teach Prince Vikram the rules of cricket in the drawing room, with Scottie acting as an unlicensed umpire as well as the fielder.

"For heaven's sake, Jimmy," I hissed, dodging a flying ball and wincing as it narrowly missed our mother's favourite Ming vase. "You can't go bowling at a prince! What if you hit him?"

"Nonsense," Jimmy replied cheerfully, winding up for another throw. "His Highness is a natural."

"But you're not! What makes you think you can teach him the game?" I asked, reminding him that he had no demonstrable skill at cricket.

"Actually, I do know how to play cricket," said Prince Vikram.

Jimmy was all astonishment.

"*Do you?* Where did you learn?"

"At Eton. And then at Oxford," explained the prince. "This isn't my first time in England, you know. I practically grew up here."

"That's wonderful, Your Highness," exclaimed Jimmy. "Let's have a game, then. Here comes a Yorker!"

He threw the ball as hard as he could, but instead of landing at the prince's feet, it narrowly missed his head and flew out of the window behind him.

Prince Vikram turned to his wife with a resigned look.

"No one mentioned we'd be facing this sort of danger in London," he said dryly.

Princess Noor, unruffled, took a sip of tea and smirked.

“Darling, if you survived the incident with the crocodile in the lift last summer, I’m sure you can survive this game.”

As Scottie bounded out of the room to retrieve the cricket ball, I clapped a hand on my forehead. It wasn’t even noon, and the royal visit was already teetering on disaster.

However, instead of returning the ball to Jimmy on his return, Scottie proudly presented it to Princess Noor, who eyed the drool-covered ball with raised eyebrows.

“How thoughtful,” she murmured, gingerly picking it up with a napkin. “Your dog appears more adept at retrieving than your brother.”

“I’ll take that if you don’t mind, Your Highness,” I replied, taking the ball from her and giving my brother a stern look. “You can have this back only if you promise to move your game to the lawn outside, Jimmy.”

With a heavy sigh, my brother led a relieved-looking Prince Vikram out of the room. I supposed he had a better chance of escaping this game unscathed if it were played out in the open. I could hear Jimmy calling to the butler, Romley, to bring him a few more balls.

I cast the princess a speculative glance as I nibbled on a piece of shortbread.

“A crocodile in a lift? That sounds very intriguing,” I said.

The princess gave a delicate little shudder in response.

“It was terrifying at the time. The river behind our palace in Dinapore was in spate during the monsoons, and when that happens, it is not unusual to find crocodiles crawling up the embankment. Only this time, one of them wandered a little too far.”

“What do you mean?”

“We had recently installed a lift in the palace...”

“A lift?” I broke in with surprise.

“Oh, yes! They are all the rage in palaces in India, right now,” said the princess.

From what Princess Noor said, Indian palaces seemed to be an extraordinary mix of the traditional and the modern.

“Vikram and I were on our way to a ball at the Residency that night, and as we came out of the lift, one of the palace dogs charged at us in a frenzy of barking. It took us a few seconds to realise that he wasn’t barking at us, but at the fat crocodile that had waddled out of the lift behind us.”

“Didn’t you see it when you were in the lift?” I asked in astonishment.

“No, because he was hiding under the bench,” replied the princess, her eyes dancing with merriment.

“The lift has a bench?”

“Of course it does! It is a slow lift that takes ages to go all the way to the roof of the palace. Vikram’s parents refuse to stand for so long,” she said, bursting into a fit of giggles.

There was a knock at the door, and a handsome sandy-haired man poked his head around the door.

“So sorry to disturb your tête-à-tête, Your Highness. But I have bad news, and I need your help to break it to Prince Vikram,” he said.

CHAPTER 2



Princess Noor held out her hand in greeting, and the newcomer entered the room and bowed over it.

"Richard, I'm so relieved you're finally here. Vikram has been fretting over your absence, even though he didn't tell me what you were off doing," she said. "Kitty, this is Richard Manton, Vikram's secretary."

"A pleasure, Miss Goring," said Richard, with a boyish grin that endeared him to me. "If you must know, Your Highness, I was on Prince Jay's trail."

Princess Noor tutted sadly.

"Oh, that boy! Jay is Vikram's younger brother who travelled with us, Kitty. He disappeared without a word the moment we landed in England. Vikram and I have been worried sick about him. Have you found him, Richard?"

"I did, and I'm afraid you won't like what I'm about to tell you. Prince Jay is holed up in an inn near the docks, and won't hear of leaving it."

"But why? He was supposed to stay with us in London," cried Princess Noor.

"I haven't the faintest idea, Your Highness. He seems to be chafing under all the restrictions placed on him by the

Foreign Office. I knew he wouldn't take very kindly to having his allowance cut,' said Richard.

"Oh, but surely he knows that's only temporary. Lord Huntley promised to intercede with the Foreign Office on his behalf if he showed that he'd seen the error of his ways. After all, he did spend an awful amount of money in a very short time."

"I've convinced him to join us for the ball on Friday night. Maybe you could talk some sense into him," suggested Richard.

My mother was hosting a grand ball in honour of the royal visit on Friday, and it was touted to be the most magnificent party witnessed by London after the frugality of wartime.

"I'll do my best," promised the princess. "Meanwhile, I must thank you for finding such a suitable maid on such short notice."

"I hope she is satisfactory, Your Highness," said Richard.

"More than satisfactory. I was terrified I'd be saddled with someone without the faintest idea of what I needed and that I'd have to train her from scratch, but Maude is exemplary!"

"I'm very glad to hear it, ma'am. I will convey your satisfaction to the agency who sent her," he replied before Prince Vikram dragged him into their makeshift game of cricket.

It was with a sense of excitement that I dressed for the ball. Our house was to be overrun with glamorous royals. Ever since it was first built, Merivale Manor had played host to some very important people, and I was thrilled we were continuing the tradition.

I surveyed myself in the mirror with satisfaction.

My drop-waist dress of rich amethyst silk, adorned with intricate metallic beading, shimmered with every movement. The scalloped hem added a touch of playful elegance to the sleek, modern silhouette. I paired it with a long strand of pearls, looped once to fall just above my waist, a beaded

clutch that caught the light as brilliantly as the frock itself, and a pair of silver heels. A delicate feathered headband, sparkling with rhinestones, sat perfectly atop my carefully arranged finger waves.

"Well, Florence, I must say, you've worked wonders with the dress. No one would guess it was an old one of Mother's. You've given it a new life with the beading and the scalloped hem," I said approvingly.

My maid slid one last hairpin into my hair to secure the headband in place.

"I don't like to say so myself, miss. But it does look like a frock from one of yer fashion magazines," she said, sounding quite pleased with herself.

"Florence, have you met Princess Noor's maid?" I asked.

A disapproving sniff was the only answer to my question. I eyed my maid keenly in the mirror.

"Do tell," I invited.

"Gives herself airs, she does," grumbled Florence. "Won't eat with the rest of us and doesn't like to be called a maid. Says she's the personal attendant to the princess. She's too uppity for the likes of me, miss."

"The princess is very happy with her work."

"I daresay she is. Maude knows her way around hair and clothes. I wouldn't be surprised if she worked in a dressmaker's before she trained to become a 'personal attendant'."

I reflected that my dear Florence was a blessing, and I wouldn't trade her for all the Maudes in the world. It was all thanks to her that I was still able to keep up appearances. It wouldn't do for our precarious financial position to become common knowledge because the Gorings were an old and revered family, even if we had fallen on hard times now. Jimmy had run the family estates into the ground, while our mother refused to hire a qualified estate manager because she believed all our troubles would be over if only Jimmy and I married into wealth. Well, her last attempt at finding Jimmy

a rich wife had failed miserably, and it had silenced her on the topic for now.

But it did mean that our family's finances were particularly lean right now. I hoped the royal visit would work miracles for our coffers, for the Foreign Office had promised us a decent sum in return for hosting the royal couple and introducing them into London society.

My mother's friend, Lord Huntley, had arranged for the visit, and while Mother had her reservations about the whole affair, I had a feeling it was all going to work out well. Prince Vikram and Princess Noor were staying with us for six weeks before they travelled to Spain for the winter. I looked forward to six weeks of parties, visits to the theatre, champagne breakfasts and horse races, if Jimmy had his way.

A knock at the door pulled me out of my pleasant reverie. It was Henrietta Alton, my mother's secretary.

"Miss Goring, your mother is feeling slightly nervous about the ball," she said, wringing her hands in distress.

If the usually placid and calm Henrietta was wringing her hands, it was an alarming situation indeed, I thought as I dabbed my wrists and neck sparingly from the bottle of Guerlain's Jicky, which I had saved up for months to purchase. I knew it was a costly indulgence, but I simply adored the lavender-vanilla scent that was the perfect touch of French sophistication for the ball.

With one last glance in the mirror to make sure my hair was in place, I hurried to my mother's room and found her pacing up and down her overheated bedchamber. The skirts of her champagne-coloured silk gown swished around her as she paced, while her diamond tiara looked slightly askew. I straightened the tiara and took her favourite diamond and ruby necklace from her maid. Fastening it around her neck, I felt a pang of guilt as I remembered the trouble I had caused with this necklace a few months ago.

"There, Mother. You look beautiful," I said, firmly dispelling my gloomy thoughts with a forced smile.

"Romley wants to know where to set up the champagne fountain. Who on earth ordered a champagne fountain?" demanded Mother. "I'm not paying for it!"

"That's quite all right, Mother. I ordered it, and I've sent all the bills for this party to the Foreign Office. We don't have to pay for anything," I replied soothingly.

Mother let out a rude snort.

"That's all very well, but the question is...will they pay the bills? Or will they nitpick over every little capon and bottle of wine on the list?"

"Lord Huntley has promised that they will pay for everything," I said hastily.

"And what's this about Prince Vikram's brother joining the party? We don't have another room grand enough for a prince!"

"Of course, we do. Besides, we don't even know if Prince Jay will agree to stay with us. From what I've heard, he's holding onto his room at the inn rather stubbornly. I've asked Romley to clean and air the room next to Prince Vikram's bedchamber, just in case."

"Thank you, Kitty. I don't know what I'd do without you," said my mother, pulling on a pair of silk gloves.

"Hurry up, Mother. It won't do to go downstairs after our guests," I reminded her with a quick glance at my wristwatch.

Mother bustled out of the room, and Henrietta let out a sigh of relief as she followed us downstairs.

Lord Huntley rose to greet Mother when she entered the bigger sitting room where our party had gathered.

"My dear Lottie. You look lovely, as always," he murmured, leading her towards Prince Vikram and Princess Noor, who stood by the mantelpiece in deep conversation with Richard Manton.

"The princess looks beautiful," breathed Henrietta in awe.

She did. But she also looked worried. She masked it with a warm smile as she greeted my mother, but I could tell something was wrong. We made our way to the little group, and after the initial greetings, Jimmy began to pour the drinks.

Princess Noor joined me at the bar at the other end of the sitting room, and we waited patiently as Jimmy fumbled with the cocktail shaker.

“What are you having?” she whispered.

“A gin fizz,” I whispered back. “Even Jimmy can’t mess that up. You look lovely, Your Highness.”

I ran an experienced eye over her sparkling silver gown, which was offset by her necklace. I took a closer look at it, admiring the breathtaking large, oval-cut sapphire at its centre, surrounded by a halo of meticulously cut, flawless diamonds, each accentuating the sapphire’s richness.

“It is called the Celestial Necklace,” she said, noticing my admiring glance.

“It’s beautiful,” I murmured.

She made a noncommittal sound, and I looked at her in surprise. Did she not like the necklace? Or was she so used to its beauty that she simply didn’t see it any more? I knew I should have left it there because I was not on such terms with the princess to probe into her feelings about her own jewellery. But I could never resist sticking my nose into what was none of my business.

“You sound as if you don’t agree,” I ventured.

“Not at all. It is beautiful, but it is also a burden,” said the princess with a weary sigh.

“What do you mean, Your Highness?”

“I don’t mean to sound ungrateful, Kitty. But I live in fear that someone will steal it because it is a very famous necklace. It has been featured in newspapers and magazines all over the world, and you only have to look at it to know that it costs a fortune. I almost wish I could lock it up in the treasury at the palace. But it is one of the most famous

pieces in our possession, and it is a great honour to be allowed to wear it."

"Isn't it insured?"

"It is, but can you imagine any insurance company actually coughing up the price of this necklace? They'd go bankrupt. No, Kitty. They would find every excuse under the sun to refuse to pay out the insurance money."

I exhaled sharply at her words.

"Oh no! If that necklace gets stolen..." I didn't finish my sentence because I couldn't fathom the extent of the misery that would befall the poor princess if she lost her necklace.

She gave a little shudder of horror, and I pasted a reassuring smile on my face and crossed my fingers behind my back as I spoke.

"I'm sure it's safe at the manor, Your Highness. There aren't any thieves here."

Not now, anyway.

Just then, Richard gave a little crow of triumph.

"He's here at last!"

I turned to the door in surprise and saw Romley stare disapprovingly at Mr Manton before he announced the newcomer.

"Prince Jay Singh," he intoned. "And Miss Flossie Derwent."

There was a murmur of surprise at his words.

"Tell me he didn't bring her here," gasped Princess Noor. "Vikram will be furious."

I watched with interest as a dark-haired, handsome man, who was almost a replica of Prince Vikram, entered the room, followed by a voluptuous blonde in a striking gold lamé dress, walked into the room and made straight for the prince.

CHAPTER 3



Prince Jay bowed to his brother formally, but Prince Vikram was staring in surprise at his companion, who wound her hand around Prince Jay's arm and stared at his brother defiantly.

"Good evening, Your Highness. Please allow me to present my fiancée, Miss Flossie Derwent," said Prince Jay.

Absolute silence followed his proclamation, and when I saw the expression on Prince Vikram's face, I braced myself for an explosion. But he was made of sterner stuff. He bowed stiffly to his brother's fiancée and forced a smile to his face.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Miss Derwent. Congratulations on your engagement," he said politely before he beckoned his wife over.

Princess Noor smoothed over the awkward moment and welcomed Miss Derwent graciously. The royal couple introduced us to Prince Jay and Miss Derwent.

"So this was why you deserted us as soon as we disembarked in London," said Prince Vikram pointedly, and his brother flushed in response.

Princess Noor rushed to fill the breach.

"I'm very glad you joined us for the ball, Jay. And you, Miss Derwent."

Miss Derwent shot her a smirk.

"Poor Jay was worried his brother wouldn't approve of our engagement, but I reminded him that it doesn't matter if Prince Vikram disapproves. It's their mother's approval that counts, doesn't it?"

Prince Jay groaned softly.

"Flossie... I told you not to start a fight," he hissed.

Princess Noor drew herself up and stared down her nose at the newcomer.

"Miss Derwent, we are guests at Merivale Manor. Let us keep our private matters just that, lest we embarrass our kind hostess," she said coldly.

Meanwhile, her kind hostess, my mother, was observing this confrontation with avid interest.

Miss Derwent inclined her head and subsided into watchful silence. Luckily, Romley announced dinner before things got even more awkward.

I fell behind the group as we walked into the dining room, right behind Richard Manton, who looked rather unhappy as he met my inquiring gaze.

"What's going on, Mr Manton? Who is that woman?" I whispered.

"Flossie Derwent is a dancer, Miss Goring," he replied grimly. "She was part of the cabaret on our ship from India to England. She ensnared the prince during the journey, and although I had hoped it was but a passing fling, she seems to have captivated him."

He looked as if he wanted to say a lot more, but we were sat across the table from one another for dinner. I was between Princess Noor and Miss Derwent, which saved them the trouble of being more than civil to each other.

Dinner was a quick light meal before the ball, and I had never been so relieved to get it over with because I was dying to get Mr Manton alone and beg him to explain the undercurrents in the royal family. Before I could do so, my mother pinned me with a firm glare as if she knew what I

was thinking, and with a sigh, I lined up next to her to receive the guests to the ball.

I spent the next hour or so smiling at our guests until my cheeks ached. When the last guest had been waved into the ballroom, Mother cast a glance over the stuffy, crowded room and shook her head mournfully.

"It's a sad crush. That's what we used to say when I was a young girl. These awful crowds..." she said faintly.

"Are exactly what you wanted, Mother," I said briskly. "The party is a roaring success. As is the champagne fountain. Now, if you'll excuse me, I want to dance."

The orchestra was playing a lively quickstep, and I grabbed Richard Manton by the arm and strong-armed him into dancing with me. I noticed that he didn't require much persuasion. He matched me both in energy and style, and I could have danced all evening, but I was glad when the orchestra switched to a dreamy waltz because it gave me a chance to probe into Prince Jay and Miss Derwent's relationship.

"Have they known each other long?" I asked, looking over his shoulder at Prince Jay, who was dancing with Lord Huntley's niece while his fiancée watched him like a hawk.

"Less than three weeks," scoffed Mr Manton. "He's lost his head if he thinks his mother will approve of the relationship."

"And does his mother's approval matter so much?" I asked carefully.

"It does, Miss Goring, for she rules the palace with an iron fist. Prince Jay might be her favourite son, but he will soon learn that his mother will not allow her precious little boy to marry a lowly dancer. If she hears of this, she will force his father to stop his allowance immediately, and she will write a stinker to the Foreign Office blaming them for this debacle."

"She sounds very scary, Mr Manton."

"Please...call me Richard," he said, the corners of his eyes crinkling agreeably. "And she is. Her Highness is a force to be reckoned with. She exerts a very strong authority over the court, which is why the Foreign Office would like her sons to spend some time away from her influence."

"Why should they care? She is their mother, after all."

"Well, Her Highness has a somewhat...orthodox view on life, and the British Resident feels the princes would benefit from exposure to a more English way of life," he replied diplomatically.

He hailed a passing waiter and grabbed two glasses of champagne. I accepted mine with a smile of thanks because all that dancing had made me very thirsty.

Prince Vikram and Princess Noor joined us, and I noticed that while he looked like a thundercloud, she looked rather worried.

"What's wrong, Your Highness?" I asked softly.

"I'm worried that woman will create a scene that will embarrass us in front of all your guests, Kitty," she said worriedly. "Oh no! Here she comes..."

Miss Derwent slowly made her way through the crowd with a smirk on her beautiful face. She meant to make trouble, I could tell. Prince Jay followed her rather unwillingly, and when they came closer, I saw that she held his wrist in a vice-like grip.

He shot us an uneasy smile while his fiancée flashed a predatory smirk at Princess Noor.

"It's a lovely party, Miss Goring," said Prince Jay.

"Yes...delightful," said Miss Derwent absently as her eyes fell on the sapphire necklace around Princess Noor's neck.

She put a hand out to touch it, but the princess took a hasty step backwards.

"Ooh! That is a smashing necklace," breathed Miss Derwent. "Is that a real sapphire?"

"Of course it is," said Prince Vikram, sounding offended at the thought of his wife wearing costume jewellery.

"Darling Jay, I want to wear it at our wedding," she cooed as if he hadn't spoken.

"Well, I'm afraid you can't," said Prince Vikram shortly.

Flossie cast him a baleful glance and turned to Prince Jay angrily.

"Jay, you told me that necklace belongs to your family, which means I have as much right to it as she does. I'm going to be a princess too. Tell them," she insisted.

Princess Noor looked as if she was about to faint in horror.

I threw an urgent glance at Richard, and he swung into action.

"This is hardly the place for such a discussion, Your Highness."

"I agree," said Prince Jay. "I beg your pardon, Noor. Come along, Flossie."

He led his fiancée away firmly, ignoring her loud squawks of displeasure.

I accompanied the prince and the princess to an alcove by the window while Richard hailed another waiter and passed around glasses of champagne with little strawberries floating in them. The colour returned to the princess's face after she took a few bracing sips.

"It has been like this ever since we first met her on the ship to England, Kitty," she said with a wan smile. "I can't help but feel she's not the right match for Jay, but the poor boy is head over heels in love with her."

"He's a fool," bit out Prince Vikram. "Anyone can see she's in it for the money. And our mother will never agree to this marriage. I don't know what Jay is trying to prove."

"He's merely trying to assert his independence, Your Highness," said Richard ruefully. "He's tired of everyone telling him what to do."

"Well, he's taken his rebellion too far this time," replied Prince Vikram. "Come along, darling. Let's forget about them for a bit and dance. They are playing the foxtrot."

“Miss Goring, who is that man with your brother?” asked Richard curiously.

I peered over his shoulder and saw Jimmy speaking earnestly to a man I had never seen before. He couldn't have been on the guest list because I knew every name on that list. And going by his appearance, he was definitely not one of our circle.

He was tall and broad-shouldered with sharp, angular features, and a slicked-back mane of dark hair with a single streak of silver across one forehead. His tailored suit was impeccable, but the heavy gold watch chain and gaudy tie pin hinted at his penchant for excess. He had to be one of Jimmy's more disreputable friends. But if that were so, what was he doing at the ball?

“I don't know, but I think we should find out,” I said sharply and led the way through the crowd to Jimmy and his friend.

Jimmy was saying something urgently to the man and even tilted his head towards the French windows that led out to the garden, but the man shook his head stubbornly and took a few steps further into the ballroom. Jimmy followed on his heels with a defeated look and gulped in horror when he caught sight of me.

“Jimmy, I don't think I have met your friend,” I said, holding a hand out to the stranger.

“Victor Langley at your service, Miss Goring,” said the man smarmily.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr Langley,” I replied icily.

Jimmy introduced Richard Manton as well, and Richard engaged the newcomer in polite conversation, while I took my brother by the elbow and led him a few feet away.

“Who on earth is that man?” I hissed. “He is not on the guest list.”

“He's one of my business associates, Kitty,” replied Jimmy loftily.

I let out a snort of derision.

"Pfft! I know what that means. Oh, Jimmy. Please tell me he's not another of your awful racing friends. He looks like a card sharp," I said worriedly.

"Of course, he isn't! And I don't need your permission to invite my friends into my house, Kitty. So let's have none of this dashed interference."

Richard and Langley joined us before I could come up with a suitably scathing retort. Interference indeed! After all that I'd done to make this party a success.

"Miss Goring, it is my dearest wish to meet such illustrious personages such as the prince and the princess," said Langley.

I gave in with a weak smile. After all, I couldn't very well throw him out when my brother had invited him to the ball.

Langley spoke smoothly enough to Prince Vikram, who greeted him warily. But when I introduced him to the princess, I noticed that his eyes were immediately drawn to the necklace.

"Your Highness," he said, his tone thick with admiration. "That necklace... It is a marvel! A piece like that could make or break an empire."

Princess Noor smiled and thanked him politely, but I saw her hand move instinctively to the necklace. However, the man refused to take a hint.

"The craftsmanship, the stones... A man in my line of work learns to spot value at a glance, and that, Your Highness, is priceless."

Princess Noor had a faintly hunted look on her face. Between Miss Derwent's insistence on wearing the necklace and now Victor Langley's strange interest in it, I wouldn't wonder if she feared for the safety of her precious piece.

The next few hours were fairly peaceful as Lord Huntley introduced Prince Vikram and Prince Jay to some very important people while Richard and I managed to keep Miss Derwent away from the princess. I saw Victor Langley stare at Princess Noor from across the room when he thought no

one was looking, his eyes flicking to her necklace more than once. But he did not approach her.

It was towards the end of the evening that disaster struck.

Princess Noor, who had been speaking with the French ambassador's wife, suddenly gave a little gasp. I was right behind her, in conversation with an aide de camp from the Foreign Office, and noticed she held a hand to her neck as she continued her conversation without a break. When the French ambassador's wife moved away, she turned to me, and I was concerned to see her face pale and her eyes wide with terror as she clutched her neck.

"Oh no," she said softly.

I excused myself from my conversation with a polite smile and stepped closer to the princess.

"Is something the matter, Your Highness?"

She jumped at my words and forced a smile as she shook her head.

"Nothing! Please excuse me, Kitty. I must speak to my husband at once," she replied, looking around frantically.

I understood that she was looking for Prince Vikram, but I couldn't spot him in the crowd. Meanwhile, the princess looked as if she was about to faint. Lord Huntley would never forgive me if I allowed the princess to swoon in a ballroom full of important people. It was my job to ease her way into London society, and allowing her to embarrass herself in public was not the way to do it.

"Your Highness, please allow me to assist you," I begged. "You do not look well at all."

"I told you I am fine," she cried, her composure starting to falter. "Oh, where is Vikram? I must speak to him."

She whirled around in place, trying to spot her husband in the crowd of dancers waltzing around us. I went up on my tiptoes, trying to peer over the heads of the revellers around us.

“There! I see him at the other end of the ballroom, Your Highness,” I said. “I think he’s heading towards the refreshment room with Lord Pole and Lord Huntley.”

Princess Noor gave a soft, despairing cry before she leaned toward me, her voice barely audible above the music.

“You must fetch him at once, Kitty. It is an emergency. The necklace – it’s gone.”

CHAPTER 4



My brow furrowed in surprise.
“Gone? Are you sure?”

In reply, the princess moved her hand away and revealed her bare neck.

My chest went tight with fear because I was well aware that the necklace cost more than our whole estate. And also because this was the second priceless necklace to go missing from Merivale Manor in less than six months. That was not the sort of reputation I wanted for our house. We had to find it and find it now!

“When did you realise it was missing?”

The princess shook her head impatiently.

“I-I don’t know, Kitty. Vikram will know what to do. Please fetch him at once.”

“I will do as you bid, but maybe we could find it ourselves if we act quickly,” I said, not wanting to waste time going all the way across the room to fetch the prince if there was a chance the necklace had slipped off her neck while the princess was dancing.

“Did it fall off when you were dancing?”

“I don’t think so,” she replied uncertainly.

A horrific thought struck me, even though I tried to brush it off as impossible. *What if someone had stolen it?* It would take a very skilled thief indeed, but maybe someone had slid it off Princess Noor's neck in the crowd. Although, I didn't see how anyone could have stood close enough to the princess to do that, even for a minute.

"Did anyone notice it or comment on it, Your Highness?"

"Everyone noticed it. They always do, which is exactly what I was dreading," said Princess Noor, her voice tight. "I know I still had it when I was speaking with Lady Dupont. She commented on it."

"And after that?"

"I can't remember, Kitty," she whispered. "I feel faint."

I took her hand and led her to an empty loveseat by a window, where we could converse without being overheard.

"Don't panic, Your Highness. Where were you when you spoke to Lady Dupont?"

She took a deep breath and clutched my hand in hers, her own feeling cold and clammy. She swallowed audibly and exhaled before she spoke.

"I was on my way to the powder room when she stopped me to compliment me on my necklace. And then I entered the powder room."

"Was anyone in there with you?"

"No, I paid the maid a shilling to make sure I was left alone in there. I wanted a few minutes to compose myself after such an exciting evening. It took me less than ten minutes to splash some water on my wrists and refresh my make-up. When I came out, I met the French ambassador's wife who wouldn't stop talking about her visit to India."

She looked around nervously, her hand now hovering at her collarbone.

"That necklace means a lot to our family, Kitty. Everyone's going to be so furious with me," she said shakily.

"No, they won't," I said resolutely. "We're going to find it before anyone discovers it's missing. Come along, Your

Highness.”

I rose and led the princess toward the powder room, weaving through the crowd with practised ease to avoid drawing attention. She clutched her evening bag tightly, clearly trying to maintain her regal poise despite the anxiety etched on her face.

The downstairs powder room had been refurbished in time for the ball, with plush furnishings and gilt mirrors, and Mother had hired additional help to offer fresh towels and perfumes. The room was momentarily empty, providing the privacy we needed. Princess Noor sank onto an upholstered bench, her hands trembling slightly.

I crouched on the floor next to her, my eyes scanning the plush carpet anxiously.

“Think carefully, Your Highness. While you were in here, did you feel anything odd? A tug, perhaps? Or hear a sound?”

The princess shook her head, visibly distressed.

“No. Nothing. I can’t imagine it falling off. The clasp was secure.”

She hesitated a little before she spoke again.

“It could have been stolen, but...I didn’t notice anyone close enough.”

“That thought struck me too, Your Highness. But stolen in the middle of a ballroom, under all those eyes? It’s not impossible, but it is highly unlikely.”

I began inspecting the corners of the room.

“And it hasn’t fallen in here. I’ll check the vanity.”

Just as I examined the vanity and Princess Noor rifled through her evening bag again in desperation, the door to the powder room creaked open. Flossie Derwent’s blonde head appeared around the door, her bright blue eyes filled with malice.

“Well, well. What are you two up to in here?”

She stepped into the powder room without waiting for an invitation, the feathers of her headpiece bobbing as she glanced around.

The princess stiffened, clearly uncomfortable. I stood up straight and met Flossie's avid gaze calmly.

"The princess has misplaced something. I'm helping her look for it," I replied.

Miss Derwent's eyes sparkled mischievously.

"Misplaced, eh? Not that gorgeous sapphire necklace, I hope?"

Her tone was teasing, but there was a slight edge to it that was unmistakable.

Princess Noor tensed further.

"How did you know about the necklace?" she asked in a clipped voice.

Flossie waved a hand airily.

"Well, it's a reasonable assumption, Your Highness," she said, her gaze flickering to Princess Noor's bare neck. "I saw it around your neck earlier, but I don't see it now."

I stepped in smoothly, my voice polite but firm.

"We're sure it will turn up. Perhaps it slipped off somewhere."

Flossie took a step towards the vanity, idly lifting a jewelled hairbrush and examining it closely.

"It must be dreadful to lose something so valuable. Especially with all these people about. You never know who might..." She trailed off with a pointed look.

Princess Noor's hands clenched in her lap.

"Thank you for your concern, Miss Derwent, but this is a private matter."

Miss Derwent raised her eyebrows, her expression one of surprise.

"I was just trying to help, Your Highness. Seeing as how I'm almost family."

She slowly gave a sly smile that I did not trust one inch, and reached into her gold evening bag. I watched in horror as she pulled out the necklace.

"You should be more careful with such a priceless necklace, Your Highness. It isn't yours to lose," she said

pointedly, as Princess Noor grabbed it from her hand.

"Where did you find it?" she demanded.

"Right here. I found it lying next to the vanity not ten minutes ago. And you're lucky it was I who found it, and not anyone else."

With that, she swept out of the room, leaving an air of suspicion behind her.

"She...she must have found a way to steal it without anyone noticing," the princess stammered.

I took the necklace from her and examined it carefully.

"No, Your Highness, the clasp is broken," I said in surprise. "It must have slipped off your neck when you were in here earlier."

She exhaled shakily.

"That woman... I don't trust her."

I tilted my head thoughtfully and studied her. She had more colour now, thankfully.

"She does seem...interested in the necklace. But let's not jump to conclusions."

Princess Noor's voice was sharper now, a mix of panic and frustration.

"You saw how she looked at me, Kitty. At *it*. She's been eyeing it all evening."

"Yes, and you're lucky she was eyeing it because she recognised it as soon as she found it. And she returned it even though she was coveting it all evening," I pointed out.

Princess Noor took the necklace from me and stowed it away into her evening bag, and we returned to the ball. I noticed Jimmy in deep conversation with Langley at the door of the ballroom and wandered over to them out of curiosity. What business did Langley have with my brother, I wondered. I reached them just in time to overhear the tail end of their conversation.

"Time's running out, Jimmy. Opportunities like this don't come twice. Think of it as a way to start afresh," growled Langley.

"I'll decide when and if I'm ready. Stop trying to rush me," snapped Jimmy before he caught sight of me. "Ah, there you are, Kitty. Langley was just taking his leave."

"Thank you for a lovely evening, Miss Goring," said Langley, his eyes darting past me to Princess Noor who had followed me to the door. "And Your Highness."

He bowed deeply and the princess shot me a comical look of dismay. As he straightened up, his eyes seemed fixed on Princess Noor's neck.

"I see you're not wearing your beautiful necklace, Your Highness. I hope you haven't...misplaced it," he said, with a smirk.

"I haven't," said the princess curtly, and Langley had the decency to look abashed as he took his leave.

As I changed out of my finery that night, I noticed Florence looking as if she was bursting with news. I would have liked to jump straight into bed as soon as she brushed my hair out, but I couldn't be so cruel to my poor maid.

"What is it, Florence? Out with it," I said sleepily.

"It's about the younger prince's fiancée, miss," whispered Florence in a voice full of suppressed excitement. "Maude says she's no better than she should be."

"She is a dancer," I said shortly, hoping to end the discussion there.

"Maude says the princess cannot stand her."

"I think Maude talks too much, and she'd do well to keep her opinions to herself," I said tartly. "I'm going to bed now, Florence. Goodnight!"



The next morning, Princess Noor looked wan and tired when she came down for breakfast.

"Cheer up, darling. You found the necklace after all, and it is safe in the locker upstairs," said Prince Vikram as he

helped himself to scrambled eggs and a rasher of bacon. "I never thought I'd be thankful to Flossie Derwent for anything, but here we are. I've asked Richard to send her some flowers on our behalf as thanks."

Prince Jay and Jimmy strolled into the room, both of them looking rather worse for wear.

They both threw themselves into adjacent chairs and clutched at their heads in unison when Scottie barked at a bird who had perched at the window.

"I'm sorry, Miss Goring. But must that animal make such a racket?" asked Prince Jay.

"Aye. Can you not train him to be silent?" grumbled Jimmy. "My head feels like it is about to explode."

"Good boy, Scottie! It serves you right for drinking so much last night, Jimmy," I said unsympathetically.

While Princess Noor and I had been searching desperately for the missing necklace, Jimmy and Prince Jay had made it their personal mission to empty the champagne fountain. And while the prince did not have to care about how much it might cost to refill it, Jimmy most definitely should have cared. Especially since he was the one who had to justify the expense to the miserly Foreign Office.

"I'm sorry I am late," said Richard Manton as he hurried into the room. "I was just on the telephone to the florist. Your Highness, I've had two dozen white roses delivered to Miss Derwent, as you requested."

"Why are you sending flowers to my fiancée, brother?" demanded Jay indignantly. "And in front of your wife, too. Dashed cheek!"

"Relax, pup," said Prince Vikram, with a grin. "They are from both of us, as thanks for finding Noor's necklace last night."

Richard froze in the act of reaching for the butter.

"The necklace? Please don't tell me you lost it," he cried, going pale. "Your father will hang me from the palace

courtyard if anything happens to it. He warned me that I was responsible for bringing it back to the palace safely."

"Calm down, Richard. It fell off Noor's neck because the clasp was broken. Flossie found it and returned it right away," explained Prince Vikram. "I must say I seem to have misjudged that young lady."

Princess Noor shot me a knowing glance. Prince Vikram might think better of her after the incident, but his wife clearly begged to differ.

"Well, I think there is something inherently untrustworthy about her. As for the broken clasp... Richard, I have telephoned Cartier, our jeweller, and asked them to send someone to mend the necklace tomorrow morning," announced Princess Noor.

"Will they do it here?" I asked in surprise.

"Unfortunately not. They are sending one of their most trusted employees to collect the necklace, and he will bring it back as soon as they mend the clasp," she explained.

"But how can we trust him to keep it safe? I beg your pardon, Your Highness, but that necklace costs almost fifty thousand pounds. If you allow me, I shall take it to the jeweller and have it repaired like I did the last time we were in London," suggested Richard.

"Yes, Noor. I sent Richard to have it cleaned and repaired for our wedding. It's safer to entrust it to him," said Prince Vikram.

Princess Noor looked nonplussed.

"Oh...but I'm sure it will be all right, darling. They do this sort of thing all the time," she insisted. "He's promised to send it back in two days."

The next day, Princess Noor and I were having tea with my mother in the small parlour when Romley announced the representative from Cartier.

Princess Noor looked relieved at the interruption, probably because she was tired of answering my mother's incredulous questions about life in a palace. I supposed she

was inured to such questions, but it must be tiring to repeatedly explain how it was that she came to speak such fluent English.

The courier was a well-dressed young man with impeccable manners and a leather satchel. He introduced himself as Mr Robert Alden and produced identification to show that he was an employee of Cartier.

I watched him closely, noting his polished yet nervous demeanour.

Princess Noor handed over the necklace, wrapped in a silk pouch, and signed the required paperwork. Alden assured her that the piece would be repaired and delivered within two days.

As Alden departed, I turned to the princess in concern.

"He seems... anxious for someone working for such a famous jeweller," I remarked.

She didn't seem concerned, though.

"All jewellers are like that when they're carrying a small fortune in their bag," she said with a shrug.

"Was that the man from the jeweller I just saw leaving the house?" asked Jimmy as he strolled into the parlour, looking rather muddy.

"Yes, it was. But don't you dare sit on my sofa looking like that," shrieked Mother. "What on earth have you been doing?"

"I took Prince Vikram and Prince Jay out to the bathing ponds on the Heath. And if you must blame someone, Mother, blame that blasted dog of hers," he replied indignantly, pointing an accusing finger at me. "He ran off with our clothes! And by the time we caught up with him, Scottie had dragged our clothes through the muck until they were unrecognisable."

"Oops," I said with a laugh. "You better go and change before that mud dries on you."

Jimmy muttered under his breath as Mother banished him from the parlour. But at the door, he turned and shot us a

wicked grin.

"That man looked rather squirrely, I must say. It would be a bit of a laugh if he turned out to be a big jewel thief pretending to be working for a jeweller."

With that parting shot, which made Princess Noor turn pale with fear, he strolled out as coolly as he had strolled in.

"Ignore him, Your Highness. Jimmy loves to make trouble, the big idiot," I said soothingly. "He was just joking."

But that evening, Jimmy's joke was no longer amusing.

Richard Manton burst in when we were all gathered for pre-dinner drinks in the sitting room, and he looked terrified.

"Your Highness, a man from Cartier just telephoned to ask if we had given the necklace to Alden. It never arrived at the store."

CHAPTER 5



Princess Noor collapsed in a dead faint at his words, and pandemonium ensued.

My mother screamed in horror as Prince Vikram and Prince Jay tried to revive her.

"Hush, Mother. Henrietta, take Lady Goring out of this room and fetch the smelling salts, please," I ordered while Jimmy led Richard Manton to a chair and began to question him.

"What exactly did they say, man? Where is that necklace?" he asked.

"Jimmy! That can wait," I scolded. It was more important to attend to the princess.

"Should I call for the doctor?" he asked abashedly.

But the smelling salts worked, and Princess Noor began to stir.

"Please tell me my necklace is safe," she said weakly when she opened her eyes.

"I'm very sorry, Your Highness. Robert Alden has disappeared with the necklace," replied Richard Manton glumly.

"Oh no," she wailed. "How could this have happened?"

Prince Vikram poured her a glass of brandy, and she swallowed it in one hasty gulp.

"Try not to worry about it, darling. We'll find him. Richard, call Scotland Yard right away and tell them to send their best man. This Alden can't get very far with the necklace."

"Right away, Your Highness," said Richard, heading for the telephone. Jimmy and Prince Jay followed him out, earnestly discussing what might have happened.

Princess Noor sat up and began to rub her temples.

"This is all my fault. I should have allowed Richard to take it to the jeweller. What was I thinking?"

"Darling, you must not blame yourself. It's not your fault that man turned out to be dishonest. Although I don't blame him. That necklace could have tempted a saint, and he was but a man. A poor man at that," said Prince Vikram kindly.

"Oh, but your parents will never forgive me," wailed the princess.

"My parents will never hear of this," assured Prince Vikram. "Because we will find the necklace soon, I promise."

Richard returned, with Jimmy on his heels.

"Prince Jay has gone off to be with his fiancée in this time of distress," he announced dryly.

"He's going to her in *our* time of distress?" asked Princess Noor in surprise.

"According to him, she is going to be just as distressed because she was obsessed with wearing that necklace," Jimmy explained.

The princess let out a snort of derision.

"If we find it, she can wear it all she likes, with my blessing. Half my hair has gone grey in the past two days because of that sapphire necklace. I want nothing more to do with the blasted thing," she said bitterly.

"Do you all think Alden stole it, or do you think he was set upon by thieves who knew what he was carrying?" asked Jimmy curiously.

"How would they know he was carrying a priceless necklace?" asked Richard sceptically. "I hardly think he'd announce such a thing. I think he must have done it himself."

"Let us not speculate on the matter," said Prince Vikram firmly. "Let's leave it to the experts."

"You mean Kitty?" asked Jimmy in surprise.

"What? No! I meant the police," exclaimed Prince Vikram. "I didn't know Kitty was an expert on such matters."

"I am not," I said hastily, with an angry glance at my brother.

I didn't want him raking up the incidents of the past because if the royals heard about the murders we had been involved in, they might not feel comfortable staying here. And we'd lose all the lovely money that was promised to us for hosting them.

But Jimmy had never been good at picking up on unspoken cues, and he began to regale them with tales of my exploits as an amateur detective. Before he could get to the dangerous bits, we heard a familiar siren, and a police car drew up in the driveway outside.

To my dismay, a very familiar figure followed Romley into the room.

"Good evening, Sir James. Good evening, Miss Goring. I didn't think I'd find myself back here so soon," said Detective Inspector Henry Burton.

I flushed at the sardonic look he threw me. Drat the man! Why did he always turn up at the wrong time? Was there no other officer in Scotland Yard?

"I didn't think so, either, Detective Inspector. As you can tell, this might be a matter for your superiors," I said snidely.

I knew that wasn't very nice of me after he had helped me find Jane's killer. He had been very kind to me during that trying time. Kinder than I had been to him. But he had disappeared after the case was closed without so much as a 'see you soon'. The least he could have done was take me for

a thank-you dinner. After all, I had solved the case, and he had taken all the credit.

He shot me a slow, unconcerned smile that made my blood boil.

"Come now, Miss Goring. I thought we were old friends. You can't threaten me with the Chief Constable after I ran to your rescue the last time."

Hateful, hateful man. Ran to my rescue indeed!

Prince Vikram stepped forward and held out his hand.

"Thank you for the prompt response, Detective Inspector."

DI Burton shook hands with him as Jimmy hastily introduced them.

"Now, what's this about a missing necklace, Your Highness?" asked DI Burton, his sharp eyes studying each of us in turn.

Princess Noor sat next to me on the sofa, visibly anxious but trying to maintain her composure as her husband narrated the tale of the missing necklace, while the Detective Inspector made notes in his little notebook.

"Let me get this clear. Are you sure the man who took the necklace was the same man who worked for Cartier?" asked DI Burton.

"Yes, I checked his identification. In addition to that, he had a letter from the jeweller authorising him to collect the necklace on their behalf," explained Princess Noor. "I would never have handed it over if there had been the slightest doubt about his identity."

"And has the store confirmed his disappearance?"

"Yes, Detective Inspector. I spoke to them myself when they called to enquire about the necklace," said Richard.

"Oh, do you think Alden has absconded with the valuable necklace, Detective Inspector?" cried Princess Noor. "You must find him immediately."

"Let's not jump to any conclusions," said DI Burton stolidly.

"It's clear, isn't it? The man saw an opportunity and took it. Why else hasn't he shown up? Probably halfway to Paris by now," said Jimmy belligerently.

DI Burton nodded thoughtfully and asked questions about Alden's appearance and demeanour.

I cleared my throat meaningfully and he looked up at me in surprise.

"Do you have something to add, Miss Goring?"

"Yes, Detective Inspector. Robert Alden seemed uneasy, even slightly nervous," I replied.

"Oh, Kitty! You said that as soon as he left. We should have listened to you," cried Princess Noor.

"Now, now, Your Highness. As I said before, let's not jump to conclusions," said DI Burton with a quelling glance at me. "We need facts, not impressions. Looking nervous does not make a man a thief."

"Good God, man! What more do you need?" Jimmy burst out impatiently. "Start looking for him and find the necklace as soon as you can."

"That's exactly what we're trying to do, Sir James. But we need all the facts to do that. If Mr. Alden has taken the necklace, he won't get far. Every jeweller in the country worth his salt can identify the necklace because it is one of the most famous pieces ever made. A piece like that is impossible to sell discreetly. I'll start with his residence and associates, and see where it takes us."

Prince Vikram agreed to let him handle the situation.

"As long as you don't take too long," muttered Jimmy. "That necklace has probably been dismantled by now, and the stones sent to four different corners of the world."

"You've been watching too many American films, Sir James," said DI Burton sardonically as he got to his feet. "I'm sure I'll have some updates for you tomorrow, Your Highness. Until then, try not to fall to pieces, Sir James."

He strode out of the room before Jimmy could make a suitable comeback.

Richard whistled under his breath as Jimmy gnashed his teeth helplessly.

"Very stern man, that," he murmured.

"You don't know the half of it," I groaned in reply.

"Come now, Miss Goring. Aren't you even slightly tempted to play detective?" he teased, and I grinned in reply.

"You, sir, are a very bad influence. I'm determined to be good this time. I've had my fill of crime and I refuse to be involved in any way."

"Pshaw! Crime follows you like your stupid dog follows Cook," said Jimmy derisively.

"First of all, Scottie is not stupid. He's a very clever boy because he knows Cook always gives him scraps of meat if he's nice to her. And secondly, I want nothing to do with crime, thank you very much," I said firmly.

The next morning, DI Burton was true to his word as he visited us to provide an update. I was surprised he chose to do it himself, but I supposed that was because of pressure from the Foreign Office.

"Your Highness, I have been able to confirm that the man who visited you was indeed Robert Alden. But there is no trace of him. Yet."

"How is that possible? Did you check his house?" asked Prince Vikram.

"I did, sir. He rented a room in a modest boarding house in Clapham. And according to his landlady, he sent her a letter ending his lease. He paid for the remainder of the week and gave up his room in writing last night. Apparently, he has found a better job in the south of England and has to move there with immediate effect."

"What about his things?" I asked.

"He has promised to collect them sometime next week. I have someone watching the boarding house, and we will nab him if he comes to collect his belongings."

"He won't need any of his old things if he manages to sell that necklace," said Richard gloomily.

"I'm sure it won't come to that, Mr Manton. We'll find him long before that."

"And how do you plan to do that?" asked Princess Noor.

"Well, for one, I'm having his movements traced after he left this house. I have men circulating his photograph all around this area."

Despite all his efforts, there was no sign of Robert Alden. It was as if the man had vanished into thin air. Meanwhile, Princess Noor was getting very antsy. As was the Foreign Office.

"Bad business, this," grunted Lord Huntley when he visited us to discuss the matter. "That necklace was the property of the state and cannot be disposed of in a private sale."

"We haven't sold it off, Lord Huntley," snapped Prince Vikram. "It was stolen from us."

"I didn't mean to imply such a thing. Merely stating facts," replied Lord Huntley gruffly.

"Consider them stated. Now, can you find a way to jog your precious Scotland Yard into action?" asked Prince Vikram angrily.

"They are doing their best, Your Highness."

"Their best isn't good enough," cried Princess Noor.

"Got any ideas about where this Alden might have gone, Kitty? This business is right up your alley, isn't it?" asked Lord Huntley, clearly desperate to change the subject.

"Not at all," I replied, determined to keep my nose out of this business.

Although, if I were being honest, I'd have to admit that it was very difficult. Every fibre of my being craved to be involved in the investigation. I chafed at the pace at which DI Burton's men were working, and I was sure I could do a better job.

"Come now, Kitty. Don't you think you could do a better job than our DI Plod? All he's doing is having the boarding

house watched. What good is that? We need some action," exclaimed Jimmy.

"Isn't there anything you can do to find my necklace, Kitty?" beseeched Princess Noor.

"DI Burton will not like me interfering in his investigation," I replied.

"He has no say in the matter. I have every right to hire a private detective if I like," she said, with a proud toss of her head.

"Now, Noor. Let's not complicate this matter further by throwing in an amateur. This is a job for the police," said Prince Vikram.

His words made me bristle. DI Burton couldn't find his own nose in a fog! He would have made a complete mess of Jane's murder case without my help.

"Well, they aren't doing their job," said the princess.

"But that's all we've got, Your Highness," said Richard placatingly. "We have to be patient. I'm sure Robert Alden will turn up somewhere."

And he did. But where we least expected it.

CHAPTER 6



Three days after we reported the necklace missing, DI Burton strode into my mother's sitting room where Lord Huntley had requested us to gather, and his grim face told me that I was not going to like what he was about to report. He addressed Prince Vikram, but we all leaned forward to hear what he had to say.

"Your Highness, I'm afraid I have some bad news. Robert Alden has been found. My men just fished him out of the Thames."

Princess Noor jumped to her feet.

"Is he dead, Detective Inspector? "

"I'm afraid so, Your Highness. His body was discovered face down, floating on the water by a dockworker near the Thames foreshore. Initial examinations by the medical examiner show that he had been dead for a couple of days at least. We are awaiting a detailed report from the coroner."

"And the necklace?"

"There was no sign of the necklace or the satchel he was carrying when he left here," replied DI Burton.

She gave a low cry and swayed a little, and Prince Vikram rushed to support her.

"What does this mean? Was he mugged, Detective Inspector?" asked Richard.

"No, Mr Manton. Alden's wallet, which contained cash and his Cartier identification, was still in his pocket when he was found. This eliminates the likelihood of a simple mugging," said DI Burton.

"And the only thing missing was the necklace," I said slowly.

"Exactly, Miss Goring. And that means..."

"It means Alden didn't steal the necklace. He was murdered for it."

Princess Noor gasped in horror, visibly shaken.

"Well, that changes things, doesn't it?" muttered Jimmy.

"The necklace is missing, Alden is dead, and we're no closer to knowing who's behind this," I said, crossing my arms protectively around my middle.

"And that opens up an entirely different line of enquiry," said DI Burton grimly.

"What do you mean?" asked Prince Vikram.

"I mean that the only people who could have killed Robert Alden were the people who knew he was carrying the necklace."

"Not necessarily. Maybe someone jumped him and found the necklace," interjected Jimmy.

"Why would they take the necklace and leave the cash, Jimmy?" I asked impatiently.

"Well...because they knew the necklace was worth a lot more than what he carried in his wallet," he said weakly.

"No mugger would ever leave ready cash, Sir James. Especially when he wouldn't be able to sell the necklace very easily," explained DI Burton.

"So what does this mean?" asked Princess Noor again.

"How many people knew what he was carrying?" asked DI Burton.

Richard hastily counted all the people in our house, including my mother, Henrietta and Romley.

"Including the butler, I'd say nine people knew Alden was carrying the necklace," he announced.

"Ten," I corrected him. "You forgot Miss Derwent."

He looked at me in surprise.

"Are you sure she knew about it?"

"If Jay knew about it, so did she," said Princess Noor dryly. "Flossie Derwent is Prince Jay's fiancée, Detective Inspector."

"And you must check to see how many people at Cartier knew about it. I am convinced it had to be one of them," insisted Jimmy.

"I will investigate all possible angles, Sir James," said DI Burton.

"What else do we know, Detective Inspector?" I asked despite myself.

I had promised myself that I would stay out of it because I did not want to be involved in yet another crime, but the lure of playing detective was too strong to resist.

"There was a small cut on Alden's temple and signs of bruising on his wrists, which suggest he may have been restrained or involved in a struggle before his death," said DI Burton. "His shoes are clean, so he was likely killed elsewhere and dumped in the river."

"That hardly seems like the work of one man," I commented softly.

"Do you think it could be a gang?" asked Jimmy excitedly.

"One step at a time, Sir James," said DI Burton sharply. "And let's leave the conclusions to the professionals, shall we? Alden left this house around a quarter past four three days ago. I'd like to know all your whereabouts from that time until the moment you discovered he was missing."

"Our whereabouts?" asked Princess Noor indignantly. "You're hardly suggesting that we stole our own necklace?"

"He has to rule everyone out, Noor," said Prince Vikram. "We are all suspects right now."

"That's impossible. We were all here," she argued. "Detective Inspector, you need to speak to the only person who wasn't here when Robert Alden took my necklace away."

"And who would that be, Your Highness?"

"Flossie Derwent, Prince Jay's fiancée," she declared stubbornly.

"How dare you accuse Flossie of such a horrible crime?" thundered Prince Jay, who had been silent until now. "She had nothing to do with it."

"Of course, she did!" insisted the princess. "That woman has been obsessed with the necklace since the moment she set eyes on it. She was ready to claw my eyes out when I didn't allow her to touch it. In fact, she did find a way to touch it that very evening."

"You're crazy, Noor. Flossie found your necklace for you when you lost it," protested Prince Jay.

But the princess was past caring.

"That's what she says. For all I know, she could have slipped it off my neck in the crowd. The ballroom was so crowded I wouldn't even have noticed it."

"You know that's impossible, Noor. You would have noticed it if she had come close enough to steal your necklace," pointed out Prince Vikram.

"In all these years, have you ever known the clasp to break, Vikram?" demanded the princess. "That necklace is almost a hundred years old. And it has never fallen off someone's neck the way it fell off mine. I am convinced that was all her doing. She damaged the clasp and when we arranged to have it picked up for repairs, she found a way to kill the courier and steal it for herself."

Princess Noor had worked herself into a frenzy and there was no way to convince her that she wasn't being very rational.

"Maybe you should check to see if Miss Derwent has an alibi for that day, Detective Inspector," I said diplomatically,

trying to stem the flow of accusations from Princess Noor.

"That's exactly what I am going to do. After all of you provide me your whereabouts," he said firmly. "Miss Goring, if you could provide us with a room to conduct the interviews."

Just like last time...the words were unspoken, but his message was clear as his implacable gaze met mine. DI Burton was determined to conduct this investigation by the book. The last time he had investigated a crime at Merivale Manor, I had eavesdropped on his interviews through a secret passage in the small parlour. I wondered if I had to do the same this time around.

Little did I know that I had a champion in my corner this time.

"Lord Huntley, it is evident that we are being turned into scapegoats for the theft of our own necklace," said Princess Noor coldly.

"No such thing, Your Highness. This is merely a formality," blustered Lord Huntley.

But the princess shook her head stubbornly.

"Vikram, I would like an assurance of fair play in this investigation," she insisted.

"What do you mean, Noor?"

"I mean that I wouldn't put it past the insurance company to blame the theft on us and wash their hands off the case because the police couldn't find the real thief."

"What makes you think I won't find the person behind this act, Your Highness?" asked DI Burton sharply.

"Maybe you will, but I would still prefer to hedge my bets, Detective Inspector. I want Kitty to represent the interests of my family in the matter."

"Miss Goring is not a lawyer," said DI Burton, rolling his eyes.

"She will not be representing us in court. Kitty will assist you in your investigation on our behalf," announced the princess.

I didn't know who was more surprised at her words. I was stupefied, to say the least. The room erupted in sharp exclamations of disbelief. DI Burton was tight-lipped with fury.

"That is preposterous," he said at last. "This is a police investigation, Your Highness, and I will not have an amateur mucking it up."

"You mean like I mucked up your last murder case?" I asked sweetly, the venom in my expression a sharp contrast to the smile on my face.

I could understand why he didn't want me poking my nose into his case, but he had no right to disregard my contributions thus far. It seemed like DI Burton needed a quick reminder about who actually solved his previous case.

"We can do this the hard way if you like, Detective Inspector," challenged Princess Noor. "I could make a telephone call to the Foreign Office right now and have you removed from the case. You have ten minutes to decide."

She swept out of the room, with her husband by her side. Jimmy, Prince Jay and Richard followed them out, looking very uncomfortable. Lines had been drawn. Sides had been taken. And we had collectively offended the police before they even began to investigate the case.

DI Burton stared daggers at me, and it was all I could do to return his angry gaze with composure. It wouldn't do to let him know that I was quaking on the inside.

Lord Huntley gave a delicate cough.

"She is right, me boy. The Foreign Office is very committed to helping the princess feel safe in London since they were the ones who insisted on sending the two princes on a Grand Tour in the first place. It will reflect very poorly on our side if we don't resolve this matter to their satisfaction."

"That doesn't mean I should compromise the integrity of my investigation," argued DI. Burton.

Lord Huntley shot me an apologetic glance before he spoke.

"All I'm saying is that if the princess wants her on your team, it behoves us to cooperate. Think of Kitty as a secretary to take notes, Burton. She won't get in the way of your case."

DI Burton let out a loud, derisive snort.

"Oh, won't she?" he asked grimly.

I stayed silent because I could not, in all honesty, promise to stay out of his way.

Lord Huntley gave him an encouraging clap on his back and made his escape before DI Burton could protest further. He turned to me and shot me an incensed glare.

"You will not speak during the interviews, Miss Goring. One word out of you, and I'll boot you out of the room," he warned.

It was now my turn to snort derisively.

"I should like to see you try," I scoffed. "I have no intention of interfering with your investigation, Detective Inspector. But might I remind you that I have proved to be of great help to you in the past? Don't cut off your nose to spite your face. Allow me to be a sounding board if you will. A fresh pair of eyes and ears."

He grunted unhappily and after a few seconds of thought, let out a defeated sigh.

"All right, Miss Goring. You win. Your first task as my assistant can be to set up a room in which to conduct the interviews," he ordered.

With great trepidation, I led him to the smaller parlour and asked Romley to bring us some notebooks and pens.

"Would you like to interview me first?" I asked, and he nodded in reply.

"Miss Goring, can you recount in your words the events of the past few days?"

I did so, giving him a detailed account of the ball and the events after it. He took down my words as I spoke, pausing

only to ask me the occasional pertinent question.

"You say two people showed a special interest in the necklace?"

"Yes, Flossie Derwent and Victor Langley."

"Has Mr Langley been to the house since the ball? Would he have known about Alden's visit?"

"I don't think so," I said doubtfully. "He had no business at the house. I don't even know why Jimmy invited him to the ball that night."

"And what about Miss Derwent? Has she been to the house since that evening?"

"No. Prince Vikram did send her flowers as a thank-you for returning the necklace that night, but she hasn't responded to the olive branch yet. And maybe it is now too late for that," I replied.

"And what about Alden? You mentioned that in your opinion, he seemed nervous and ill at ease."

"Yes. I found it odd in someone who should have been used to carrying around expensive jewellery. Was he new to the job?"

"On the contrary, he was one of their most trusted employees, and from what I gleaned, this wasn't the first time he was handling the Celestial Necklace. He had cleaned and restored it for Prince Vikram and Princess Noor's wedding."

I hesitated a little before asking my next question, not knowing how it would be received.

"Detective Inspector, can you tell me what you discovered about Alden? Was he a trustworthy man?"

"That is difficult to say, Miss Goring," he replied with a sigh. "As I see it, there are two possibilities. One is that Alden was innocent, and was murdered for the sake of the necklace. The second is that he was working hand-in-glove with his killer."

"Which do you think is more likely?"

"That remains to be seen."

There was a knock at the door just then, and Romley ushered Princess Noor in for her interview.

CHAPTER 7



The princess looked relieved to see me in the room.

"I'm glad you're willing to meet us halfway in this matter, Detective Inspector," she said with a warm smile.

"It isn't as if I have any choice in the matter," he replied dryly. "Although I am surprised you chose Miss Goring to represent you in this matter, instead of Lord Huntley. Do you know her well enough to trust her?"

I stared at him in dismay. Was this an underhand way to get me kicked off his case?

The princess met his gaze calmly.

"I might not have known Kitty for long, Detective Inspector, but I do trust her. She was of immense help to me at the ball when I lost my necklace. And since she is one of the few people here with an unshakeable alibi, I know she was not the person who killed Alden. I cannot say the same about Lord Huntley."

"How do you know her alibi is unshakeable, Your Highness?"

"It must be since she was with me for most of the time between Alden picking up the necklace and the telephone message from Cartier. We parted only to dress for dinner."

"In that case, let us proceed with this interview. If you could tell me why you insisted on having the necklace repaired so urgently?"

"Because I could not possibly wear it with a broken clasp," replied the princess. "And I had planned to wear it for quite a few occasions during our stay here."

"Did anyone object to the necklace being taken for repair?"

"Well, Richard Manton, who is my husband's secretary, did offer to deliver it because he was worried the courier would lose the necklace. I should have taken him up on that offer."

"Did you discuss the repair plans with anyone outside the household?"

"Not at all."

"And where were you that evening, Your Highness?"

"Let me see. Kitty and I walked Scottie on the Heath after Alden took the necklace. And then, we returned to our rooms to dress for dinner. As I said earlier, we were together all evening."

DI Burton thanked her and she left the room. Jimmy was shown in next.

He was forthright but slightly irritated by the questioning.

"This is getting to be a habit, eh, Kitty?" he said, with a wink.

"Sir James, were you present when the necklace was handed over?" asked DI Burton.

"No. Although, I did bump into Alden as he was leaving."

"Did you notice anything unusual about Alden?"

"Didn't know the chap at all. So I couldn't really comment on what would be unusual. But I did notice that he seemed to be in a great hurry to get away from the house."

"And what were your movements that evening?"

"I briefly entered the room just after Alden left, but I didn't stay long. My mother kicked me out of the room

because my clothes were muddy after my swim in the bathing pond. I went upstairs for a wash and change."

"And after that?"

"Well, I set off to meet a chap in a pub for a bit," said Jimmy vaguely.

"What chap?" probed DI Burton.

"If you must know, it was Victor Langley," replied Jimmy, with a defensive glance at me.

DI Burton consulted his notes at length.

"Would that be the business associate who was at the ball?"

"Yes."

"And what exactly is the nature of your business with him, Sir James?"

"It's a bit of this and a bit of that. I couldn't tell you if I tried," joked Jimmy. "I have no head for business, you see. Victor helps me sell some antiques to keep the estate running, that's all."

"That does not explain why you invited him to such an exclusive event as the ball," pointed out Burton.

"Well, I didn't exactly invite him. But when he showed up, I couldn't very well kick him out, could I?" asked Jimmy, looking slightly hot under the collar.

I pressed my lips tightly together to curb my tongue, although I would have a lot to say on the matter as soon as DI Burton left. Hadn't he learned his lesson the last time he brought his disreputable friends around? Hadn't we suffered enough?

"And how soon did you leave the house after Alden, Sir James?"

"Look here! What are you trying to imply?" asked Jimmy angrily.

"I'm merely trying to get the details out of the way, sir," said DI Burton placidly, unmoved by Jimmy's outburst.

"If you must know, I left the house around twenty minutes after Alden, and I went straight to The Wells Tavern at the

end of the street, where I was supposed to meet Victor."

DI Burton leaned forward with interest.

"And did you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You said you were supposed to meet him. I ask you if you did meet your friend as planned."

Jimmy stuck a finger under his collar and looked mighty uneasy.

"Now that you mention it, Victor didn't show up after all. But that is not unusual. Sometimes, his other business concerns call him away suddenly."

"I'm sure they do," said DI Burton soothingly. "That will be all, Sir James."

Jimmy rose with an audible sigh of relief and was almost through the door before Burton called him back.

"I have one last question, Sir James. Did you by any chance mention Alden's impending visit to Mr Langley?"

Jimmy suddenly looked shifty and did not meet our eyes as he shrugged his shoulders.

"I might have," he mumbled.

"When did you tell him?" asked Burton sharply.

"I might have mentioned it on the phone when he called to set up our meeting. It was just a passing remark because he was so taken by the necklace at the ball," said Jimmy defensively. "I didn't mean anything by it."

Foolish, foolish boy, I thought with despair.

"That will be all, Sir James. If you could ask Prince Vikram to see me next?"

Jimmy escaped with blatant relief and Prince Vikram was ushered in.

He appeared calm but reserved, clearly disliking the scrutiny.

DI Burton asked him about the necklace's significance and his feelings about the repair.

"The necklace is priceless, Detective Inspector. And it is one of our most famous pieces. As for the repair, I left that

decision to my wife.”

“I am surprised you allowed such a reckless act, Your Highness. I would have thought you’d be more careful.”

“I have full faith in my wife’s decisions, Detective Inspector,” said the prince curtly. “It is not her fault that someone tried to steal her necklace.”

“I never meant to imply that it was,” replied Burton.

“It is a disgrace, and now we are left to deal with the insurance company, which is already insinuating foul play on our part.”

“But why the hurry to claim insurance, Your Highness? We might still recover the necklace for you,” said Burton, watching the prince carefully.

“We are in no hurry, Detective Inspector. But we did need to inform the insurance company as soon as the necklace was stolen. And I must say they aren’t the least bit impressed by your progress in the case.”

“All in good time, Your Highness,” replied Burton, with a lazy smile. “Now, if I may trouble you to send in your secretary, Mr Manton?”

Prince Vikram swept out of the room and soon, Richard poked his head around the door.

“You summoned me, Detective Inspector?”

“Please have a seat, Mr Manton.”

Richard sat down with a quick wink at me, which I pretended not to notice.

“Can you account for your whereabouts on the said date, Mr Manton?” asked DI Burton briskly.

“I was running errands for His Highness all day, Detective Inspector. Here’s a list of all the places I visited that day. I had to visit his tailor in Bond Street, and then his lawyer and his agent at the docks because His Highness was having trunk loads of fabric and cheese sent to his mother. Unfortunately, all those appointments had been set up much earlier, which was why I wasn’t here to hand the necklace

over to Alden personally. I returned just before dinner, just in time to receive that blasted telephone call from Cartier."

"How long have you been working for Prince Vikram, Mr Manton?"

"Oh, for almost seven years now," replied Richard. "I met him through common friends at a boat race in Oxford soon after I passed out from Magdalene, and when he heard that I was looking for a job, he asked me if I was willing to move to India to be his secretary. It was the best decision of my life."

"I'm glad to hear it," said DI Burton politely. "Now, have you met Alden at all?"

"I might have met him in passing when I delivered the necklace to the jeweller the last time it was cleaned. But I'm afraid I couldn't say for certain."

"Thank you. That will be all for now. Please ask Prince Jay to see me next," said Burton.

Prince Jay was defensive and belligerent, to say the least.

"Flossie has nothing to do with this," he declared, even before he sat down.

"I'll be the judge of that, thank you, Your Highness," replied DI Burton calmly. "If you could just provide me with your whereabouts that evening."

"Well, Jimmy took us swimming in the bathing ponds, and Alden was on his way out when we returned."

"Did you meet him?"

"No, I merely saw him from a distance. After that, I returned to my room to wash and change, and then, my brother and I played billiards until it was time to change again for dinner."

I surreptitiously pushed my notepad closer to DI Burton, and he read the lines I had scribbled hastily.

"Your Highness, did you go to your fiancée after you heard the necklace was missing?"

"What if I did?" asked Prince Jay sharply.

"What was her reaction to the news?"

"She was very upset, naturally. That necklace belongs to the family, not to Noor. And Flossie feels she has an equal right to wear it after we are married. We are both very unhappy with the way Noor has been monopolising the necklace."

"Thank you, Your Highness. That will be all," said, DI Burton, dismissing him politely.

I blew out a heavy breath after he left the room.

"Do you plan to call on Miss Derwent, Detective Inspector?"

"Yes, but we'll leave that for tomorrow, Miss Goring. If you can be ready by nine o'clock, I'll drive you to Miss Derwent's rooms."

He took his leave without further discussion, which annoyed me a little. He had told me nothing of what he'd learned about Alden. And he hadn't discussed his opinions of the people we had just interviewed. It was as if he was doing his best to shut me out of the case. Well, I would show him!

I was going to learn everything there was to know about Alden by hook or by crook.

A quick glance at the clock told me that it was just past three o'clock. It wasn't too late to begin my investigation.

Princess Noor was sitting in the bigger parlour with my mother, discussing the events of the afternoon over a cup of tea.

"Your Highness, the Detective Inspector would like to see you again."

My mother sat up and cast me a censorious glance before the princess could reply.

"Is he still here? Now Kitty, what is this I hear about you being involved with the police again?"

"I'm representing Her Highness in the matter, that's all. And truly, I do nothing but sit in the room while DI Burton asks all the questions," I lied.

I gave Princess Noor a meaningful look and she set her cup down immediately.

"Lady Goring, if you will excuse me, I must attend to DI Burton right away."

I led her to the telephone in the hall and made sure the coast was clear.

She looked around in confusion.

"Where is Burton?" she asked.

I gave her a mischievous grin and shook my head.

"That was just an excuse, Your Highness. I need you to do something for me."

"What do you need?"

"I need you to call up Cartier and ask for the address of Alden's boarding house in Clapham."

"Oh, but surely DI Burton has the address," she replied, sounding confused.

"I'm sure he does, but he's not very likely to share it with me," I pointed out impatiently. "He's allowing me to sit in on his interviews under duress. But we can't expect him to allow me an equal share in his investigation, Your Highness. I have to do my part on my own."

"Of course! I'll ring them up at once."

I could only hear her side of the conversation, but from what I could make out, the staff at Cartier was putty in her imperious hands. Two minutes later, I had a piece of paper with his address and the name of his landlady written in her neat hand.

I thanked her before I raced up the stairs, and begged Florence to pull out my oldest dress. It was a modest, black crepe dress that I paired with a matching cloche hat and set off for Clapham. I had a feeling I was going to find all my answers in the boarding house where Alden used to live.

CHAPTER 8



*I*t was grey and damp, with a fine drizzle misting the air when I reached Clapham. The boarding house was a slightly rundown building with peeling paint and sagging shutters, in stark contrast to the grandeur of Merivale Manor. The smell of coal smoke in the air made my nose wrinkle.

My heels clicked sharply against the cobblestones as I approached the house, drawing glances from a few passersby. I hesitated briefly before knocking on the weathered front door, the paint cracked and flaking. I adjusted my gloves as I waited for the door to be answered, wondering uneasily if I was making a mistake.

Before my fear got the better of me though, the door creaked open, revealing a stout woman in her late fifties, dressed in a faded brown dress with a white apron. Her grey hair was tightly pinned under a bonnet, and her expression was wary as she looked me up and down.

"Mrs Carter?" I asked, remembering the name Princess Noor had written on that scrap of paper.

"If you're selling something, I'm not interested," came the blunt reply.

"I'm not selling anything, I assure you. I'm here about Robert Alden," I replied with a polite smile.

She crossed her arms over her chest and stared at me belligerently.

"Alden? What about him? He's gone if that's what you're here for. Upped and left without so much as a week's notice. I should have known he was up to no good. The police were here asking about him when he vanished with that necklace. I'll have no such doings in my boarding house, miss. You tell him that. I'm a respectable woman."

Knowing that Alden's landlady wouldn't speak to Miss Goring of Merivale Manor, I had practised my story on the way and I was ready.

"My name is Cynthia Alden. I am Robert Alden's stepsister," I lied. "And I suppose you haven't heard, but Robert is...well, he's dead."

I hoped I looked sombre enough to convince her that I was related to the dead man.

"Dead?"

Edith Carter looked astounded.

"Yes. He was murdered. Mrs Carter, may I come in?"

"What do you want, Miss Alden? I've already told the police what I know about him. And I know nothing about his death."

"I was wondering if Robert left any letters for me. I was expecting his weekly letter when the police informed me about his demise."

"His things are all in my box room. Told me he'd come for them next week, he did. Will you be taking them away with you?"

"Erm... I don't think I can do that until the police allow it. But if I could just go through his belongings and see if he left me a letter..."

"You'd better come in," she replied, stepping back to let me into the boarding house.

The interior was dimly lit, with threadbare rugs on the wooden floors and a faint smell of dampness in the air. The walls were adorned with faded floral wallpaper, and a clock ticked loudly in the parlour.

"Would you like a cuppa?" offered Mrs Carter grudgingly, and I accepted, knowing that was the only way I could get her to talk to me.

Over a cup of weak tea in the cluttered kitchen, I gently probed Alden's grim landlady for information.

"Mrs Carter, did Robert have any enemies that you can think of?"

She gave a mighty sniff as she set her cup down.

"I don't know, miss. He was a quiet tenant, always paid his rent on time and kept to himself. Didn't have many visitors."

"And how did he seem on his last day here?"

"I saw him at breakfast. And all I noticed was that he seemed a little jumpy. Didn't eat his eggs. He did drink a lot of coffee, though. I didn't expect him to go away the way he did."

I pushed my cup away and asked if I could see his things.

She led me into the big box room behind her office and left me to go through the boxes labelled 'Alden'. There were a few clothes, old but well-made. Some faded letters. But there was nothing to show who might have murdered Robert Alden. Not that I expected to see anything. I merely wanted a reason to speak to his landlady.

She shot me a questioning look when I returned to the parlour.

"Did you find a letter?"

I shook my head sadly.

"I'm afraid not. Mrs Carter, what time did he leave this place on his last day?"

"At nine o'clock as usual," she replied.

"And did he say where he was going?"

"No, but I assumed he was off to work. I told him I'd got a nice bit of fish for his dinner and he said he looked forward to it."

"So when he left the house in the morning, he did plan to return that evening," I mused.

"I suppose so," said Mrs Carter doubtfully. "That's what the young lady thought as well."

"What young lady?" I asked sharply.

"The one who came to see him that night. He always returned by four o'clock, but it was half past and he still hadn't returned from work. She waited for almost an hour before she said she'd try again the next day."

"And did she come back the next day?"

"Now that you mention it, she didn't," said Mrs Carter slowly.

"Mrs Carter, can you describe this young lady please?"

"She was one of them...what the papers call a voluptuous blonde. Dressed all in gold," said Mrs Carter with a snort. "Very expensive clothes too, but I could tell she wasn't a lady if you know what I mean."

I did know what she meant, and my heart was beating rapidly because I knew only one woman who looked like the woman she described. And that was Flossie Derwent.

"Did she give a name?"

"No, she told me it was none of my business. Pert bit of goods she was," said Mrs Carter huffily.

"Did she come alone?"

"Yes, and I made up my mind to tell Mr Alden that I would have no such goings on in my boarding house," said Mrs Carter stoutly. "Only he wrote to me that night and said he was giving up his rooms."

"Did you tell the police about that woman?"

"Why, no, miss. I didn't think it was important."

"Did Robert have any other visitors that week, Mrs Carter?"

“Well, only that strange man that came the day before he disappeared.”

I inhaled sharply and sat down in the rickety old chair opposite the sofa. That must have been the day before Alden picked up the necklace.

“Can you describe this man, Mrs Carter? It might be important.”

She screwed up her eyes and made an effort to remember what he looked like.

“Well, he was tall and had a sharp face. But not good-looking, if you know what I mean. Well-built. Oh, and his hair. It was dark and he had a silver streak over one side.”

My head began to whirl at this revelation.

The man she described sounded exactly like Victor Langley. But why had my brother’s business associate come to visit Robert Alden the day before he disappeared?

“Did you hear them talking, Mrs Carter?” I asked hoarsely.

“No, because Mr Alden took him upstairs to his room. They were in there a long time before the man left, and I must say Mr Alden looked mighty relieved when he left. You look as if you’ve seen a ghost, I said to him. I was that worried about him, miss. But he said he was fine and ran up to his room after he saw his visitor off.”

I couldn’t get anything more out of Alden’s landlady and made my way back home thoughtfully.

So far, it looked as if two of the people connected to this case had visited Alden at his boarding house when they had no business with him. One was Flossie Derwent, who didn’t get to meet him because he never made it back home that night. And the other was Victor Langley.

I knew what I had to do. I had to tell DI Burton what I had learned, but I wished I could hide the bit about Langley. I was worried it would implicate Jimmy in the matter.

Langley’s only connection to Alden and the necklace was Jimmy. He saw the necklace for the first time because Jimmy

invited him to the ball, and my foolish brother was the one who told him that Alden was going to pick up the necklace that night.

I knew nothing about Langley, except the fact that he dealt in antiques on behalf of my brother. Was he a thief and a murderer as well? And how was Jimmy tied up in all this?

My brother might be a bad judge of character, but I knew one thing for sure. He was not a thief or a murderer. If Langley was behind the theft of the necklace, he must have acted in the matter alone. But would the police take that view or would they accuse poor Jimmy of conspiring to steal the necklace?

I suddenly remembered the snippet of conversation I had overheard between them at the ball. Langley was pushing Jimmy to do something he didn't want to do. Oh dear! I hoped my brother wasn't involved in this mess after all.

CHAPTER 9



I wandered down for breakfast the next morning feeling very grumpy after my sleepless night filled with worry, and I was annoyed to see the object of my concern stuffing himself with eggs and kippers. The sight of Jimmy's sunny smile turned my stomach.

I told myself I was too old to slap my brother on the back of his head as I might have done during our nursery days. Besides, my mother would never allow it. She positively doted on her precious boy and would hear no criticism of him.

The royal party was still in bed, as was our mother. I was thankful for the privacy. I dismissed Romley and the parlour maid after they served me my toast and coffee, and turned to Jimmy angrily.

"What on earth have you been up to, Jimmy?"

He paused in the act of shovelling scrambled eggs into his mouth and looked at me with surprise.

"What's bitten you this morning, sister dear?"

"This is no time for levity, Jimmy. You must tell me the nature of your business with Langley," I insisted.

Jimmy flushed brightly and did not meet my eyes.

"I told you, Kitty. He sells some antiques for me when I need to raise money for the estate. I've sold some of the old paintings up in the attics that no one likes."

"Is that all?"

"What more can there be?" he asked evasively.

I despaired at the thought of getting a straight answer out of him.

"Jimmy, you have to be honest with me. Is Langley involved in this theft in any way?"

Jimmy stared at me in shock.

"The theft of the necklace? You've gone barmy! What does he have to do with any of it?"

I did not mention the fact that Langley had visited Alden the day before he disappeared. I kept that little fact up my sleeve for now.

"When did you tell him that Alden was going to pick up the necklace?"

"I've already told you and Burton... I mentioned it in passing when he telephoned me to fix our meeting at the pub."

"All right, but tell me this. Who raised the topic first? You or Langley?"

I didn't think Jimmy would have broached the topic with Langley at all. And as it turned out, I was right.

"Well, if you must know it was him. He asked me if Princess Noor found her necklace. He'd noticed she wasn't wearing it at the end of the ball."

"And did you not think that unusual? What did it have to do with him?"

"It's a priceless necklace, Kitty. And Victor deals in antiques. He was just curious, that's all," said Jimmy defensively.

"And what did you tell him?"

"I just said the clasp was broken and that she was having it fixed soon."

"Did you say when?"

Jimmy looked embarrassed as he pushed his eggs around the plate with his fork.

"I might have," he mumbled.

"Oh, Jimmy," I wailed with despair. "When did this conversation take place?"

"The day after the ball. But it doesn't mean anything, Kitty. I don't know why you've taken such a dislike to poor Victor. He hasn't done anything."

It was all I could do to keep a civil tongue in my head. I drained my Spode coffee cup and set it on the table with a thump that would have caused my mother to have an apoplectic fit if she'd been there to see it.

"Do yourself a favour, Jimmy. Stay away from that man from now on," was all I said before I stalked out of the room angrily.

DI Burton turned up right on time, and we set off to interrogate Miss Derwent at her flat, which was on the third floor of a narrow mansion block in Soho. The area was lively during the evenings, with music spilling from nearby clubs and the chatter of people filtering through the streets. But at half past nine in the morning, the streets were practically deserted as the residents recovered from their debauchery of the night before.

The building itself was slightly shabby, with a chipped facade and a faded brass plaque on the door reading, 'Hartsworth House'.

As DI Burton and I ascended the creaky stairs, the scent of perfume and cigarette smoke grew stronger. Miss Derwent's flat was on the third floor. When her maid opened the door, we were greeted with a burst of colour and a waft of something floral – lilac, perhaps, mingling with the faint smell of stage makeup.

After DI Burton identified himself, the maid led us into the sitting room, which was tiny but vibrant, a clear reflection of its owner's theatrical life.

A plush velvet chaise longue in a deep plum colour took centre stage, draped with a fringed gold throw. A mismatched set of chairs surrounded a low table cluttered with an eclectic mix of items: cigarette holders, makeup compacts, and half-empty glasses. A gramophone sat in the corner, with a stack of jazz records beside it.

The walls were adorned with framed photographs of Miss Derwent in glamorous costumes, alongside posters from her performances at various venues. Strings of faux pearls and feather boas hung casually over the back of chairs and the edges of mirrors, adding to the impression of barely contained chaos.

As we waited for Miss Derwent to emerge from her bedroom, the walls began to crowd in on me and I started to feel slightly breathless and uneasy.

The room was dimly lit by a combination of a Tiffany-style lamp with stained-glass panels and the warm glow of candles on the mantelpiece. Shadows danced across the walls, giving the room an intimate, almost conspiratorial feel.

A gold-sequined dress was draped over a folding screen in the corner, next to a pair of silver dancing shoes, reminding me of the way Mrs Carter had described Alden's mysterious female visitor. Bolts of colourful fabric spilt out of a trunk near the chaise, suggesting Miss Derwent must be altering or creating her own stage costumes.

A bouquet of wilting flowers in a chipped vase added a touch of melancholy to the space.

A cold sweat broke out over me and I shifted in my seat restlessly. DI Burton looked up at me in concern.

"Are you all right, Miss Goring?"

Before I could reply, Miss Derwent strolled into the room with a yawn, wearing a silk dressing gown in a bold peacock print, her hair pinned up with sparkling combs.

She greeted us with a sly smile, a cigarette dangling from her crimson lips.

“Well, well, this is unexpected. To what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from Scotland Yard – and Miss Goring, no less?”

DI Burton had just begun to explain the circumstances of our visit when the doorbell rang and Miss Derwent’s maid scurried to the door. Prince Jay strode into the room and cast us an angry glance.

“I knew it! I knew you were planning to harass my fiancée behind my back. I’m not having it, Burton,” he exclaimed.

“There is no harassment going on here, Your Highness,” said DI Burton stolidly. “I’m just doing my duty by asking Miss Derwent a few pertinent questions.”

“Well, you’ll have to do it in front of me,” declared Prince Jay, as he threw himself into a big wing chair by the fireplace.

DI Burton had no choice but to continue. Miss Derwent was flamboyant as usual but she also appeared to be uncomfortable with the situation. And as DI Burton lingered over her immediate fascination with the necklace, she became very defensive.

“Of course, I was fascinated with it, Detective Inspector. Who wouldn’t be? And as you can see, I like pretty things,” she replied, waving a hand around to indicate her flat with little boxes spilling over with shiny trinkets on display all around.

“The question is, do you like them enough to steal a necklace that you were denied?” mused DI Burton, and Miss Derwent flushed angrily.

“How dare you insinuate such a thing? I might have wanted it, but not like that. Do you think I’d wear something stolen?”

“I don’t know, Miss Derwent. Would you?”

“You’re being very insulting, Detective Inspector,” said Prince Jay furiously.

“I am doing my job, Your Highness,” retorted DI Burton. “A man has been murdered, a priceless necklace is missing,

and I will do whatever I need to do to find the killer and retrieve the necklace. And if you try to stop me, I will be forced to suspect your motives."

Prince Jay subsided with ill grace.

"Now, Miss Derwent, I need you to tell me where you were the evening the necklace was taken."

"I was at home, practising my dance routine," she replied coldly.

"And is there anyone who can corroborate that? Your maid perhaps?" pressed DI Burton.

Miss Derwent began to look a little hunted, her eyes darting around the room as if she were looking for an escape.

"Err...my maid had the evening off and was at the pictures with her young man. But I think Jay visited me that evening. Didn't you, darling?"

She stared at her fiancé meaningfully with wide eyes. Unfortunately for her, Prince Jay had already told us that he was playing billiards with his brother all evening.

"I did visit you, my dear. But that was after we discovered Alden was missing," he said gently.

His loving fiancée stared daggers at him before she smiled sweetly at DI Burton.

"In that case, I'm afraid, I have no alibi for the time that you asked, Detective Inspector. You'll just have to take my word for it."

I bit my tongue to keep from blurting out that she was a liar. I had to use the information I had wisely, I decided, and so allowed DI Burton to finish his line of questioning.

"Did you speak with Alden at any point?" he asked.

She widened her eyes even more and shrugged delicately.

"Of course I didn't," she replied.

That was when I struck.

"Not even when you went to meet him at his boarding house that night, Miss Derwent?"

My words had a catastrophic effect on my audience.

Miss Derwent turned white with a mixture of fear and fury, while Prince Jay jumped up, exclaiming in anger. Meanwhile, DI Burton stared at me stonily. I knew I was going to pay for hiding this little fact from him, but right then, I felt exhilarated at putting one over Miss Derwent.

"That's a dirty lie," yelled Prince Jay.

"Sit down," said DI Burton sharply, and Prince Jay sat down in surprise. I didn't think anyone had ever spoken to him in that tone in the entirety of his privileged life.

DI Burton leaned forward and spoke in a menacing voice.

"Miss Derwent, I will ask you a question, and I want you to think very carefully before you answer. Did you go to Robert Alden's boarding house the night he was killed?"

"I didn't know he was dead," she blurted out, looking much younger and thoroughly frightened for once.

Prince Jay turned to her in shock.

"Flossie, did you really visit that man the night he disappeared with our necklace?"

She covered her face with her hands and let out a low wail.

"I didn't kill him, I swear." She lowered her hands and stared at Prince Jay in dismay. "Darling, I had nothing to do with his disappearance. I only went there because I wanted to speak to him."

"What could you possibly have had to say to him?" he asked, looking thoroughly betrayed.

"Look... I don't want to discuss it in front of these people..."

"You have no choice," interjected DI Burton. "You can discuss it right now, or you can discuss it at Scotland Yard, Miss Derwent."

"At the Yard?" she yelped. "Surely you're not arresting me?"

"I might have to if you don't tell me why you were there that night," he said grimly.

"But I didn't even meet him," she cried. "I waited for almost an hour, and when he didn't return, I came back home."

"But why did you go there at all?" demanded Prince Jay.

Her eyes shifted between us wildly, and when she realised there was no escape, she gave in with a defeated sigh.

"Well, Princess Noor had the necklace, and she would not let me so much as look at it closely. So I decided to commission my own Celestial Necklace. Only, unlike the royal family, I cannot afford the price of the original stones, which is why I wanted to speak to Alden and see if he could make me a replica of the original necklace," she admitted sheepishly.

"Flossie!" said Prince Jay, his voice loaded with disappointment.

"We have only your word that you did not speak to Alden that night. Maybe you caught him unawares before he entered the house and killed him to get your hands on the original necklace," accused DI Burton coldly.

Miss Derwent looked at me pointedly.

"Ask her. If she knows I was there that night, surely she knows what I did there."

DI Burton turned to me with a question in his stormy, grey eyes and I nodded in agreement.

"She's right. I spoke to Alden's landlady yesterday, and she can confirm that Miss Derwent waited for an hour, and when Robert Alden did not turn up, she left the boarding house."

Miss Derwent blew out a relieved breath.

"That will be all for now. But please make sure you're available for further questioning, Miss Derwent," cautioned DI Burton, before we left the flat.

He strode down the creaky stairs angrily and I struggled to keep up with him. He ignored my feeble attempts at an apology until we turned into a smaller, emptier street. Then he whirled around and stared down at me furiously.

"How dare you...how dare you interfere with my investigation, Miss Goring? I warned you yesterday that I would boot you off the case if you ever got in my way," he seethed.

"But I did not get in your way, Detective Inspector. I merely did a bit of digging on my own and uncovered information that was of immense help to you," I said and braced myself for the explosion that was not long in coming.

"Help? *Help?* If you wanted to help me, you would have told me what you discovered as soon as you met me this morning. But no! You sat there, looking as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth, waiting for the perfect moment to drop your little bomb. You're not helping anyone, Miss Goring. You're merely entertaining yourself at our expense," he accused.

"That is not true," I cried. "There is nothing entertaining about murder, Detective Inspector."

There was a loud honk behind us and we jumped out of the way of a big cart laden with theatrical equipment that swerved past us drunkenly in the tiny lane. DI Burton leaned towards me and whispered menacingly.

"If I find out that you have hidden anything else about this case from me, Miss Goring, I will clap you in irons and throw you in prison before the day is out."

I bit my lower lip and stared at him pensively for a moment before I spoke.

"In that case, maybe we need to talk."

CHAPTER 10



DI Burton led me to a little café in Soho that was frequented by the theatre-going crowd. We found an empty table by the window and ordered coffee and sandwiches before we sat down.

He waited silently until I took my first sip of coffee before he began to eat. I watched in awe as he demolished the whole pile of cucumber and cheese sandwiches.

"Pardon me, Miss Goring. I haven't had breakfast yet. I was at the coroner's office from six o'clock until I came to pick you up," he said finally. "Are you sure you don't want one? They are quite good."

"No, thank you," I replied. "Detective Inspector, I have a confession to make."

"As long as it's not a confession of murder," he said dryly.

"I went behind your back yesterday evening and spoke to Robert Alden's landlady."

"How did you even get her direction?"

"Princess Noor got it for me from Cartier. They were very helpful."

"I'm sure they were," he bit out.

"You have to promise not to get angry," I insisted.

"I make no such promises," he said.

"Then I will say nothing, and you'll be sorry."

DI Burton let out a pained sigh and drained his coffee cup before he turned to me.

"I am a good policeman, Miss Goring. I am fair and just, and very hardworking. And I do not know what I have done to deserve this torment," he said plaintively.

I could understand his pain at being outwitted by a woman, and I could almost feel sorry for the poor man. Almost, but not quite. Because he had been very high-handed with me yesterday.

"If you will try to listen without interrupting me, I will tell you what I learned," I said with what I considered immense generosity.

Burton muttered under his breath darkly before he nodded.

I narrated what Mrs Carter had told me about the man who came to meet Alden the day before he disappeared.

"Did you recognise the man from his description?" he asked sharply.

"Yes. I think it was Victor Langley," I replied, feeling a knot of guilt twisting my stomach, as if I was betraying my brother by this admission.

DI Burton let out a low whistle.

"Your brother's business associate?"

"It gets worse," I said and proceeded to tell him how Langley had wriggled the information out of Jimmy.

"Your brother needs to pick his friends more wisely," commented Burton.

"I promise you, Detective Inspector, Jimmy had nothing to do with this. He did not conspire with Langley."

"You have no way of knowing that, Miss Goring," he replied gently. "I will have to investigate his role in this matter thoroughly."

"Do you think Langley was the one who killed Alden? And if he did, the necklace must already be sold by now.

According to Jimmy, he deals in antiques. I'm sure he has buyers lined up for this sort of thing."

"I'll have to pay him a visit right away," said DI Burton with satisfaction. "Until now, there was nothing to connect him to the case because merely admiring a necklace at a ball is not a crime. But now I have good reason to speak to Victor Langley."

"We," I corrected.

"I beg your pardon?"

"We have to pay him a visit because we have to speak with him," I said sweetly. "After all I've done in the case, if you think you're going to cut me out now, you're going to have to think again, Detective Inspector."

DI Burton paid the bill and we set off to beard Langley in his den.

"Where does he live?" I asked as I settled into the passenger seat of his car.

He consulted his notebook and I wondered if I would ever get a look at its contents.

"Langley lives in Bloomsbury. Twenty-six, Ewing Lane," he replied as he started the car.

Ewing Lane was lined with elegant, Victorian terraced houses, and when DI Burton stopped the car in front of number twenty-six, I expected it to be just like its neighbours. But I was in for a surprise.

The façade of the building reminded me strangely of its owner. The narrow house was squeezed between its more stately neighbours, its bricks grimy and its shutters crooked, as though the structure itself had grown weary of its dubious occupant. The garden out front was overgrown, tangled with weeds and brambles, while an ostentatious marble fountain stood in stark contrast to the general neglect.

I stepped out of the car, clutching my gloves in one hand, and frowned as I observed the house.

"Quite the statement piece," I murmured to DI Burton, nodding toward the fountain. "Though it seems the fountain

is as empty as the man's conscience."

Burton chuckled dryly.

"If only appearances could convict, Miss Goring. Unfortunately, merely looking like a crook does not make him one. We must believe Langley to be innocent until we can prove otherwise." He adjusted his bowler hat and motioned to the door. "Shall we?"

We approached the door, which boasted a brass knocker shaped like a snake coiled around a scroll. I made a moue of distaste as I rapped the knocker sharply. The sound echoed hollowly, followed by a scuffle of hurried footsteps within.

The door creaked open a moment later, revealing a manservant who did not look at all surprised when DI Burton identified himself. I wondered if he was used to the police dropping by unannounced. He let us into the house and scurried away to fetch his master.

When we stepped into the house, the air grew close and cloying, carrying the faint scent of cigar smoke and something chemical – paint thinner, perhaps. The interior was as mismatched as the exterior, a jumble of ostentation and decay. A gleaming chandelier hung in the entryway, but the wallpaper was peeling at the edges. A Persian rug covered the floor, but it was frayed and stained.

We waited in the little hall for Langley to appear, and my distaste for the man deepened when I saw the paintings displayed on his walls. Each piece seemed to tread the line between scandalous and grotesque, as though chosen specifically to provoke shock rather than admiration. The garishness and unsettling nature of the paintings made the hall feel oppressive, as if the very walls whispered sordid tales of corruption and vice. It was clear that Langley's taste leaned not toward art for beauty's sake but as a reflection of his appetite for the scandalous, provocative, and macabre. I averted my eyes with a shudder just as he came downstairs with a fake smile of welcome.

His hair was slicked back with far too much pomade, giving it a shiny, unnatural sheen. His thin moustache curled slightly at the ends, and his suit – well-tailored but garish – seemed chosen to scream wealth, though it did the opposite.

“Ah, Miss Goring,” Langley said, his sharp eyes darting between Burton and me. His voice was smooth like syrup drizzled over poison. “And...the police, I see.”

He placed a hand over his chest in mock alarm.

“To what do I owe this unanticipated pleasure?” he asked.

DI Burton stepped forward, his presence commanding even in the face of Langley’s sarcastic obsequiousness.

“Mr Langley, I’m Detective Inspector Henry Burton. I have some questions regarding a murder.”

Langley’s eyes flickered, just for a moment, before his easy smile returned. He stepped aside and swept his arm in an exaggerated gesture of welcome.

“But of course, do come in. I’m always happy to assist the authorities.”

Langley led us into a drawing room that was overfurnished with no obvious reason, as though he’d crammed as many expensive items as he could into the space but hadn’t thought to make it inviting. A massive mahogany desk sat in one corner, cluttered with papers and ledgers. On the mantel above the fireplace, a row of garish figurines of Greek gods gleamed in the dim light.

“Please, make yourselves comfortable,” he said, gesturing to an overstuffed sofa that looked as though it might swallow us whole. He perched on the edge of an armchair, his fingers steepled in front of him. “Now, what can I help you with?”

DI Burton remained standing, his hands clasped behind his back.

“We’re investigating the murder of a man named Robert Alden,” he said, watching Langley like a hawk.

Langley smiled, his teeth flashing like a predator baring fangs.

“The name doesn’t ring a bell, Inspector. Should it?”

"That depends," replied DI Burton. "Alden was carrying an object that seemed of great interest to you, Mr Langley – a necklace belonging to Princess Noor that you had admired at the ball at Merivale Manor."

Langley's smile tightened, and he leaned back slightly, his fingers drumming on the arm of the chair.

"Ah, the necklace. It caused quite a stir, didn't it? But I fail to see what it has to do with me, Detective Inspector."

"You seemed uncommonly interested in it, from what I hear."

Langley chuckled, a sound that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Ah, yes, a stunning piece, wasn't it?"

"It was," agreed DI Burton. "How far would you go to own such a piece, Mr Langley? Would you go so far as to commit murder?"

I saw a spark of fury in Langley's eyes and for a minute, I thought he was going to spring on DI Burton. But the moment passed and he simply smiled at us nastily before he spoke.

"I assure you, Detective Inspector, I admire such things purely from an aesthetic standpoint. Besides, I wasn't the only person at the ball to admire the necklace. It was all anyone could talk about. Are you going to interrogate everyone who admired the necklace that night?"

"What *were* you doing at the ball, sir?" asked DI Burton, sidestepping that question neatly.

Langley raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"I was invited by Sir James, as his sister can tell you," he replied with a pointed smile at me. "I spent much of the evening in conversation with him – business, you understand. Apart from that, I mingled with the other guests. A delightful crowd, though I dare say I'm not one for small talk."

"Were you aware that the necklace was being sent for repairs two days later?" asked DI Burton.

Langley's fingers stilled, and for the first time, his smooth demeanour faltered. It was slight – a flicker of something in

his eyes – but I caught it.

“Repairs?” Langley said, his voice carefully even. “I can’t say I was privy to that information. Though I suppose it explains all the fuss. It’s such a pity, really. A treasure like that disappearing...positively tragic.”

I exchanged a meaningful glance with Burton. He was lying! I’d had it directly from Jimmy that Langley knew Princess Noor was arranging to have the necklace sent for repairs.

DI Burton studied him for a long moment, the silence thick and tense.

“Mr Langley, can you describe your whereabouts the day after the ball at Merivale Manor?”

“The day after the ball...hmm...let me think. Ah, yes. I attended an auction at an estate in Bibury that morning, and in the evening, I was at my club,” Langley replied smoothly.

“Can anyone corroborate the latter?” asked DI Burton sharply.

“Of course! I attended a going-away dinner for one of my friends who is moving to America. The other guests at the dinner can attest to my presence there. If I remember correctly, we ate steak and kidney pie, and a lemon syllabub for afters. I was at the club all evening and returned home around two in the morning.”

“If that is true, Mr Langley, how do you explain your presence at Robert Alden’s boarding house at the same time?”

“Say what?” asked Langley, almost falling off his armchair.

“Alden’s landlady claims that a man of your description visited Alden the day before he disappeared with the necklace. She described you down to the colour of your hair, Mr Langley.”

Langley ran a hand over the silver streak in his hair and smiled carelessly.

“She was lying, Detective Inspector. As I told you, I have never met this man Alden, and I know nothing about his

death.”

“Thank you, Mr. Langley. That will be all for now. Please be so kind as to give me the name of your club and the people who can vouch for your presence there on the night in question.”

Langley stood, his movements fluid but tense.

“Of course, Detective Inspector. I’m always happy to assist the law.”

He scribbled some names and the address of his club on a sheet of paper from the writing desk in the corner of the room and thrust it at DI Burton.

“Thank you,” he replied. “And please don’t leave London – you may hear from us again if we need any more information.”

We were almost at the door when DI Burton turned around and spoke again.

“I have one last question, Mr Langley. You’ve been very helpful with your whereabouts on the day after the ball. Can you be kind enough to tell us what you were doing the day after that?”

Langley frowned.

“Do you mean the day the necklace disappeared?”

“Yes, Mr Langley. I understand you were supposed to meet Sir James at the local pub that evening. But you didn’t,” said DI Burton.

Langley lit a cigarette carefully and blew a ring of smoke in our direction before he spoke.

“As to that, Detective Inspector, I was at home all day. It was probably something I ate at the dinner the previous night. I was too sick to meet Sir James at the pub. My man can confirm that I was home all night,” he said, putting a hand out to ring the bell.

“That’s quite all right, Mr Langley. I’ll speak to him on the way out,” said DI Burton, and he gestured for me to precede him out of the room.

The manservant let us out of the house with a nod and DI Burton paused at the door to speak to him softly. He let out a heavy sigh as he joined me on the stoop outside the house.

"Langley wasn't lying. His manservant agrees that he was home all night the day Alden disappeared."

As we stepped back out into the cold London air, I turned to him with a frown.

"We can't let him off the hook so easily, Detective Inspector."

"We haven't let him off the hook, Miss Goring. I will check his alibi, and I will make enquiries near Alden's boardinghouse in Clapham. Surely someone must have seen him around if he visited Alden that night."

I knew he had to follow the word of the law, but I felt restless. There was a gnawing anxiety in my gut. What if Langley's alibi was strong? Then we'd have no reason to suspect him. At the same time, what if his alibi was fake? Then we'd have reason to suspect him, but we would also have to suspect Jimmy of colluding with him to steal the necklace.

Now, the quest to find the murderer was no longer just about justice. At least, not for me. As far as I was concerned, it was more a quest to prove my brother's innocence before anyone accused him of being party to a murder.

CHAPTER 11



The next morning, Princess Noor came down to breakfast with a wan face. And I noted that the Princes Vikram and Jay looked particularly grim.

"What is the matter?" I asked as we waited for the rest of our party to join us.

They looked at one another and shook their heads.

"Have they found the killer, Kitty?" asked Princess Noor with quiet desperation. "And what steps have they taken to recover the necklace?"

DI Burton had warned me to keep the details of the investigation to myself. So there was very little I could do to reassure the worried princess.

"We're doing our best, Your Highness. And we do have a lead, although I can't discuss it with you quite yet."

"That's not good enough," said Prince Jay. "Not with the Foreign Office breathing down our necks."

"Jay, don't..." began Prince Vikram, but Princess Noor rolled her eyes angrily.

"Why bother to hide it, Vikram? The sooner Kitty finds out, the better equipped she will be."

"Equipped to do what?"

"To save us! The Foreign Office is doing its best to pin this crime on us, Kitty."

"But why?" I asked in disbelief.

My mother swept into the room before she could reply, and she subsided into silence.

"I'll tell you after breakfast," she mouthed.

But before I could get Princess Noor alone to discuss the matter further, Romley announced DI Burton and Lord Huntley. I asked him to show them into the smaller parlour that had now become the centre of our investigation.

"Langley's alibi holds up as far as the party at the club," announced DI Burton as soon as I walked into the room, and I sank onto the sofa with a groan. "But that's not all. I had my men make enquiries around Alden's boardinghouse in Clapham, and you will never believe what they found."

Lord Huntley and I stared at him expectantly.

"Go on, boy," prompted Lord Huntley, and I had to bite my lip to hide my grin. I was sure no one had called DI Burton 'boy' in years, but he didn't take offence.

"A waitress in the café next to the boardinghouse remembers serving a man of Langley's description that evening. And guess what he ordered?"

DI Burton gave a boyish grin.

"Steak and kidney pie," he said, when we stared at him dumbfounded.

I gave a short bark of laughter, while Lord Huntley still looked confused.

"I beg your pardon, Lord Huntley. I'm just laughing at the fact that the same man ate the same dish at two different locations at the same time. How is this possible, Detective Inspector?"

"I haven't the faintest idea, Miss Goring. But I will find out."

"Could Langley's friends at the club be lying?" I suggested.

It wasn't the first time someone had perjured themselves on a friend's behalf.

"It's not just his friends who vouch for his presence, though. The staff at the club do as well. And I don't think they would lie on his behalf. Langley is not the type to inspire such loyalty."

"But why would the waitress lie?" I asked in disbelief.

"That is the whole trouble with this case. She doesn't seem to be lying. But how can one man be in two different places at the same time?"

"That's all very well, Burton. But if Langley's alibi can hold up in court, do you have anything else concrete enough to tie him to Alden's murder?" asked Lord Huntley.

"If his alibi holds up, we have no grounds to investigate him further, Lord Huntley," replied DI Burton glumly.

"Then may I suggest a new avenue of enquiry?"

Lord Huntley handed a sheaf of papers to DI Burton.

"These are the financial statements of Prince Vikram and Prince Jay. The Foreign Office is keeping a close eye on their activities, and it pains me to say that despite a very handsome allowance, they are both steadily on the path to financial ruin."

"How is that possible?" I asked in surprise.

"That is for the two of you to find out. They are both up to their necks in debt, borrowing from Peter to pay Paul, I reckon. That gives them both a strong motive to sell the necklace on the sly, don't you think?"

The ever-present frown on DI Burton's craggy face grew stronger as he studied the documents.

"Forget about Langley and look into this, boy," instructed Lord Huntley, and DI Burton scowled at him.

"I will look into this matter, of course. But I don't think I'm ready to forget Langley quite yet, Lord Huntley," he replied firmly.

"Do whatever you think is best, but find that priceless necklace soon if you don't want the wrath of the Foreign

Office descending on your head,” warned Lord Huntley.

“I don’t understand what it has to do with them at all,” I snapped. “The necklace belongs to the royal family, and it is their personal affair if they choose to sell it.”

“It isn’t as straightforward as that, m’dear. That necklace belongs to the state treasury. As long as Prince Vikram’s family is the ruling power, that necklace is theirs. But as soon as the ruling power shifts from their family to the Crown, the necklace becomes Crown property with the rest of the contents of the state treasury. We want that necklace safe and accounted for because the two princes do not seem capable of running their state after their father dies, in which case, the Crown will have to step in and take control,” explained Lord Huntley. “And if they have killed an Englishman in their efforts to sell the necklace illegally, the Foreign Office will see them hanged for the crime.”

I left Lord Huntley and DI Burton to discuss the case while I decided to take Scottie for a long walk on the Heath to clear my head. I realised I had been so caught up in playing detective that I had been neglecting my poor dog.

Luckily, Scottie was far too kind to hold a grudge and came bounding up to me happily when I whistled for him. I was fastening his leash to his collar when Princess Noor came out of the sitting room.

“Are you taking him for a walk, Kitty? Can I join you?”

“Of course, Your Highness,” I replied with an uneasy smile.

Lord Huntley’s suspicions about the two princes were still ringing in my ears, and I wondered if it was possibly true. And if it were true, was Princess Noor complicit in this treachery? I pushed these unpleasant thoughts away and led the way out of the house.

She was silent as we walked up the dirt road that led from the manor to the Heath. Scottie tugged at his leash as we got closer to his favourite muddy path and as soon as I gave him

his freedom, he went flying up the track, only to return with a stout stick that he laid at my feet.

I threw it as far as I could and he went chasing after it while I searched for the right way to ask Princess Noor if she had arranged for her own necklace to be stolen.

CHAPTER 12



*B*efore I could speak, Princess Noor took a deep breath and turned to me.

"Kitty, I don't know if you've heard anything about the matter from Lord Huntley, but the Foreign Office is convinced Vikram and I did this. They believe we stole our own necklace from Alden and had him killed so we could sell the necklace in a private auction," she said in a shrill voice.

"Did you?" I asked baldly.

Princess Noor shook her head immediately.

"Of course, not! How can you even ask that?"

"Your Highness, this isn't just about the necklace. Not any more. Now this is a murder case, and everyone involved in the case is a suspect until proven innocent. Even you."

"Why would we steal our own necklace?"

I had to choose my words here very carefully. Whatever Lord Huntley had told us about the financial woes of the royal family was confidential information, and I couldn't let on that I knew anything about it.

"I'm sure DI Burton will get to the bottom of the matter soon enough, Your Highness. If you are innocent, he will prove it once and for all."

"Not if the Foreign Office has its way," she replied bitterly. "This is a conspiracy of the worst sort."

"I don't understand. Why would they want to pin this crime on you?"

"Because it isn't about the necklace at all," cried Princess Noor. "The British Resident of our state is just looking for an excuse to wrest control from our family because we support the demand for local self-government. He would dethrone my husband's father and establish a ruler far more sympathetic to the British cause."

"Your Highness, a man has been killed," I reminded her. "I hardly think the Foreign Office would murder an Englishman to further their political goals in India."

"Maybe not," she conceded. "But I wouldn't put it past them to influence the outcome of this investigation to suit their purpose. They are already doing their best to alienate us from our family."

"What do you mean?"

"That is what this whole trip is about, Kitty. The British Resident insisted that we spend a year away from home, travelling to Europe, to broaden our horizons. In reality, he wishes to cause a rift between Vikram and his mother, and I am worried he might have succeeded."

"In what way?"

"Her Highness was furious with us for giving in to the Resident's demands and has forced Vikram's father to reduce our allowance. As his seniormost wife, she exerts a lot of influence over matters of court. She practically controls the treasury, and has the power to cut us off without a penny."

That could explain why both the princes were in dire need of money, I realised. But were they capable of going to such lengths to recoup their finances? That remained to be seen. All I knew was that Princess Noor could have averted this situation if she had only taken the necklace directly to the

jeweller instead of asking them to send someone to pick it up.

"Your Highness, may I ask you a question?"

"Of course," she replied.

A sudden gust of wind took me by surprise and I pulled my warm Pashmina shawl securely around my shoulders as I looked up at the sky. The day had been pleasant enough when we set out, the autumn sun filtering through the budding trees, dappling the ground in shifting patches of gold.

Then, quite suddenly, the light changed. A shadow seemed to sweep across the land, and the air grew oddly still. Princess Noor stopped mid-step and frowned up at the sky, where the once-white clouds had thickened and darkened with unnatural speed. I wished I had remembered to carry an umbrella.

"Why didn't you take the necklace to Cartier yourself? Why did you ask for a courier to pick it up?"

"What does it matter now?" she asked absently, as she stared up at the stormy sky.

"It matters a lot because that little fact is what can turn this case against you," I said sharply. "You could have sent Richard to drop the necklace off at the jeweller's store, but you insisted on doing something so unconventional and convoluted. Why would you trust a stranger with such an expensive necklace?"

"I made a mistake, Kitty," she cried. "I admit it! I was extremely foolish, and for once in my life, I made a very bad decision. Because I am *human*, and even though everyone expects me to be perfect all the time, I am not! And now I will have to pay for that single bad decision."

The wind picked up sharply, rippling through the grass and sending a shiver through the trees. A few fat droplets of rain splashed onto my sleeve and I groaned.

"Oh no! I should have known it was too nice a day to last. Quick, we'd better get back before..."

Before I could finish my sentence, the sky split open and a heavy downpour soaked through our clothes in an instant.

Scottie yelped in surprise and gave himself a vigorous shake, sending water flying in all directions. Then, tail tucked, he bolted back towards the manor.

"Scottie, wait!" I cried, lifting my skirts and dashing after him.

Princess Noor followed, clutching her shawl over her head as though the flimsy fabric might offer some protection.

The open Heath suddenly felt endless, the manor far too distant for comfort. The soft, dry lanes we had strolled along just minutes ago were now slick with mud, the grass turning into a sodden tangle underfoot. My hat tilted dangerously as the wind caught at it, and I yanked it off before it could fly away entirely.

"This is a proper downpour!" Princess Noor shouted over the roar of the rain.

"Welcome to England!" I called back, laughing despite myself.

Scottie, now thoroughly disgruntled, had stopped his mad dash and was waiting for us near a low stone wall, shaking his wiry coat furiously. His usual boundless energy had been replaced with a look of deep betrayal as if I was personally to blame for the sudden change in the weather.

"You're the one who ran off, you silly boy," I huffed, scooping him up. "At least you ran in the right direction."

He was sodden and squirming but at least no longer at risk of bolting again.

The wind picked up, howling through the trees, and a distant rumble of thunder rolled across the sky. Princess Noor shot me a wide-eyed look.

"Run!" I yelled.

And run we did - skirts clutched, shoes squelching, breathless laughter escaping between gasps. The Heath was nearly deserted now, save for a few other unlucky souls making a run for shelter. We passed a gentleman who had

clearly set out for an afternoon stroll, now standing under a tree with his newspaper held uselessly over his head. Another woman, less lucky, was frantically chasing her hat across the grass.

The familiar rooftops of Merivale Manor finally came into view, standing solid and stately against the stormy backdrop. My heart leapt at the sight. Almost there.

With one final sprint, we reached the grand front steps. I nearly slipped on the slick stone as I burst through the door, Scottie still clutched in my arms. Princess Noor tumbled in after me, breathing hard, and slammed the door shut behind her.

For a moment, there was only the sound of our ragged breathing and the rain hammering against the windows. Then Scottie gave one last indignant shake, sending a fresh spray of water onto the polished floor.

I bent over, hands on my knees, and let out a breathless laugh.

"Well," I said, straightening. "That was bracing."

Princess Noor pushed back her dripping hair and grinned for the first time in days.

"I don't suppose there's a roaring fire and a pot of tea somewhere in this house?"

I peeled off my sodden gloves with a grimace.

"Oh, I think that can be arranged, Your Highness."

She retreated to her room to change out of the wet clothes after I promised to have a tray of tea and toast ready in ten minutes. I rang the bell and Romley arrived promptly. He took in the situation with one glance and directed a footman to take Scottie downstairs and dry him thoroughly.

"Please arrange for tea and toast in the sitting room immediately, Romley," I said as I skipped upstairs to change out of my own wet things.

A few minutes later, I was sitting in front of the mirror in a fresh dress as Florence squeezed my hair dry with a towel

while reading me the riot act for being foolish enough to venture out without an umbrella.

"Enough, Florence," I protested. "I'll carry one the next time I go out, I promise."

"Hmph," she replied, and I tried to think of anything that would distract her from the topic of my folly.

"What do they think of our big robbery downstairs?" I asked quickly.

It worked. Florence gave me a quick grin as she brushed the tangles out of my damp hair.

"Well, it doesn't matter what the rest of us think, miss. Maude has decided it is Miss Derwent that did it, and that's all that counts."

"You don't say?" I murmured.

"She's that sure. Says she knows a thief and a murderer when she sees one."

"Has she seen Miss Derwent, though?" I asked curiously.

"In passing, maybe," replied Florence with a shrug.

She had just finished dressing my hair when I heard voices in the corridor outside my room. Heated, raised voices.

I exchanged a surprised glance with Florence when I realised that they belonged to Jimmy and...Henrietta!

Florence took one step towards the door, but I grabbed her arm to stop her and held a finger up to my lips. Jimmy and Henrietta were arguing about something and I wanted to hear what it was about. After all, what on earth could make my mother's secretary take the liberty of arguing with her employer's son?

I tiptoed to the door and stuck my ear to it, trying to hear what she was saying.

"Sir James, if you don't tell her, I will," said Henrietta firmly.

"You're being ridiculous," argued Jimmy stubbornly. "It is a small thing, of practically no significance. I won't have you bothering Kitty about it when she's already worried about this blasted necklace."

"She is right to be worried," hissed Henrietta. "And if she knew what you were up to..."

"I'm not up to anything," interrupted Jimmy, but I'd had enough.

I swung the door open angrily and glared at the quarreling pair who turned to me with almost comical dismay.

"Kitty," yelped Jimmy. "I didn't know you were back."

"Miss Goring... I'm...I'm glad you're back. I need to tell you something," stammered Henrietta.

"Be quiet, Henrietta," said Jimmy awfully.

"Have the two of you gone quite mad?" I asked politely.

"Nothing of the sort," replied Jimmy stiffly. "Henrietta is being a busybody as always."

I skewered him with an angry glance and pushed my door open wider.

"In," I barked, and they followed me into my room obediently like lambs.

I nodded to Florence and she immediately gathered up my wet things and left. I shut the door behind her before I turned to my brother and raised an eyebrow.

He scowled at Henrietta and let out a heavy sigh.

"It isn't as important as she's making it out to be," he began in his usual convoluted fashion.

"Get to the point, Jimmy. I should be downstairs right now, making amends for taking Princess Noor out into a deluge. The Foreign Office will never forgive us if she contracts pneumonia under our roof."

"I wish they had never come to Merivale Manor," he grumbled.

"It is too late to wish that. Now...what did you do?"

Henrietta pursed her lips and crossed her arms over her chest as she stared at my brother with a militant glare on her face. She looked like a nursery governess about to box her charge's ears. And I didn't blame her one little bit

because my brother had often provoked a similar impulse in me. Jimmy had that effect on people.

"Well, maybe I wasn't entirely honest with Burton. But it is none of his business, dash it!"

"Honest about what?" I asked in alarm.

Jimmy was already in deep waters and he didn't even know it. What had he done now?

"About Alden," he said baldly, and my heart gave a terrified leap.

I sank onto the little wooden chest at the foot of my bed and motioned for him to stop.

"On second thought, I think I want to hear Henrietta's side of the story first," I said, with a sinking feeling in my belly. I couldn't trust Jimmy to tell me the whole truth. Not any more.

"That's not fair," exploded Jimmy.

"Be quiet, Jimmy. You'll have your turn to speak after I have heard what she has to say," I said sternly. "Go on, Henrietta."

She gave him an apologetic glance before she turned to me.

"This is about the day Alden disappeared with the necklace, Miss Goring. I was walking back to the manor after running some errands for your mother. She wanted me to drop off some old clothes at the vicarage, and on my way back, I chanced to see Sir James outside the pub on the corner of Well Walk. And he wasn't alone. He was with that man, Alden."

CHAPTER 13



The sharp tang of fear filled my mouth as I cast a furious glance at Jimmy who stared ahead stonily.

"How did you know it was Alden?" I asked.

"I knew it was him because I was putting on my coat in the hall when Romley let him into the house earlier. I heard him give his full name just as I left for the vicarage."

If she had been anyone else, I would have thought she was mistaken. Why would Jimmy be meeting Alden outside a pub after he'd collected the necklace? If she had been anyone else, I wouldn't have believed her. But she was Henrietta, and she did not make such mistakes. If she said she saw Jimmy at the pub with Alden, then she must be right.

"Why, Jimmy?" I asked hoarsely.

"It's not what you think, Kitty. I wasn't there for Alden. I was supposed to meet Victor Langley at the pub, don't you remember? Well, I saw Alden lurking outside and asked him what he was up to, and he said he was waiting for a taxi. He didn't want to risk taking the necklace on the underground because of pickpockets," he replied.

"And?" I demanded.

"And nothing! I left him to it and went into the pub to wait for Langley. When I came out an hour later, Alden was gone."

I was tempted to interrogate him more until I could be sure my brother had nothing to do with the murder, but my conscience reminded me that the only person who had the right to interrogate Jimmy was DI Burton. With a heavy heart, I marched Jimmy and Henrietta into the little parlour where Burton was still poring over the documents left by Lord Huntley.

"Jimmy has something to say to you, Detective Inspector," I said firmly, ignoring the resentful glance my brother shot at me.

DI Burton heard him out grimly before he spoke.

"Why didn't you mention this earlier, Sir James?"

"Because I knew it would look bad! Look here, Burton. I had nothing to do with Alden's disappearance and you know it."

Did we, though?

"Hiding this fact makes you look even worse, Sir James. It makes you look like an accomplice in the crime. For all we know, you helped Langley lure the poor man to his death," said DI Burton angrily.

"But he didn't," said Henrietta, looking very white in the face.

"How do you know that, Miss Alton?"

"Because I stood across the street and watched Sir James clap Alden on his back and walk past him into the pub. And scarcely had he gone in when a taxi pulled up outside the pub, and Alden got into it."

"Did you happen to see the number of the taxi?" asked DI Burton sharply.

Henrietta shook her head.

"N-no...but I think I saw someone sitting in the taxi that pulled up, and strangely, he did not get out at the pub," she said hesitantly.

"What do you mean, Miss Alton?"

"I beg your pardon, Detective Inspector. I'm afraid I'm not making any sense. What I mean is that there was already

another passenger in the taxi when Alden got in. One would have thought he'd have to get out if Alden had to get in."

"Not if he was there to pick up Alden," I said quickly. "Maybe he wasn't waiting for a taxi. Maybe he was waiting for this man, who happened to pick him up in a taxi."

"And maybe the man took Alden to the other side of the city, where he killed him and dumped his body in the river. I'll make some enquiries with the taxi rank on the high street," said DI Burton briskly. "Someone might be able to describe him."

"Jimmy, we only have your word that you were waiting in the pub for Langley. Is there anyone who can vouch that you stayed in there for an hour, like you said?"

"Of course! I played darts with some of the regulars. I'm sure they remember me," he replied quickly, looking relieved at this reprieve.

"If I find that you have been hiding anything else, I will not be so lenient again, Sir James," said Burton menacingly.

My brother looked shaken as he nodded glumly.

"And well done, Miss Alton. You might just have put us on the track of our killer," DI Burton added, with a warm smile at Henrietta.

CHAPTER 14



A wave of excitement spread over me at DI Burton's statement. He was right. For the first time since Alden disappeared, we had got a glimpse of the shadowy figure behind his murder.

"May I use your telephone to call the Yard, Miss Goring?" he asked.

"Of course! This way, please," I said, leading him to the telephone in the hall. "Romley will make sure you're not disturbed, Detective Inspector."

"Just a moment, Miss Goring," he said, with a quick glance around to make sure we were alone. "I've been going over the bank statements that Lord Huntley left us. Can you get any information out of the princess about the state of their finances?"

Hastily, I told him what Princess Noor had said while we were walking on the Heath, and he nodded thoughtfully.

"That might explain it. If Prince Vikram and Prince Jay's mother has reduced their allowance, then it is natural that they will be struggling to make ends meet. And it gives them a very strong motive to sell the necklace on the sly."

"But why would they do it on the sly? They are within their rights to sell it, aren't they?" I asked.

“Not according to Lord Huntley. The necklace does not belong to Princess Noor. She had merely borrowed it from the royal treasury for the duration of this trip. Neither she nor her husband can sell it without permission from the treasury. But if they claim it has been stolen, the insurance company will be forced to replace the necklace, which will keep the treasury happy, while Prince Vikram can arrange for the proceeds of the sale to be transferred to a secret bank account.”

He seemed convinced that our guests were complicit in this crime.

“Detective Inspector, you seem to forget another couple who have just as strong a motive for stealing the necklace. Prince Jay and Flossie,” I reminded him.

“I have forgotten nothing, Miss Goring,” he replied dryly. “Everyone has a motive for the murder, but we cannot arrest any of them without evidence. Maybe one of the taxi drivers might lead us onto the right trail.”

I excused myself and left him to make his telephone call, retreating to the small parlour. Not ten minutes later, DI Burton returned and shot me a sardonic smile when he saw me poring over the bank statements.

“Find anything useful?” he asked.

“No,” I replied, laying them down with a sigh. “Did you?”

“I did, actually. Here, take a look at these statements for Prince Vikram. There have been large withdrawals from his account on three occasions since he landed in London. And I have been checking with the bank. On each occasion, Prince Vikram visited the bank in person to withdraw the money.”

“What does that signify?”

“Miss Goring, a man like Prince Vikram does not need to visit banks to withdraw money when he has a secretary to do it for him. But on these three occasions, he went into his bank alone and withdrew around five hundred pounds. And I have a feeling that money wasn’t for his personal expenses.”

"Why do you say that?" I asked. "Prince Vikram and Princess Noor live quite lavishly, Detective Inspector. The dress she wore at the ball alone must have cost her two hundred pounds."

"That might be so, Miss Goring. But if Prince Vikram withdrew the money for his personal expenses, he wouldn't have sent his secretary, Mr Manton, to the bank to withdraw more money the very next day. On three separate occasions," said DI Burton pointedly. "No, Manton was the one withdrawing money for their household expenses, while Prince Vikram was withdrawing money for...well, only he can tell us why he needed such large sums. But not yet. I don't want to put him on his guard. We won't ask him about it until we have more information on the matter."



The next day, DI Burton rang me to say that his men had traced the taxi driver who had picked up Alden from outside the pub at Well Walk.

"I'll speak to him this afternoon."

"Wait! Can I come along?" I asked eagerly.

"I'm sure I can question one taxi driver all by myself without your guidance," he replied sarcastically.

"Oh, do take me along, Detective Inspector. I promise I won't interfere in your conversation," I begged because I couldn't bear to be left out of any part of the investigation.

He relented with a deep sigh.

The wind had picked up by the time DI Burton pulled up outside the manor. The afternoon sky had turned a sullen grey, the kind that warned of more rain to come, and I pulled my coat tighter around me as I walked toward the waiting police car. Scottie trotted beside me with a sense of purpose, ears perked and tail wagging.

DI Burton eyed him warily.

"Must you bring that animal along, Miss Goring?" he asked, his deep voice laced with mild exasperation.

I lifted my chin.

"Yes, I must. I've been neglecting him ever since I began assisting you in this case, and he deserves an outing. Besides, Scottie is an excellent judge of character – he can usually tell when someone is hiding something."

Scottie, as if sensing he was the subject of conversation, gave a little huff and then trotted right up to Burton's side. To my amusement, instead of rebuffing the attention, the usually no-nonsense detective gave him an absent-minded scratch behind the ears.

"He's a traitor," I observed dryly.

Burton glanced down at Scottie.

"No, Miss Goring, he's got good taste."

I rolled my eyes but said nothing as we climbed into the car.

The drive through London's twisting streets was uneventful, save for Scottie making himself comfortable by resting his head on DI Burton's knee. I tried not to smile when I caught the detective looking down at my dog with a bemused expression. It wasn't easy, especially when I noticed that he did not push Scottie's head off his knee.

"Where are we meeting this taxi driver?" I asked.

"Off Commercial Street. My men tracked him down after checking which taxis had been working near the pub that night. He was hesitant at first – some of these cabbies don't like getting mixed up in police business – but a few well-placed questions made him see sense."

The car pulled up outside a tea shop that had seen better days. The sign above the door read *The Rose & Crown*, though the paint was peeling, and the windows had a permanent smudge to them. A few men stood loitering nearby, smoking and talking in low voices, but otherwise, the street was quiet.

The driver was waiting inside, sitting at a corner table with a cup of tea that had likely gone cold. He was a thin, wiry man with a narrow face and a nervous energy that made him look as if he might bolt at any moment. His cap was pulled low, and his fingers drummed against the table.

DI Burton led the way, taking the seat opposite him, while I sat down beside him, Scottie immediately making himself at home beneath the table.

"Are you Mr Flynn?" asked Burton.

The cabbie nodded.

"Aye. Reggie Flynn at yer service. You the detective?"

DI Burton nodded.

"This is my assistant, Miss Goring."

Flynn nodded to me, eyed Scottie warily, and then returned his attention to Burton.

"I've already told the officer what I saw."

"You did," agreed Burton. "But we'd like to hear it again. From the beginning, if you please."

Flynn sighed and rubbed his jaw.

"It was almost a quarter to five when the man - Alden, you called him? - got into my taxi."

DI Burton leaned forward.

"But you already had a passenger."

Flynn nodded.

"Aye, a gent already in the backseat. Smart coat, well-spoken type. He tapped me on the shoulder when we arrived at the pub and I pulled up. He beckoned to this man, Alden, and he got in."

"And where were they headed?"

"The gent asked me to drive to Westminster."

"Did they speak to each other?"

"Alden tried to say something about how he didn't think it was a good idea, but the gent shushed him. I think he didn't want to talk about it in front of me."

I exchanged a meaningful glance with DI Burton.

"That means Alden knew who he was dealing with," I murmured.

"What did he look like? This gent?" asked DI Burton sharply.

Flynn hesitated.

"It was getting dark, you understand, and I wasn't exactly staring at him through the mirror. But I do remember one thing clear as day - he had this streak of white in his hair, right over his forehead."

My heart skipped a beat.

"A streak of white?"

Flynn nodded.

"Aye, miss. Stood out against the rest of his dark hair. Like a bolt of lightning."

I exchanged another glance with Burton. The description was unmistakable. Langley had the same distinctive feature.

"Are you sure about that?" asked DI Burton in a measured tone.

"Positive."

I drummed my fingers on the table.

"And where did you take them?" I asked, only to be on the receiving end of a scowl from Burton. Too late, I remembered that I had promised to stay out of the conversation.

"As I said, we were heading towards Westminster," said Flynn. "We were near the Abbey when the gent with the white streak suddenly told me to stop. Said they'd walk the rest of the way. Paid me too - good money, more than the fare was worth."

He shifted uncomfortably.

"Then he stepped out and told Alden to get out, as well. And I remember thinking that he looked like someone had just walked over his grave."

I frowned at him, wondering if he was adding this just for effect.

"What does that mean?" asked DI Burton sharply.

"Well, he seemed shaken. Frightened even."

DI Burton folded his arms.

"And that was the last you saw of them?"

Flynn nodded.

"Aye. Dropped them off, and that was that."

"Flynn, did you notice anything else unusual about this man? Did he speak in a certain way?" asked DI Burton.

Flynn shook his head.

"Not really. Well-dressed, like I said. Carried himself with confidence. Spoke like a gentleman."

I sat back in my chair, my mind racing. Scottie, who had been remarkably well-behaved, chose that moment to nudge against Flynn's leg. The cabbie chuckled and reached down to scratch behind the dog's ears.

"Friendly little thing, ain't he?"

"He has his moments," said DI Burton with a grunt.

We thanked Flynn, who seemed relieved to be done with the whole affair, and we returned to the police car. Scottie shook himself as if shedding the tension of the conversation. I smiled slightly, but my thoughts were elsewhere.

Langley's distinctive white streak had been noticed by more than one person, and now he was supposedly in a cab with Alden the night he disappeared. But there was one problem.

"Langley was sick that night, Detective Inspector," I pointed out. "Is it possible that his manservant was lying about that?"

"No, I followed up on his statement, Miss Goring. The manservant confirmed that he had to call for a doctor that evening because Langley was sick. I have the doctor's statement as well. Langley is telling the truth."

"But how can he have been in two places at the same time on two successive days? First at Alden's boardinghouse and at his club. And now, in the cab at the same time that he was at home, lying sick in his bed!"

DI Burton's expression was unreadable.

“Either Flynn is lying, or someone is impersonating Langley, and I reckon it is the latter. Miss Goring, we have a very clever impostor on our hands.”

I drew in a sharp breath because this case seemed to be getting murkier by the minute. If someone had gone through the trouble of disguising themselves as Langley, it meant they had a plan.

“Why would someone try to implicate Langley?” I asked.

“I think it was more a case of adopting a convenient disguise to throw the police off the scent of the real killer.”

“But why use a disguise at all?”

“Probably because the person under the disguise is extremely recognisable. Probably because even being seen with Alden could point to their culpability in the disappearance of the necklace.”

I took a deep breath to calm my racing heart.

“It brings us back to the royal family, doesn’t it?”

DI Burton nodded slowly.

“So what now?”

He unbuttoned his coat before he held the car door open for me.

“Now we find out who had a reason to pose as Langley,” he announced, as he got into the driver’s seat.

Scottie wagged his tail, oblivious to the seriousness of the situation. I glanced down at him, then back at Burton.

“Let’s hope Scottie’s keen nose is onto something,” I said lightly. “Because I have a feeling this is about to get a lot more complicated.”

And with that, we set off, the city lights flickering as the mystery deepened around us.

CHAPTER 15



“I don’t see what we can do next, Detective Inspector,” I said with a sigh, as we pulled up outside the manor. “Prince Vikram, Prince Jay and Princess Noor all have strong alibis for the time that Alden disappeared. Princess Noor and I were together all evening, while the two princes were playing billiards.”

Romley let us in and took our coats. I had just taken one step towards the parlour when I stopped and turned to our butler.

“Romley, may I have a word with you in the small parlour?”

“Of course, Miss Goring,” he replied with a small nod and followed us into the room.

I ignored the quizzical glance DI Burton gave me and smiled at the butler.

“Romley, I’m going to ask you to think very carefully before you answer my questions. Do you remember the day the man from Cartier visited us to pick up the necklace?”

“Of course, Miss Goring.”

“Do you remember what Prince Vikram and Prince Jay were doing that evening just before dinner?”

“Yes, Miss Goring. They arrived just in time to dress for dinner. Not together, of course. Prince Jay arrived by the main door, and Prince Vikram arrived by the side door that leads to the Heath.”

DI Burton and I stared at him in confusion.

“Arrived? What do you mean arrived?” asked Burton sharply. “They were in the house, man! Playing billiards until dinner!”

Romley gave him a calm look, unperturbed by his outburst.

“No, sir. I’m afraid Their Highnesses could not possibly have played billiards that evening because the baize was torn. There was a large rip in the centre. The second housemaid noticed it when she was dusting the room that morning, and informed me of it. I put an out-of-order sign on the billiards table immediately. It is still there if you’d like to see it. I did inform Lady Goring about it, but she said she didn’t wish to have it repaired just yet,” he said.

I let out a loud groan.

“Miss Goring, how is it that none of you noticed that the billiards table was out of order?” asked DI Burton with disbelief.

“Probably because none of us care for the game. The billiards table is only used when we have visitors, and since the royal family arrived, the two princes have taken over the room for their own. Even Jimmy doesn’t venture in there when they are playing because they play for money, Detective Inspector. And my brother plays too ill to risk losing a fortune at the table.”

“I think it is time to interrogate the royal family again. They have been spinning us a web of lies and it is time to break it,” said DI Burton grimly. “Romley, please ask the two princes and Princess Noor to see us in the sitting room immediately.”

Ten minutes later, we were all assembled in the sitting room. Jimmy and Richard Manton wandered in, as well,

looking very curious.

A log crackled in the fireplace of the sitting room, casting long shadows on the richly panelled walls. But despite the warmth of the fire, the atmosphere in the room was frigid.

Detective Inspector Burton stood near the mantelpiece, his expression set in stone. His dark overcoat was draped over the back of a chair, and his sleeves were rolled slightly, as though he meant business.

Seated across from him on the sofa, Prince Vikram kept his expression carefully neutral, although his fingers tensed against the armrest. Beside him, Princess Noor looked equally tense. Prince Jay sat in the wing chair across from them, his usual easy charm dulled by the weight of the accusation hanging in the air.

I sat slightly apart, my gaze darting between the two princes and the detective. At my feet, Scottie dozed lightly, blissfully unaware of the tension. Jimmy leaned against the mantel, arms folded, watching in silence.

"What is the meaning of this summons, Detective Inspector?" asked Prince Vikram, looking slightly wary, as well he should, I thought viciously.

"There are a few points I'd like cleared up, Your Highness," replied Burton coldly.

"Such as?"

"Such as why did you lie about being in the billiards room on the night Alden disappeared?"

Prince Vikram stiffened and scowled at him.

"Where is the lie? I already told you - Jay and I were playing billiards that evening."

"But there is an out-of-order sign on the table, Your Highness. You can't possibly have played that evening because the baize was torn."

Prince Vikram shook his head stubbornly.

"No, Detective Inspector. We did play because the baize did not get damaged until later that evening when I rammed my cue into the table accidentally. Jay can back me up."

"Y-yes... Vikram's right," stammered Prince Jay.

"Come, Your Highness," said DI Burton sardonically. "I have two witnesses who can confirm that the baize was torn that morning."

Prince Vikram's hands tightened on the arms of the sofa, but his face remained carefully neutral.

Burton continued, his voice quiet but firm.

"I spoke to the butler. He passed through the billiards room at half past four, and it was empty. If you were there, he would have seen you."

There was a long pause. Finally, Prince Vikram spoke.

"We weren't in the billiards room," he admitted.

Jimmy let out a low whistle, and Princess Noor gasped in surprise.

"Then where were you? And before you answer, I want you to know that the butler saw you returning to the house through the side door just before dinner."

Prince Vikram exhaled slowly. He glanced at Princess Noor, and she leaned forward slightly.

"Vikram, where were you?"

There was another awkward silence until he finally spoke.

"I was on the Heath."

Jimmy straightened slightly.

"The Heath? What the devil were you doing there?" he asked before I shot him a quelling frown.

"I went for a long walk. Since when is that a crime?" asked Prince Vikram defensively.

Burton's expression darkened.

"This isn't a game, Your Highness. It is time you stopped playing," he said grimly. "This is a murder case, and if you don't come clean now, you will leave me no choice but to arrest you."

"Arrest him on what charge?" demanded Princess Noor. "So he lied about going for a walk. That's not a crime, Detective Inspector. Don't forget that you need to prove a motive before you can accuse a man of murder."

“Oh, I have motives aplenty, Your Highness,” retorted DI Burton. “For instance, let’s talk about your financial transactions, Your Highness.”

Prince Vikram’s fingers twitched on the armrest.

“What about them?” he asked in a casual tone that seemed forced.

“Your bank statements show that you are firmly on the way to financial ruin...”

“That is because our mother has restricted our allowance,” broke in Prince Jay. “And how dare you access our bank statements without our permission?”

DI Burton gave him a cold smile.

“I got these from the Foreign Office, which takes a great interest in your family’s affairs, Your Highness. As I was saying before you interrupted me so rudely, I am surprised that a man on the brink of a financial disaster would waste such large amounts of money,” he said, pulling out the bank statements and squinting at them. “Let’s see. Here’s the first withdrawal of three hundred pounds as soon as you landed in London. And another one ten days later. And the biggest one yet that happened the day after the ball. How do you explain that, Prince Vikram?”

Princess Noor turned to her husband in shock and looked as if she was about to speak, but she subsided when he clutched her hand tightly in warning.

“What does my personal spending have to do with anyone, Detective Inspector?” he asked haughtily. “Our lives are not like yours. We have expenses you couldn’t even dream about.”

“I agree, Your Highness. But given your financial problems, those very expenses give you a very strong motive for murder and larceny,” countered DI Burton, not in the least intimidated by the prince’s high-handed behaviour.

Prince Vikram swallowed. His fingers tightened into fists against his knees.

"I have not killed anyone," he declared loudly. "Nor have I stolen the necklace."

"Then tell us where you spent all that money," snapped DI Burton. "Considering the timing of those withdrawals, I'd like to know: whom were you paying?"

I watched Prince Vikram carefully. There was the faintest flicker in his eyes – a moment's hesitation.

The room grew heavy with tension as his silence stretched out, his eyes shifting from DI Burton's penetrating gaze to Princess Noor's concerned look. I could tell that he was a man used to control, accustomed to being in charge, but here, surrounded by the law and suspicion, he was cornered.

Princess Noor turned around to face him, her eyes never leaving his face.

"What was the money for, Vikram? Please tell us," she urged softly.

There it was again – his hesitation. A flicker of *something* crossed his face, a flash of unease before it was masked with cold indifference.

DI Burton pressed harder.

"You're not going to get away with evasion, Your Highness. You might as well come clean."

Prince Vikram looked at his wife again, and it seemed as if her beseeching gaze did what DI Burton's badgering could not do. It broke his iron will.

"Very well. If you really want to know, I am being blackmailed."

CHAPTER 16



“Tell us everything, Your Highness,” ordered DI Burton firmly.

“On the journey to England, I was approached by a fellow traveller on the ship. A man called William Dunn. He joined our nightly poker game, and before we knew it, he was part of our little circle,” began Prince Vikram.

“Not little Will Dunn,” cried Prince Jay. “He seemed like a harmless chap, if a little too easily dazzled by the trappings of our lifestyle.”

“He isn’t harmless at all,” replied Prince Vikram grimly. “He’s a snake and a vicious one at that. He came up to me on our last night on the ship and told me that he had a very incriminating document concerning our father. One that would see him ruined and our family disgraced if it was made public. I didn’t believe him at first, but he showed me a copy of the document, and I knew he was speaking the truth.”

“What was it, man?” demanded Prince Jay.

Prince Vikram shook his head.

“Our father signed a treaty with the British Resident, promising to share information about the dissenters in our state in exchange for the chance to rule indefinitely. If this

betrayal comes to light, it will disgrace us all because we will lose the trust and love of our people forever."

Prince Jay turned pale at the disclosure.

"I can't believe it," he muttered. "It must be a forgery."

"It was our father's signature, Jay," said Prince Vikram quietly.

"And this man is still blackmailing you?" asked DI Burton.

"Yes. He telephoned me the day after the ball and asked for more money. I met him on the Heath that evening to inform him that this was all I could pay until my allowance was restored."

"And did he agree to that?" asked Prince Jay with disbelief.

Prince Vikram let out a mirthless laugh.

"Oh, he was certainly very understanding about it then," he said.

"And now?" asked Princess Noor.

"Now, he's back with a new demand. He telephoned me this morning and said while he's very sympathetic to my plight, his conscience will not allow him to keep quiet on the matter. He has many friends among the dissenters, and he says he owes it to them to make the document public. Unless I can come up with another payment, which he swears will go towards paying the legal fees for dissenters who have been arrested by the British. He's going to ring me tonight with instructions for our next meeting."

As if on cue, Romley entered the room.

"Your Highness, there is a telephone call for you. The caller wouldn't give his name," he announced.

Prince Vikram bounded off the sofa and made for the door angrily.

"That must be Dunn. I'll tell him to do his worst," he declared.

"Hold on, Your Highness. That wouldn't be a very wise move on your part. Are you willing to risk the disgrace that

will follow if the truth becomes known?" asked DI Burton, reminding him of what was at stake.

Prince Vikram looked tortured as he turned to face us.

"What else can I do? I cannot allow him to milk me dry," he said desperately.

"You're not alone in this, Your Highness. You have the might of the British Empire at your side," replied DI Burton. "What Dunn is doing is essentially treason. If he makes the document public, he will be acting against the Crown, and that gives me reason enough to arrest him."

"He's right, Vik. It is time to end Dunn's treacherous game once and for all," said Prince Jay fiercely.

Prince Vikram smiled for the first time since he entered the room.

"All right. Tell me what to do, Detective Inspector," he said.

"Tell him you can make one final payment and no more," advised DI Burton. "But when he arrives at the designated rendezvous point, he will be in for a nasty surprise."

Prince Vikram left the room with a grin on his face, and he returned five minutes later with an even bigger grin.

"He wants to meet me tonight, Detective Inspector! At midnight, at our usual spot on the Heath."

"We'll be lying in wait for him," promised DI Burton. "But we will wait for you to make the payment before we pounce on him."

And so it was that DI Burton and Prince Vikram set off for the Heath at half past eleven that night while Richard Manton, Princess Noor, Prince Jay, Jimmy, and I waited for them at the manor with bated breath. It was with great difficulty that Richard held Prince Jay back from following them.

"My brother needs me," argued Prince Jay. "What if Dunn gives them the slip?"

"DI Burton's men are crawling all over the Heath, Your Highness. They are manning all the exits. I promise you

Dunn will not escape,” said Richard kindly.

Prince Jay gave in with ill grace and threw himself on the loveseat next to Princess Noor, who was glued to the window that overlooked the Heath.

“Can you see anything?” he asked.

She shook her head in response.

“It is too dark to see anything,” she replied. “But I’m watching for their return.”

It was almost an hour later that she leapt up with a soft cry.

“I can see some torches coming towards the house,” she announced.

Not five minutes later, Prince Vikram bounded into the room with a triumphant grin, with Detective Burton at his heels.

“It is over. It is finally over, Noor,” he said, and she gave a loud cry of relief.

“Did you get him, Detective Inspector?” I asked.

“We did, Miss Goring,” replied DI Burton. “We arrested him as soon as he accepted the envelope containing the money from Prince Vikram. I’ll need you to come down to the Yard tomorrow morning and file an official complaint, Your Highness.”

“And the document?” asked Prince Jay.

“The Foreign Office will make sure he turns it over, sir. I wouldn’t worry about it anymore if I were you,” said DI Burton reassuringly.

Scottie and I walked him to the door after he made arrangements for Prince Vikram’s visit to the Yard the next morning.

“Detective Inspector, we haven’t considered one angle to our case,” I pointed out.

“And what is that, Miss Goring?”

“What if the Langley who was at the club and later sick at his home was the impostor, while the real Langley was out murdering poor Alden?”

"Do you think the fake Langley was skilled enough to fool the real Langley's manservant as well as a group of close friends without being noticed?" countered DI Burton, and my shoulders slumped in defeat. That did sound far-fetched.

"Maybe not, but that is the only lead we have left," I said wearily.

"Not at all, Miss Goring. We haven't ruled out any of our suspects yet."

I stared at him in surprise, wondering whether the late hour and my tiredness were playing tricks on my mind.

"Detective Inspector, do you mean to say you still suspect Prince Vikram and Princess Noor of murdering Alden?"

"All I'm saying is that I haven't quite ruled them out as suspects yet."

"But...but...Prince Vikram was being blackmailed by William Dunn," I argued.

"Which gives him an excellent motive for murder. He needed the money quite desperately, don't you think?"

I didn't know what to think. He was right, I realised slowly. All we had proved so far was that Prince Vikram had a very solid motive for murder.

"But what about Langley?" I persisted. "Are we letting him off the hook so easily? What if he arranged for a double to secure his alibi?"

"We're not letting him off the hook at all, Miss Goring. I have arranged for the waitress who served him at the café in Clapham, and the Hackney driver who drove him and Alden to Westminster to visit the Yard tomorrow to confirm if the man they saw was indeed Victor Langley. But we can't deny that certain members of the royal family have a far stronger motive to murder Alden than he does."

"Prince Jay," I murmured at once because I realised what he meant. "If Prince Vikram's alibi for the evening that Alden disappeared is false, then so is his brother's because they said they were together until it was time to change for dinner."

"Exactly," said DI Burton, sounding pleased with my reasoning. "We know Prince Vikram was out meeting Dunn on the Heath that evening. Where was Prince Jay?"

Where, indeed.

"He couldn't have been with Miss Derwent because we know she was at Alden's boarding house in Clapham, because she wanted to commission a replica of the necklace for herself."

"So she says. I think her statement bears a little more scrutiny, don't you think?"

"I do, Detective Inspector! Maybe she and her fiancé were in it together," I said excitedly.

"Possibly. From the state of his bank account, we know he certainly needed the money. But I think we need to pay Miss Derwent another visit before we confront Prince Jay."

Just then, Scottie, who had been snoozing by the door, gave a sharp bark and bounded to the sitting room door, which was shut. He barked again, and I tiptoed up to the door and pushed it open. The room was empty, save for Prince Jay, who stood by the fireplace, lighting a cigarette.

"Were you looking for someone?" he asked warily, and I shook my head before I allowed the door to swing shut.

"What is it, Scottie?" I asked, but all I got out of my silly dog was a loud yawn.

"Will you meet me outside Miss Derwent's flat tomorrow afternoon, Miss Goring?" asked DI Burton.

"Of course. Do you want me to ring her and let her know we're coming?" I asked softly, keeping one eye on the sitting room door.

"No...let it be a surprise," he replied thoughtfully.

CHAPTER 17



The next day, Scottie and I set off for Miss Derwent's flat in Soho in Jimmy's Morris Oxford 'bullnose' that he lent me with extreme reluctance. It was a bit cheeky of him, seeing as how I was a better driver than he would ever be, I thought, changing the gears a little too fast and wincing at the car's loud protest.

Scottie gave a very put-upon sigh as he lay down on the seat next to me with his paws over his eyes.

"You're being very dramatic," I informed him. "I'm an excellent driver."

But he refused to believe me and didn't take his paws off his eyes until we were safely at our destination.

I saw DI Burton waiting outside Miss Derwent's mansion block on the other side of the road, and I parked as neatly as I could and let Scottie out before I stepped out of the car.

But I had scarcely taken two steps when Scottie let out a sharp bark and came to an abrupt halt. I almost fell over him but managed to stay on my feet. More importantly, I managed to stay where I was. Which was what saved my life, for not two seconds later, a speeding car almost ran me over before it sped away.

I stood frozen in place for a few moments while Scottie barked furiously and DI Burton came running over to me.

"Are you hurt, Miss Goring?" he asked frantically.

I shook my head slowly.

"No, he missed me, all thanks to Scottie here," I whispered. "He saved my life. Did you see the driver?"

"No, he was driving too fast," said DI Burton furiously. "I'll telephone the Yard immediately and have the car traced. It was a red Austin Seven - a Baby Austin. I didn't get the license plate, but maybe we can trace his route after he drove away from here."

"Detective Inspector, I did get a good look at the driver," I said.

"And?" he asked sharply as Scottie jumped all over me, trying to check if I was hurt.

"All I saw was the profile of a man with black hair slicked back and a large streak of white over his forehead."

DI Burton was speechless for a long moment.

"Langley! He wouldn't dare." He breathed menacingly before he sprang to life. "I have a man stationed outside his house, Miss Goring. We can get to the bottom of this once and for all. Come along, Miss Goring."

"My car..." I protested, but he shook his head.

"Leave it here. You're in no state to drive. Come along now. We need to get to Langley's house immediately."

I shook myself out of the fear that had encased me and followed DI Burton to his car. He drove to Bloomsbury in his police car in record time, honking at anyone foolish enough to get in our way. We screeched to a halt in front of Langley's house, and a plainclothes police officer strolled up to the car.

"Is he back, Morty?" asked DI Burton as he sprang out of the car.

"Back? He never left, guv'nor," said the officer, sounding puzzled. "He's been home since six o'clock last night."

"That's impossible," I said sharply. "We just saw him..."

DI Burton held up a hand to silence me and ran up the steps to Langley's door. I left Scottie with the plainclothes officer and followed him quickly. He rang the doorbell and stood there impatiently until Langley's manservant opened the door.

"Is your master at home?" asked DI Burton.

"Yes, sir. I'll inform him of your presence."

"Wait a minute. What time did he come home this afternoon?" asked DI Burton.

The manservant looked at him in surprise.

"Mr Langley has been home all day, sir. He had a few meetings in his study in the morning, and he just finished a late lunch at his desk."

"Do you mean to say he hasn't left the house today?"

Before the manservant could reply, Langley came strolling out of his study.

"Can I help you, Detective Inspector?" he asked coldly. "Is there a reason you're harassing my servant?"

"I'm merely trying to ascertain your whereabouts this morning, Mr Langley," replied DI Burton.

"Well? Did he tell you that I've been home all day?"

"Yes, he did. And now I'll leave you to get on with your day, sir," said DI Burton, raising his hat politely.

I pursed my lips tightly as we walked back to the car.

"Do you see what's going on, Miss Goring?"

"It wasn't Langley," I said through practically bloodless lips. "It was the impostor. And he tried to kill me."

"But how did he know where to find you? Think carefully, Miss Goring. Did you tell anyone you were going to Miss Derwent's house?"

"No," I cried. "I even told Jimmy I was going to Liberty to buy tea towels."

"Were you followed on the way to Soho?"

"Not that I could tell, but I have to be honest, Detective Inspector. I wasn't really checking," I said ruefully.

Just then, I remembered the way Scottie had barked at the door of the sitting room last night as DI Burton and I stood in the hallway making plans for the next day. Prince Jay was the only person in the room when I checked. Was it possible that he had been listening at the door and knew we were planning to visit his fiancée?

When I mentioned this to DI Burton, he scowled deeply and swore under his breath.

“But why would Prince Jay want to kill me?”

“Maybe because he doesn’t want us to investigate his or Miss Derwent’s role in this case,” suggested DI Burton.

We drove back to Merivale Manor in silence, with Scottie firmly in my lap, casting watchful glances at every vehicle that came too close to us.

Princess Noor and Prince Vikram were strolling in the garden when we drove up, and they came to greet us.

“Where is Prince Jay?” I asked, and Princess Noor seemed taken aback.

“I suppose he’s playing cricket with Richard and Jimmy on the Heath. At least, that’s what they were planning to do this afternoon since this is the first sunny day we’ve had in ages,” she said

I sighed heavily at her words because this seemed impossible to unravel. If Prince Jay was playing cricket on the Heath, then who was it who had tried to run me down?

“Your Highness, do either of you have a car at your disposal in London?” asked DI Burton.

“Well, yes. I have a Rolls Royce that we all use. And Noor has a lovely little red Baby Austin at her disposal, although she doesn’t like to drive it much. She prefers to be driven around,” replied Prince Vikram.

I shot a startled glance at DI Burton. The car that tried to run me over was a red Baby Austin!

“Are both the cars at the manor right now?” asked DI Burton grimly.

Prince Vikram shrugged.

"I suppose so. They are usually parked in the mews at the back of the manor."

We thanked them for their help and handed Scottie over to a footman before we walked over to the mews.

"If Prince Jay is playing cricket on the Heath, the car should be here because they would have walked to the Heath," I commented as we turned the corner. But to my surprise, it was only the magnificent Rolls Royce that the royals had arrived in that was parked in the mews. There was no sign of the other car.

DI Burton exhaled sharply and walked around to see if it was parked on the other side. He shook his head as he returned to where I stood.

"Where is Prince Jay's car?" I wondered loudly.

"Hullo? Are you looking for Prince Jay?" asked Jimmy, turning the corner just then. "You're out of luck. He decided to take Miss Derwent for a picnic in the Regent's Park. And who could blame them? It's such a lovely day. Perfect for a picnic, wouldn't you say?"

"When did he leave?" I demanded, and Jimmy looked taken aback by the urgency in my voice.

"Right after you left, actually. Did you find some nice tea towels? And where's my car?"

I gave him a sheepish look.

"Er...no. They were all out of tea towels. As for your car...well...I got a puncture and I've left it at a garage near Liberty," I lied hastily.

Jimmy shot me a suspicious glance before he turned it towards DI Burton.

"And did you drop her home, Detective Inspector?" he asked.

"I did," replied DI Burton calmly.

"And where did you happen to meet her?"

"I rang him at the Yard to ask for help," I said before DI Burton could reply.

I was sure he was up to the challenge of making up a story, but I had more experience lying to my brother than he did.

"You rang Scotland Yard because you got a puncture?" Jimmy asked sceptically. "Really, Kitty! As if I'm so wet behind the ear as to fall for that story. Tell me the truth. Have the two of you been sleuthing?"

"Ask me no questions, and I will tell you no fibs," I said with a wicked grin, quoting Oliver Goldsmith.

"As long as you aren't bothering poor Victor. I need him to be in a good mood, Kitty," warned my brother.

"Why? What hold does he have over you, Jimmy?" I demanded.

"Hold? He has no hold over me," sputtered Jimmy. "I merely need him to be in an amiable mood because I'm about to strike a very big deal with him."

"A big deal of *what*? There's nothing left in the attics to sell," I hissed, with an embarrassed glance at DI Burton.

"Never you mind, Kitty dear," said Jimmy loftily. "And stop harassing Victor. He has nothing to do with this blasted murder."

"Yet, he keeps popping up everywhere," I muttered under my breath.

"What's that?" asked Jimmy.

I shook my head with a smile.

"I said I'll leave your friend alone. Now, are you sure Prince Jay left soon after I did?"

"I just said so, didn't I? You need to start listening, Kitty," scolded Jimmy before he walked off in a huff.

I turned to face DI Burton and found him staring after my brother thoughtfully.

"Well?" I demanded. "How are we going to prove that it was Prince Jay who tried to kill me?"

CHAPTER 18



“I wish I had got a good look at the license plate,” said DI Burton furiously. “But it all happened in a flash. He drove away before I could do anything more than register the make of the car. Did you happen to see his face, Miss Goring?”

I shook my head in dismay.

“No, I only saw his hair...”

“Which was exactly what he intended,” snarled DI Burton. “He wanted us to think it was Langley. Unfortunately for him, we were having Langley watched, and we discovered that he was home all day.”

Just then, a very familiar Baby Austin roared into the mews and stopped an inch away from me.

“I’m so sorry, Miss Goring. I almost didn’t see you there,” said Prince Jay sheepishly.

“You need to work on your driving skills, Your Highness,” I said coldly. “I’m surprised to see you back so soon. Jimmy mentioned you were planning a picnic in the park this afternoon.”

“Yes, well, Flossie had a headache and insisted on returning home,” he replied awkwardly.

"Can anyone vouch for your whereabouts this afternoon, Your Highness?" asked DI Burton bluntly. "Apart from your fiancée, of course."

"What do you mean? Has something happened?" asked Prince Jay warily.

"Please answer the question," insisted DI Burton.

"Well, let me think. Dash it! I can't think of anyone... except Flossie's maid. Yes! She can tell you that I picked Flossie up from her flat slightly over an hour ago. We set off for the park, but Flossie said being out in the sun made her head ache. The maid can vouch for me."

"Hmm," said DI Burton disbelievingly. "But from what I heard, you left the manor two hours ago, right after Miss Goring did. Say it took you twenty-five minutes to get there, you still have almost thirty-five minutes accounted for. Can you provide me with an account of that period, Your Highness?"

"What is this...an inquisition?" asked Prince Jay uneasily. "I wasn't looking at my watch while driving. So, no! I cannot account for every minute of the period mentioned, Detective Inspector. You'll just have to take my word for it."

"I'm afraid your word is not good enough when there is murderous mischief at hand, Your Highness," said DI Burton sternly.

"Another murder?" asked Prince Jay, blanching.

"Not quite, but close. Someone in a red Baby Austin similar to yours almost ran down Miss Goring in broad daylight."

"And you think it was I? Dashed insolent, I must say! Why would I hurt Miss Goring?" demanded Prince Jay furiously.

"Maybe you didn't mean to hurt her," conceded DI Burton. "Maybe you merely meant it to be a warning. To tell her to stop investigating your involvement in the case."

"You're mad," whispered Prince Jay, going white.

DI Burton shook his head.

"No, Your Highness. I'm only determined...to find Alden's killer and put him behind bars, no matter who he is."

"Look here, I can account for those blasted thirty-five minutes. But you can't tell Vikram," said Prince Jay desperately. "He will be furious with me."

"Keep talking," said DI Burton.

"I visited a moneylender in one of the tiny lanes behind Flossie's house. I'm up to my neck in debt, Detective Inspector, and I needed some cash to keep the sharks at bay. I hocked one of my rings to raise some money. Naturally, I wouldn't want my brother to know the extent of my difficulties."

"Can this moneylender vouch for you, Your Highness?"

Prince Jay let out a derisive snort.

"I'm afraid I can't allow you to speak with him, Detective Inspector. He's a hard man. He will make me suffer if I lead the police to his lair. As I said earlier, you'll just have to take my word for it. But here's a receipt to show you I'm telling the truth."

Prince Jay handed Burton a scrap of paper, which he studied intently.

"I'm afraid this only mentions the date when you pawned the ring and not the time."

Prince Jay shrugged in reply.

"That's all I have," he replied. "Is there anything else I can help you with, Detective Inspector?"

"That's all for now," said DI Burton and he stepped back to allow the prince to walk back to the house.

"Do you believe him?" I asked as I watched him walk away.

"We have no choice but to take him at his word, Miss Goring. We have no evidence against him. It is all conjecture."

"Detective Inspector, if Prince Jay has been going around committing crimes disguised as Langley, where does he keep it?"

“Keep what?”

“The wig with the white streak,” I exclaimed. “Where does he keep it when he’s not wearing it?”

“Probably in his bedchamber,” said DI Burton sharply.

“Exactly! Here’s what we can do to find our evidence. I’ll search his room when he’s at dinner tonight,” I offered.

“All right, but do not confront him. Say nothing to anyone. Merely note where you found the wig—if you find it—and leave everything as it was when you entered the room,” he warned.

I tried not to roll my eyes at his words, but I had a feeling he knew what I was thinking.

“This isn’t a joke, Miss Goring,” he said sternly. “I need you to take this very seriously. If Prince Jay suspects you’re on his trail, you might find yourself in a lot of danger.”

“I promise I’ll be careful,” I replied hastily, to ward off another of his lectures.

True to my word, I was very careful. I sent word to my mother that I was in bed with a headache and that I would not come down for dinner. I even sacrificed the prospect of one of Cook’s excellent roast dinners and made do with the bowl of soup and toast that my mother sent up on a tray. When my stomach insisted on growling despite my meagre meal, I fed it some biscuits from the tin on my bedside table and grumpily hoped DI Burton appreciated my sacrifice.

When I was certain that Romley had begun dishing up the fabulous roast dinner, I sent Florence to lure Prince Jay’s valet to his own dinner downstairs. When I heard them walk past my room, I poked my head out of my room and looked up and down the corridor to make sure it was empty before I set off for Prince Jay’s room, which was at the other end of the long corridor.

Scottie shot me a quizzical glance as he shook himself awake and followed me on my quest.

“You must be very quiet,” I whispered and he wagged his tail enthusiastically in response.

I sent up a prayer of thanks when I found Prince Jay's door unlocked. I turned to Scottie and pointed at the carpet outside the room.

"Stay," I ordered sternly.

To my delight, he lay down promptly and stared at me questioningly from under his bushy brows.

I tiptoed into the room and ventured in only after I confirmed it was empty. I stared at the wardrobe in dismay, wondering where to start my search. After a thorough search of the most obvious hiding places, like drawers and even the fireplace, which bore no fruit, I turned to the less obvious ones, like below the heavy mattress on the bed.

I was completely out of breath and terrified of being caught in the act by the time I had searched every corner of the room. But there was no sign of the wig.

A sudden, soft cry down the corridor sent me scurrying out of the room. Scottie was nowhere to be seen. Before I could whistle to him, I heard another cry, and I realised it was coming from Princess Noor's room, which was a few doors down from Prince Jay's room. And then I heard it. A loud, defiant bark. Scottie!

I hurried towards Princess Noor's room to drag him out before he alerted the whole house. To my surprise, Princess Noor's maid was standing cowering against the far wall while Scottie rooted around in the open shoe cupboard.

"Oh, miss! Can you please call your dog off? He ran into the room when I opened the door to go downstairs for dinner, and now he won't leave," she whimpered.

"Are you afraid of dogs?" I asked kindly.

She nodded vigorously without taking her eyes off him.

"I am so sorry...Maude, is it?"

"Yes, miss. I'm that afraid of dogs because I was bitten by one when I was a little girl," she said softly.

"Don't worry, Maude. My dog won't bite. He's just very curious. But I will take him away before he frightens you anymore. Scottie! Come away, boy," I called sharply.

But Scottie was tugging at something and wouldn't heed my call.

I crouched next to him and tried to pull it away from him and succeeded in doing so only after a rousing game of tug. He was rooting around something that was wrapped in a cheesecloth.

"Let go, you idiot," I said with a laugh and almost fell over when he did.

Scottie grabbed the loose end of the cloth and shook the parcel open, and a couple of things tumbled out, but I had eyes only for one object.

All the laughter drained out of me when I realised that I had found exactly what I had been looking for in Prince Jay's room—a wig with a streak of white hair in the front, just like Langley's.

CHAPTER 19



“What’s this?” I asked sharply, reaching for the wig.

“I don’t know, miss. But Her Highness will be very upset if he chews up her shoes,” said Maude worriedly.

My mind raced as I thought about the implications of finding the impostor’s disguise in Princess Noor’s shoe cupboard. My first impulse was to run downstairs and confront her, but better sense prevailed, and I realised that I could not reveal that I had found it. Not until I discovered Princess Noor’s role in the case. Was this all her idea or was she merely an accomplice?

I placed the wig back in the cloth and grabbed Scottie by the scruff of his neck.

“What is he eating?” I cried as he hastily swallowed something before I could pull it out of his mouth.

“It must have been a piece of leather from an old shoe, miss,” replied Maude.

I sighed angrily. He did love chewing on the best-quality leather shoes. Our Scottie had excellent taste.

“You little beast! It will serve you right if it makes you sick,” I scolded as I picked him up and walked to the door. He gave a little burp in response and had the grace to look

ashamed of his behaviour. "I'm terribly sorry he bothered you, Maude. I'll make sure he doesn't come in here again."

I took Scottie back to my room and ignored his pleas to be let out again.

"No, sir. You're not going anywhere. You have to help me solve this case," I said sternly.

I waited till everyone was back in their rooms before I tiptoed down to the hall to telephone DI Burton at his home. He had given me the number for an emergency, and I supposed this counted as one. At least, I hoped it did, because if I had to wait until morning to tell him what I had learnt, I would simply burst.

Thankfully, he answered on the first ring.

"Burton," he said gruffly.

"Good evening, Detective Inspector. This is Kitty Goring," I said, casting a quick look around the hall to make sure I was still alone.

"Good evening, Miss Goring. How can I help you?"

"I found it," I whispered excitedly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I found the wig!"

"That's wonderful," came the triumphant reply. "Now we've finally got him."

"Sorry, no," I said hesitantly. "I didn't find it in Prince Jay's room."

I hastily explained where I had found the wig and there was complete silence on the line as DI Burton tried to make sense of what I was saying.

"Do you think it was her all this while?" I asked, biting my lower lip in distress because of all the people it could have been, I really didn't want it to be Princess Noor. I liked her, dash it!

"We don't know that yet. Miss Goring, let us not be hasty. If Princess Noor is the mastermind behind this robbery and murder, we need concrete evidence before we accuse her. Let us stay low for a bit while I try to trace the car that

almost hit you. Remember, she and her husband were at the manor when that attack happened."

I exhaled slowly when he mentioned that. She couldn't have tried to kill me, in that case. Unless she hired someone to do it. Or unless they were in it as a family. No, I could not believe something so monstrous.

"What do you suggest?" I asked glumly.

"Keep an eye on her. Watch what she does and whom she speaks to, and if she does anything suspicious, call me at once. And Miss Goring, let me make one thing quite clear. You are not to confront her at any time," he said severely.

I returned to my room feeling as if my whole world was off-kilter, only to find Jimmy pacing up and down the corridor outside my bedchamber.

"What is it, Jimmy?" I asked worriedly.

"Kitty, I need your help," he cried, looking pale with fear.

"Of course!" I said, marching him into my room.

"I've done something...something big, and well...stupid," he said, gulping audibly.

I clutched his arm in fright.

"Oh, Jimmy! Don't tell me you're involved in this blasted case, after all," I said despairingly.

"What? *No!* Is this murder all you can think about, Kitty?" he asked, sounding aghast.

"Well...yes," I stammered as I realised that the necklace, its disappearance and Alden's death had practically taken over my life.

"But why? You don't work for the police. You're Kitty Goring, for heaven's sake! One of London's brightest Bright Young Thing. When was the last time you went to a nightclub with Bingo? Or shopping with Gertie? When was the last time you did something for yourself? And don't mention buying tea towels at liberty," he said severely when I opened my mouth to reply.

I shut my mouth immediately because I had no answer for him.

"I wish we hadn't fallen for the temptation that Lord Huntley dangled in front of us. I wish we hadn't invited Prince Vikram and his family to Merivale Manor," he went on with a groan.

"We needed the money, Jimmy," I said gently.

"Money," he spat. "That is the root of all our troubles."

"Well, it is. You have very little, and I have none. We can't keep up our lifestyle without any money."

"And this ridiculous quest to make money by any means has led us into grave danger over and over again for the past few months. If Mother hadn't invited Helen to stay with us, we wouldn't have been embroiled in those murders last summer, and now, if we hadn't offered to host these blasted royals, you wouldn't be stuck with yet another murder on your hands. I've made up my mind, Kitty," he declared. "We are not selling our souls for money anymore."

"What else can we sell? We've run out of paintings and silver," I said dryly.

Jimmy took a deep breath and swallowed audibly before he spoke.

"Well, you'll have to help me break it to Mother, but I've decided to sell our estate."

I stared at him in horror. Had he gone mad?

"Sell Merivale? You must be joking! Mother would never allow you to do such a thing," I said faintly.

"I don't need her permission," he replied shakily. "The estate is mine to do as I wish. And I wish to sell it."

"You're well within your rights to sell it, Jimmy. But I beg you to think again. This is the legacy of the Gorings. You owe it to your future sons to hang on to it tooth and nail, as Papa did before you and GrandPapa before him," I whispered. "I cannot believe you wish to sell our home."

I staggered on my feet as the enormity of his proposition hit me right in the gut.

"I *won't* sell our home! Merivale Manor is not for sale," he said fiercely.

"I...I don't understand."

"I mean to sell the land around the house, not the house. Langley is not just an antiques dealer, Kitty. He is also a developer. He wishes to build expensive mansion blocks on our land, and he's offering me a lot of money for it. You know the estate is failing miserably. The home farm brings in practically nothing, and I cannot find men to farm it for me anymore. Meanwhile, we beggar ourselves just to keep up appearances."

"The mind boggles at the very idea," I said, as my stomach churned in horror at the idea of rows of mansion blocks standing in place of our home farm.

"Mansion blocks are the future of London, Kitty. And Langley's giving us a very good deal. We will be millionaires if I sell him our land. Not to mention that he will give each of us spacious apartments in the mansion blocks in addition to the money."

"I don't trust him one inch, Jimmy. The man is a snake," I cried. "How can you be sure he won't cheat you out of the money?"

"I've asked Lord Huntley to recommend an excellent solicitor who will handle the sale of the land. We will still retain a bit of land around the house. The gardens and mews, and so forth. But you must help me break the news to Mother because the offer is open only for a few more days. I can't keep Langley waiting any longer."

"Is that what you were discussing at the ball?" I asked, suddenly remembering the conversation that I had interrupted.

"Of course! What did you think we were talking about? How to steal the Celestial Necklace?" he asked with a laugh.

He gaped at the look on my face.

"Really, Kitty! Is that what you think about me? You *are* an idiot," he scolded.

"I was worried Langley was blackmailing you into doing something bad," I replied defensively. "You must admit you

haven't had the best taste in friends until now."

"But I've told you over and over again that Langley is merely a business associate," he argued. "Nobody ever listens to me in this house. Now, how are you going to break it to Mother?"

"I thought I was only to help come up with a plan to do it," I said, outraged at his assumption that I would do something as stupid as telling Lady Charlotte Goring that she was about to lose all her lands.

"No, no. You're going to have to do the actual telling," said my incorrigible brother with a happy grin. "Come, now. Be a sport."

"No," I said stoutly.

"Is this the same Kitty Goring who is the scourge of criminals in Hampstead? The woman before whom murderers and thieves alike tremble with fear?"

"Yes, well, this scourge trembles with fear at the thought of confronting her mother. So, I want nothing to do with your plan, thank you very much. You can break it to Mother all by yourself since it was your stupid idea in the first place. I have enough on my plate already," I said, with a shudder.

"Oh no!" cried Jimmy, going pale with fright at the very idea. "Maybe I don't have to tell her at all. She doesn't go out to the home farm anyway."

"I think she'd notice if a row of mansion blocks spring up suddenly where the farm is supposed to be," I pointed out.

Jimmy groaned theatrically.

"Do you think she will be very upset?" he whimpered.

She was.

"What have I done to deserve such undutiful children?" wailed Mother when Jimmy and I sat her down in her bed chamber the next morning and broke the news of the impending sale. "All I wanted was for you to continue your dear father's legacy. But you're trying to destroy it. The Gorings have been landed gentry for more than three

hundred years. But now, we will have no land. Oh! I cannot bear it!"

"We still have the estate in Buckinghamshire, Mother. And now, we will have the money to hire an estate manager to run it properly," wheedled Jimmy. "And I promise you we will never have to sell the manor. You can host as many balls as you like and never have to worry about bills again. You can even hire more footmen and parlourmaids. If you think about it, I'm doing more to preserve the Goring name now than I have ever done in the past."

"Let us be honest, Mother. You know we have no other choice. The estate is in ruins, and Jimmy doesn't have the skills to revive it. I don't believe anyone can revive it at this point," I added. "And isn't this better than rushing a distress sale because we're up to our necks in debt?"

Mother sniffed prodigiously and mopped her face with her silk handkerchief.

"If you had to sell the estate, why didn't you think of it sooner?" she demanded. "At least we wouldn't be falling all over these cursed royals with their necklaces, murders, and never-ending intrigue."

"Does that mean you will allow me to go ahead and sign the deal?" asked Jimmy cautiously.

That was Mother's cue to burst into tears again.

"Oh, go ahead and do it. Who am I to stop you? It isn't as if you ever listen to your poor mother," she wailed.

I nodded meaningfully at Jimmy.

"This is the only blessing you'll get," I whispered. "I'd go with it if I were you."

"Thank you, Mother," he said with relief and kissed her quickly before he bounded out of the room.

I cursed him under my breath because the least he could have done was take me with him. Now, I had to sit here and listen to Mother's sermon about disobliging and cruel children. It took twenty minutes of nodding along to her strictures and a bit of distraction from Henrietta, who very

kindly botched the bit of embroidery she was doing before I could make my escape.

As I staggered downstairs, I saw Princess Noor slipping out of the side door.

CHAPTER 20



I looked out of the window and frowned in surprise. She wasn't going towards the mews but made straight for the street. I decided to follow her because I simply had to know what she was up to. I wondered if I had the time to telephone DI Burton, but the princess was already out on the lane that led to Well Walk and I didn't want to lose sight of her.

I grabbed a coat and an umbrella before I hastened after her. Well Walk was practically deserted at this hour, so I had to stay behind lest I spook her, but I could catch up more easily once the princess turned onto the High Street.

As I followed her, I wondered where she was going. Princess Noor knew nothing of the city. But for a woman who refused to step out of the house without an escort, she was forging ahead at a very confident clip. We walked past the clock tower on Heath Street, past the underground station and turned onto the High Street. I dodged women with big baskets who were returning from the market at Gospel Oak and men with large Bowler hats and sharp walking sticks who walked as if they owned the pavements.

Princess Noor crossed the road a couple of times, and I realised she was making her way down the high street in a

zigzag fashion designed to throw off anyone following her. Unfortunately for her, I was far too determined to be bamboozled by such a manoeuvre.

She stopped near a building that housed a chip shop on one side and a shabby little antique shop on the other, which never showed any signs of life. I wondered if Princess Noor was in the mood for a bit of shopping. Or if she was up to something more sinister.

I ducked behind a stall selling Cornish pasties and waited for her to make her next move. Just as I began to wonder if she'd had a sudden hankering after fish and chips, Princess Noor pushed open the door to the antique shop and stepped inside hesitantly.

Was she making plans to sell the necklace on the sly? I debated following her into the shop. DI Burton had warned me not to confront her, but I had to know what she was up to, I decided. Accordingly, I crossed the road to the opposite side and read the name of the antique shop. There was a dusty nameplate that read:

The Brockley Emporium

Antiques and more

I wanted to follow Princess Noor into the shop, but I wasn't foolish enough to walk in there without knowing anything about the place.

I crossed the road again and made my way to the telephone booth on the corner, which had a direct view of the shop. I needed to speak to the one person who might know something about the Brockley Emporium. Someone who had sold more than his fair share of objets d'art—my brother, Jimmy.

With one eye on the entrance to the shop, I dialled the number to Merivale Manor and was relieved when Romley answered at once.

"Thank heavens! Romley, is Jimmy still at home? Can you fetch him for me, please?"

Within two ticks, Jimmy was on the line.

"Hullo? Kitty? Where on earth are you calling from? Didn't I just leave you to console Mother?" he asked.

"Yes, you did, you fiend! But I had a stroke of luck, and Henrietta helped me escape. Now listen here, this is important. What do you know about the Brockley Emporium?"

"The *what*? Speak up, Kitty. It sounds like you're calling from Timbuktu."

"The Brockley Emporium," I repeated as loudly as I dared to, still keeping an eye out for Princess Noor. "It is an antique shop on the high street. But a very dingy little one, from what I've seen."

"Ah, I know that one. What business do you have with Brockley?" asked Jimmy censoriously.

"That doesn't concern you," I snapped. "Just tell me what I need to know."

"He's a bad sort, Kitty. And you'd do well to stay away from him."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because he deals mainly in stolen goods and will go to any length to protect his investment if you know what I mean."

"Jimmy," I said kindly. "I always know what you mean. Now, can you introduce me to this Brockley?"

"Of course, not!"

"Why not?" I demanded.

"Because he's not the sort of person I care to know. I only know what I've heard about him from Langley," said Jimmy.

"Langley? Huh," I murmured, my brain ticking rapidly. "Listen, Jimmy...darling...have you signed the deal with Langley yet?"

"No, I'm expecting him at any minute for our meeting, though. Hullo, speak of the devil. I have to hang up now, Kitty. Langley's here."

"Wait!" I screeched, causing passersby to shoot me startled looks as they gave the telephone booth a wide berth.

"Jimmy, please listen to me. I need you to do me a big favour."

Ten minutes later, Princess Noor had still not left the shop, and I was waiting outside the telephone booth when Jimmy's Morris slid to a halt next to me. Victor Langley parked the car neatly and hopped out of the car with a wrathful glance at me.

"Of all the interfering little devils," he snarled.

"Hey," scolded Jimmy, as he rounded the driver's side and joined us. "That's my sister you're talking to, Victor. I'll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head."

"The two of you think you have the upper hand, eh? I can still cancel this deal, and then where will you be?"

"Oh, I'm sure we can find another developer with no difficulty. As my brother explained to me, mansion blocks are the future of London, and we have a fairly large parcel of land that will appeal to anyone wanting to make millions by building a few hundred flats," I said sweetly.

Langley turned an unattractive shade of puce and glared at the two of us.

"What do you want?" he barked.

"Calm down, Mr Langley. I'm not asking for much. All I need is for you to telephone Mr Brockley of the Brockley Emporium and mention that a close and trusted friend, Miss Gertie Dacre, who's looking for a special piece of jewellery, will be visiting him shortly at your recommendation. The price is no bar, of course."

"You're asking me to help you trick one of my oldest friends?" he growled.

"Come now, Mr Langley. As a respected developer of luxury flats, you shouldn't associate with the likes of Brockley, and you know it. Maybe this is a good way to cut ties with such people for good," I reasoned.

"I won't do it," he said bluntly.

"Well, then thank you for your time. But the Gorings will look elsewhere for a property developer," I replied tartly.

Langley growled again, resembling a nasty bear more than a human.

"Fine! I'll do as you say but don't blame me if things go wrong. You can't mess with men like Brockley without suffering for it. Say, does DI Burton know what you're up to?" he asked suspiciously.

"Of course, he does. It was his idea," I lied cheerfully.

The truth was that if DI Burton discovered what I was up to, he'd lock me up in a jail cell and throw away the key. But I had to catch Princess Noor in the act of selling her necklace. For that was exactly what she was doing.

I didn't know if she was doing this all on her own or if Princes Vikram and Jay were part of the conspiracy, but I knew Princess Noor was up to no good.

Langley let out a loud, out-upon sigh, but when he realised that the only way to get Jimmy to sign over our land was to do as he was told, he squared his shoulders and stepped into the telephone booth to make the call. Not five minutes later, he came out and glared at me.

"It is done. Brockley has agreed to meet you whenever you like."

"What did you tell him about me?" I asked curiously.

"I told him you're a pampered heiress with plenty of money and no conscience. And I wasn't lying," he said with a sneer. I was sure he meant it to sting, but I merely smiled at him sweetly.

"That's an interesting way of putting it, I suppose," I said lightly. "Now, we're going to have to reschedule your meeting with Jimmy. He will telephone you when I have concluded my meeting with Brockley safely."

"But you promised to wrap this deal up if I helped you," he protested.

"And we will," I promised. "We just want to make sure you've held up your end of the deal."

"You are a very hard woman, Miss Goring," Langley said, shaking his head in disgust. "It is extremely unbecoming in a

young lady.”

“Unfortunately, it is all too necessary when one is dealing with lowlifes,” I retorted, tying the belt of my coat tightly around my waist and gripping my umbrella more securely before I thanked him for his help and walked towards the Brockley Emporium.

Jimmy drove away with Langley, and I took a deep breath as I pushed the door open and walked into the dimly lit shop.

CHAPTER 21



To my surprise, the shop was empty. I wondered if I was mistaken about the whole thing. But I had seen Princess Noor enter this very shop, and I had nothing to lose by trying my luck. So I raised my hand and pressed the bell on the counter.

No one answered the bell for a few minutes, and I fancied I could hear someone whispering, but I attributed it to my overworked imagination. I pressed the bell again and for slightly longer this time.

A curtain at the back of the shop swung open abruptly, and I stared in surprise at the tiny, wizened man glaring at me.

"Mr Brockley?" I stammered.

"Who wants to know?" he asked from around a fat cigar.

I took a deep breath and turned on the charm.

"My name is Gertie Dacre. I was referred to you by Victor Langley, who is a dear, dear friend of mine." I suppressed my natural revulsion at referring to a man like Langley as my dear friend.

"You must be the heiress," said Brockley before he came towards me.

I looked around the store hesitantly and was almost overcome by faintness at the staleness of the air inside. A person could choke to death in this place. Did he never open the windows? I took a few deep breaths and forced myself to remain upright as I took note of my surroundings.

Princess Noor was nowhere to be seen. I knew she hadn't left the shop because I had been watching the entrance like a hawk. Had I made a big mistake after all?

"Langley said you were looking for something special, Miss Dacre."

"Er...yes! I want an exquisite piece of jewellery to wear at my engagement party."

"Engaged, are you?" he crooned, twirling his cigar happily. "My felicitations, ma'am. And when is the happy event?"

I decided to go with the flow and pretended I was Gertie Dacre.

"Whenever I find the perfect necklace to go with my gown," I replied with a chuckle. "My fiancé, the Duke of Girton, spoils me silly. And he wants me to have whatever I wish."

"Don't you think you could find what you're looking for in Cartier or Aspinall's, Miss Dacre? I'm a very small dealer."

I thought of every vampish woman I had ever met and tried to distill the essence of their behaviour into my very soul as I gave him a roguish wink.

"Ah, but where's the fun in that?" I asked. "You see, Mr Brockley, I like to live dangerously."

"I see," crooned Brockley, his eyes shining in anticipation at the prospect of an easy sale. "Are you looking for anything particular, Miss Dacre?"

"My gown is of a sparkling silver, so I want a stone that goes with that colour. Maybe an unusual diamond...or... maybe sapphires," I said, my voice dropping to a whisper.

I was thoroughly enjoying the pretence of being someone other than boring old Kitty Goring, who never did anything

interesting any more.

Brockley stared at me shrewdly, and for a moment, I was worried I might have given my hand away. But he blew a perfect ring of smoke before he unlocked some drawers and pulled out a few jewellery cases.

I stared at them with bored disinterest as he flipped open one case after the other, displaying beautiful sapphire and diamond necklaces worth a fortune. I flicked through them, trying them on one by one in front of a mirror, with a growing scowl on my face.

"No," I declared. "These are all quite ordinary Mr Brockley. Please don't waste my time with these trinkets. If this is all you have, I shall take my leave."

Since Princess Noor wasn't here, there was no reason for me to continue this charade. Besides, Brockley did not seem like the type of man who would appreciate being fooled. The sooner I got out of here, the better, I decided, as I moved towards the door.

"Just a minute, Miss Dacre," he said hastily. "I was saving the best for last."

I cocked an eyebrow and stared at him sceptically.

"Is that so?" I murmured.

"Please give me one moment, Miss Dacre. Let me check if I have something special in my safe."

He gestured to me to wait and disappeared behind the deep red curtain at the back of the store. When he reappeared, there was a new gleam in his eye.

"There is a necklace... a very special one," he whispered. "It has come to me all the way from India, and I have it on good authority that it used to belong to a princess."

My heart leapt with excitement, but I allowed a bored look to come over my face as I let out a derisive snort.

"Tell me something I haven't heard, Mr Brockley. If I had a penny for every time someone tried to sell me a necklace belonging to an Indian princess, I'd be...well, I'd be even richer than my fiancé, the Duke," I said with a chuckle.

"Oh no, Miss Dacre. This isn't one of those fake trinkets. This is the real thing. It is called the Celestial Necklace," he whispered, wagging his eyebrows in excitement.

I swallowed over a suddenly dry throat.

"Where is it, then?"

"Miss Dacre, the Celestial Necklace is priceless. I cannot risk showing it to someone who isn't a serious buyer," said Brockley, running a finger over one of the jewellery cases on the counter in front of me.

"I *am* a serious buyer, Mr Brockley. But I'm beginning to believe this necklace doesn't exist. You're just stringing me along," I accused. "I'm not fond of people wasting my time, so if you do have such a priceless necklace, bring it out at once. Otherwise, I'm sure Victor Langley can recommend another dealer."

"Well...the thing is...purely as a security measure, you understand...I cannot take it out of its display case. If you'd be so kind as to step into the inner office for your first look at the necklace, maybe we could discuss it further."

I knew following him deeper into his store was a bad idea. A very bad idea. If DI Burton ever found out, he'd clap me in irons and have me shipped to the West Indies. And yet, this man claimed to have the necklace we were all searching for, which could only mean one thing. Princess Noor had come here after all.

If that were true, where was she? Was she hiding in the inner office? And did Brockley really have the Celestial Necklace? There was only one way to find out.

With a deep breath, I followed him into the inner office behind the deep red curtain. And the first thing I saw was the prone figure of Princess Noor lying on the floor in the centre of the room.

CHAPTER 22



“*Y*our Highness,” I gasped, running to the princess who seemed to be unconscious.

I shook her shoulders gently and she groaned and stirred a bit, but did not wake up.

“What have you done to her?” I cried.

“Me? I didn’t do anything,” said Brockley defensively. “It was *‘er*. She knocked the princess out with an antique silver candlestick. Bloodthirsty little thug, she is, our Maudie.”

At his words, I looked up in surprise and found Princess Noor’s maid, Maude, grinning down at me. I tried to leap to my feet in anger, but she tutted softly as she waved a pistol in my direction. I froze in place and tried to muster my wits.

“Welcome, Miss Dacre...or should I say...Miss Goring? That’s her real name, Uncle Ernie,” she said calmly.

“Well, I never! A lady giving a false name? What is the world coming to, Maudie?” he asked, with a mocking grin.

“Why did you hurt Princess Noor?” I demanded.

“Because she caught on to what I was doing, didn’t she? There I was, minding my own business, and what does she do but follow me around like Mary’s little lamb?”

“Nosy, that’s what I call it,” said Brockley.

"How is a girl to ever get any work done?" complained Maude, throwing her hands in the air.

"So it was your wig I found in Princess Noor's shoe cupboard the other day," I exclaimed, but I could not imagine Maude ever pulling off being Langley. She was the wrong gender, for starters. But I *could* imagine Brockley doing it. He had played his old friend a very nasty hand indeed. "It was you all along."

"Indeed," replied Maude, sounding very pleased with herself. "It was all because of me that Princess Noor needed to send the necklace for repairs at all. I managed to loosen that clasp just before the ball. And planting that wig in her shoe cupboard was a stroke of genius."

"You meant me to find it," I gasped.

"Of course! We wanted you to suspect the royal family – a bunch of toffee-nosed toffs if I ever saw one," she snarled. "I lured your stupid dog in with a piece of meat and led him straight to the closet. There was another piece of meat under the wig, and he went mad trying to get at it."

So that was what Scottie had been chewing when I found the wig.

"But why did you go to all that trouble?" I asked. "You had access to the necklace anyway."

"Yes, and who do you think always lands up in clink when a lady loses a trinket? Her maid, that's who," replied Maude, with a toss of her head. "It was much better to have it stolen while it was on its way to the jeweller."

"But why did you kill Alden?" I asked.

"Never you mind, miss. Her Highness is starting to stir. Wake up, Sleeping Beauty," she cooed mockingly as Princess Noor sat up slowly. "Now, help her into that chair, please. I'd like you to tie her up using the rope in that corner. Yes, thank you very much."

I leaned over the princess and pretended I was helping her stand.

"Lie back down and pretend you've fainted, Your Highness," I whispered.

"What's that?" demanded Maude.

"She's swooned again," I cried as Princess Noor went limp in my arms.

"Let me see," snapped Maude, and she advanced on us. "No tricks, mind you."

When she bent over Princess Noor to check if she was really unconscious, I stuck a foot out and tripped her. She went sprawling to the floor with a loud squawk, and I went straight for the pistol in her hand. We rolled on the floor, grappling for the pistol, and I almost grabbed it out of her hand, but Brockley was too quick for me.

He stepped over Princess Noor's body and grabbed the pistol. Before I could snatch it from him, he backed away until he was at the door.

"Now, now, miss. She warned you not to try any tricks," he scolded. "You be a good girl and get the princess into that chair and tie her up."

"What about me?" I asked as Maude splashed some water on Princess Noor's face to revive her. She opened her eyes with a groan and sat up gingerly.

"Up with you, Your Highness," said Maude. "Sit down here, if you please. As for you, miss, you've been far too nosy for your own good. It's time for you to pay the price. Shoot her, Uncle Ernie."

"I think not," drawled Jimmy from behind Brockley. "Step away from my sister and stand in the corner with your hands where we can see them or your uncle cops it. I have a gun aimed at his back, and I'm not afraid to shoot."

"Jimmy! You angel," I exclaimed happily. "How did you get here?"

"I wasn't going to let you brave Brockley all by yourself, sister dear," he replied, with one eye on the man he was holding hostage with a pistol to his back. "I dropped Langley

to his car and raced back here with my pistol. Turns out I was just in time. Is Princess Noor all right?"

"Yes, she might have a bad concussion, though. She can't seem to stay awake," I replied. "What do we do now?"

"You should tie Maude to one of the chairs in the outer room first before we deal with Brockley," suggested Jimmy. "I say! Is that the missing necklace?"

I marvelled at the change in him. Apparently, all my brother needed was for the pressure of running the estates to be taken off his shoulders to turn him into a confident young man.

"It is! We've saved the day, Jimmy," I replied with a laugh.

I took the gun from Brockley's hand and between the two of us, Jimmy and I forced Maude and her uncle to move to the outer room at gunpoint, where we tied them to chairs one by one.

"I'll telephone the police before I call for a doctor for Princess Noor," I announced as I stuffed handkerchiefs into their mouths to keep them from cursing at us loudly. "DI Burton will be furious with me, but that cannot be helped. At least we've found the necklace and Alden's killers. Now that I think of it, he should be thanking me instead of yelling at me."

But when I picked up the receiver, the line was dead.

"Jimmy, this phone is out of order," I cried. "But it was working when Langley telephoned Brockley to tell him I was coming to see him."

"There's some road work happening on the High Street. They must have cut the telephone lines," he groaned.

"Here's what we're going to do, Jimmy. You keep an eye on them and Princess Noor, while I run out and telephone the police from the phone booth."

"All right, but hurry. That one looks like she can make trouble even when she's bound and gagged," he said, throwing a nasty glance at Maude.

She bounced in her chair, trying to drag it closer to Jimmy.

"Oh no, you don't," I said as I picked up a silver candlestick from the shelf above her and knocked her out in one swift stroke, just like she'd done to poor Princess Noor. As soon as the candlestick made contact with her skull, I felt as if the contents of my stomach would make a swift reappearance because I had never so much as squashed a fly in my life. But it was a necessary move to keep Jimmy safe from her while I went out to call for help, for I knew my brother would never hurt a woman even in self-defence.

I felt terrible for having suspected her of such a monstrous crime. But Maude and her uncle had done a very good job of framing the royal family for their crimes.

I waved the candlestick threateningly at Brockley who reared back in horror.

"You just sit there and be on your best behaviour until I get back," I warned, and he nodded vigorously.

With a wink at Jimmy, I skipped out of the shop and headed for the telephone booth. Just as I stepped out of the shop, I saw a very familiar red Baby Austin roaring past me on the High Street. It was Richard, driving Princess Noor's car. I put out a hand to wave him to a halt, but he had already driven past me.

Giving up, I entered the telephone booth and picked up the receiver. With a groan, I realised that the phone was out of order, just like Brockley's. I cursed the roadworks under my breath. Why did they have to choose today to snip the telephone lines?

With a sigh, I looked up and down the street, hoping to find a taxi to take me home since I was sure our telephone was still working, but there was none. With no time to waste, I began walking towards the Manor. I had barely taken two steps when a car screeched to a halt next to me. To my immense relief, it was Richard.

"There you are," I exclaimed. "I thought you didn't see me."

"I did, but there was no place to turn the car around. Hullo, you look worried," he said, casting me a quizzical glance.

"You don't know the half of it, Richard," I replied, getting into the passenger seat with a sigh. "Take me home at once. It's an emergency. I need to call the police immediately. And I need to send for a doctor because Princess Noor is hurt."

"What? Where is she?"

"I'll tell you on the way. Start driving!"

With a yelp, he gunned the engine and drove off, speeding up the hill. I filled him in on whatever had transpired, and he turned to shoot me a shocked glance when I told him that Maude was the one behind the robbery and Alden's murder.

The car swerved wildly as he made a sharp right towards Heath Street.

"You need to hurry back there after you drop me off and take the princess to the nearest hospital. I wish the telephone lines hadn't let us down just when we needed them," I said worriedly.

Something niggled at the back of my mind, but it seemed just out of reach. Just then, I noticed something odd.

"Richard..." I said slowly. "This isn't the way home."

"You don't say," he murmured.

I turned my head to see him smirking at me. Something about the turn of his head jolted a memory in my mind. For a few seconds, he looked just like the man who had tried to run me down. In this very car.

"It was you," I breathed in horror. "You tried to run me down. Not Brockley..."

CHAPTER 23



*M*y voice trailed off as I tried to make sense of what was happening.

"Stop the car," I demanded, but he only picked up speed as we approached the Heath.

I reached out to grab the wheel from him, but a very familiar click made me pause. The louse had a pistol aimed at my middle!

"Miss Goring, I will be forced to shoot you if you so much as twitch in your seat. So be a good girl and sit there quietly," he said with a polite smile that scared me more than all the snarling in the world.

I thought of jumping out of the car, but we were going so fast that I'd only end up hurting myself. I forced myself to stay still and reason with Richard.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked.

"You'll see," he said cheerfully. "You really shouldn't have meddled in this case, Kitty. I tried to warn you."

"Warn me? You tried to kill me," I exclaimed.

"Pfft! If I wanted to kill you, you would have been dead by now. I was warning you not to get in my way. But you did, which means now, I will have to take you out of my way."

He veered off the road and onto a wide dirt path that led deeper into the Heath. When we were almost at the bathing ponds, he stopped the car and motioned for me to get out.

"No tricks," he warned. "It won't take much for me to shoot you right here. That's right. Keep walking towards the bathing pond on your right."

"You won't get away with this. Jimmy's waiting for me to return with help."

"I'll take care of Jimmy, thank you very much. As soon as I've disposed of you just like I disposed of Alden."

"I thought it was Brockley who killed him," I said, trying to buy some time.

Richard let out a derisive snort.

"That idiot? He couldn't kill a mouse. He's all talk, but he quails at getting his hands dirty. No, that was all me."

"But why would you betray your employers, Richard?"

He stared at me dumbfounded, and it was a few seconds before he recovered the power of speech.

"*Why?* My dear Miss Goring, do you know how much that necklace will fetch? Even on the black market? I would betray my own grandmother for that much money," he replied with a shrill laugh.

"And Maude...where does she come in?"

"Ah, my beautiful Maude..." he said with a happy sigh.

"You were the one who hired her from the agency," I remembered, but Richard shook his head.

"Not from the agency. I met Maude at the Dinpore Polo Club last year. She had come down to see if there were any cut-price antiques her uncle could sell for triple the price back in London. I met her at a polo match and found her enchanting. She possesses a mercenary little soul that matches mine perfectly. We began smuggling antiques out of Dinpore Palace, which she would send to Brockley's emporium. It was a lovely little business we had going for us, right under the noses of the royal family. When I heard that Princess Noor was planning to bring the Celestial Necklace

to London, I thought it was the perfect opportunity to set ourselves up for life. Now, I need you to go ahead and stand at the edge of the wooden deck so that you fall right into the water when I shoot you in the head."

"But how did you convince the princess to hire her as a maid?" I asked hastily, trying to distract him.

"That was simple. I slowly poisoned the maid she had brought from India while we were on the ship until she was too sick for duty. She's recovering nicely in a little hospital near the East India Docks. Then, all I had to do was convince Her Highness that she needed a proper English maid for her stay in London. Come along, now. It's time to go for a little swim."

"But why did you kill Alden? And why the wig that made you look like Langley?" I asked desperately, hoping to buy some time until someone...anyone passed by. The Heath was normally crawling with dog walkers, but they were probably resting after luncheon right now.

"Ah, the wig was a particularly inspired choice, don't you think? It was such a neat little manoeuvre to distract the police. You and Burton went chasing after Langley while Maude and I laughed at you behind your backs. To be honest, Miss Goring, Alden did not have to die. I offered him a cut of the profits if he'd simply give us the necklace and then disappear. He could have made a new life for himself with the money. But he was far too straight to do anything of the kind. And so, he had to die."

"I can't believe you pulled off such a complicated scheme," I babbled.

"Believe it," he snapped. "Only I could have pulled off such a scheme. Of course, it would have made my life much easier if Princess Noor had allowed me to take the necklace to Cartier in the first place. But she felt the need to call a courier for some reason, and I had to improvise the plan at very short notice. I met Alden at his boardinghouse the day before he picked up the necklace and tried to lure him to our

side, but we couldn't arrive at an understanding, so I gave him one more chance. I collected him from outside the pub the next day when he was waiting for a taxi and took him for a walk along the Thames, hoping to knock some sense into his head. But when he threatened to expose me, I had no choice but to kill him and dump his body in the river."

"And you tried to frame the royal family for both the crimes," I accused.

I heard a faint bark in the distance, and it gave me hope where I had none before. I had to keep Richard talking until the dog and its walker came closer.

"Why not?" he shrugged. "What have they ever done to deserve a life of such luxury while I have to work for a living? Besides, it isn't as if they'd ever go to prison. At the most, they'd get a rap on the wrist and be forced to rusticate at Dinapore for a bit until things cooled down. Dear greedy Flossie was such a blessing because she couldn't keep her grubby little paws off the necklace. I decided she and Prince Jay would make lovely scapegoats for the murder. And when I tired of them, it was so much fun to pin it on Prince Vikram and Princess Noor. I overheard you and Burton planning to visit Flossie again and decided that was a good time to warn you to stop meddling with my plans. Now, turn around, Miss Goring."

"You can't get away with it, Richard. Victor Langley knows where I was going, and if you kill me and also manage to kill Jimmy before he calls the police, Langley will hunt you down like an animal because you would have cost him a very lucrative land deal," I said hastily, trying to keep his attention off the dog that was now barking nearby.

And then I realised that I recognised that shrill bark.

"Scottie," I screamed with all my might.

"Stop that," snapped Richard, looking around nervously. "Scottie is at the manor. I left him snoozing on the couch beside your mother."

There was a moment's silence, and then the woods resonated with Scottie's frenzied barking as he ran around trying to find me.

"Here, boy! Come here, Scottie," I shouted, trying to run past Richard, but he blocked my way and forced me to the edge of the water just as Scottie erupted from the bushes.

"Tell him to stay or I'll shoot him first," he snarled.

"Scottie, stay," I called immediately.

My fearless dog obeyed reluctantly but kept up a torrent of angry barks and growls.

"Say bye-bye, Miss Goring," crooned Richard as he raised his pistol to my face.

But before he could press the trigger, a shot rang out and Richard let out a shriek as he dropped his pistol.

I turned around to see Prince Vikram emerging from the bushes, smoking pistol in hand, with Prince Jay at his heels. They rounded on Richard, and Prince Vikram grabbed him by the collar and shook him as Scottie would shake a mouse.

"Your Highness, stop! The police can deal with him because I need you to go to the Brockley Emporium on the High Street at once," I cried, panting with fear. "Princess Noor is injured. Jimmy is with her, but she might need to go to the hospital. It was Richard and Maude all along. I'll go home and call the police while Prince Jay keeps watch over Richard."

"Yes, you go on, Vik. I'll watch this treacherous rat. And if he so much as twitches in my direction, I'll shoot him between the eyes."

I gave him the directions to the antique shop, and Prince Vikram raced off to rescue his wife while Prince Jay and I turned to Richard, who lay on the ground cradling his injured hand. Prince Jay kept Richard's own pistol trained on him while Scottie jumped all over me.

"You saved my life, you good boy," I squealed. "Thank you so much for riding to my rescue, Your Highness. I didn't expect to see anyone here at this time of the day."

“Scottie was driving your mother wild by jumping all over the furniture while she was trying to take a nap, so she banished him from the house. The poor boy looked so mournful that we decided to take him to the Heath for a run,” said Prince Jay with a grin. “The minute he heard your voice, he set off in pursuit and led us to the right place. You should train him to track and retrieve, Kitty. That is a very smart dog.”

“He is, indeed,” I cooed, kissing Scottie’s scruffy little face. “Ugh! Your breath stinks. Have you been hunting mice again, you fiend? Never mind, I’ll train you out of all your bad habits and turn you into the best detective dog in the world. Now, come along and let’s ring the police.”

CHAPTER 24



As I expected, DI Burton was furious with me. I heard him out patiently while he read me the riot act.

"Of all the feather-brained things to do," he fumed. "Did I not explicitly tell you not to go adventuring on your own?"

"Not in so many words," I pointed out. "You merely told me not to confront Princess Noor. Well, I didn't confront her."

"No, you decided to risk your life instead by following her headlong into danger. Yours, *and* those of Princess Noor and Sir James."

"But it did all work out in the end, Detective Inspector. And if I hadn't followed her into the emporium, you would never have found the killer," I argued and then realised that I should have stopped talking two minutes before I actually did.

DI Burton's face turned a shade of red that I did not even know existed in nature, and I was worried I was about to give him an apoplectic fit.

"I didn't mean it that way," I said hastily, but the damage was done.

"If you ever interfere in police work again, I will have you arrested for obstruction of justice, public endangerment and any other charge I can throw at you, Miss Goring. You are a menace, a nuisance, and a danger to everyone around you," he snarled.

"You really have some strong feelings towards me, don't you? Don't keep it in. Let it all out before your head explodes, Detective Inspector."

"You...you..." he sputtered.

Unfortunately, he was destined not to let it all out because Lord Huntley poked his head around the door of the small parlour.

"Well done, boy," he exclaimed gleefully. "You've tied everything up neatly, and excellent work on catching that William Dunn. The Foreign Office was very interested in what he was doing."

DI Burton cast me one last wrathful glance and straightened his cuffs as he turned to speak to Lord Huntley.

"I couldn't have done it without Miss Goring, sir," he said smoothly, and I gave him a sweet smile that I knew would irritate him no end. But there was nothing he could do about it.

I *had* saved the day, whether he liked it or not, and I had done so at great personal cost. My life had been threatened twice, and if I ever saw a pistol again in my life, I would simply scream in horror.

But poor Princess Noor had suffered more than I had.

"Is the princess safe?" I asked.

"She's recovering splendidly in her private room at the hospital with her husband by her side," said Lord Huntley, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"And the necklace?"

"It has been stowed in Jimmy's safe for now, to be returned to her when she returns to the manor," he replied.

"Will she have to stay in the hospital for long?"

"Just until tomorrow," promised Lord Huntley. "She will be dancing at your next ball soon enough. You acted very promptly, Kitty dear. I am very proud of you. And I think the Foreign Office is very pleased with you, too."

Prince Vikram had thankfully taken Princess Noor to the hospital as soon as he found her. As for Maude and her uncle, I had telephoned the Yard as soon as I got home, and DI Burton had acted immediately. He and his men had descended on Brockley's emporium just as Maude was beginning to stir, and they saved Jimmy the trouble of fighting her.

He told us all about it when we gathered in the sitting room to discuss the events of the day.

DI Burton scowled at the lot of us from next to the fireplace while Scottie sat at his feet, replete with the large steak I had given him as thanks for saving my life as soon as I got home. I would have liked him to sit at my feet, but I supposed DI Burton needed the comfort more than I did, seeing as how he had been left out of the most exciting part of the case.

"Cor, the first thing that Maude did when she regained consciousness was kick me hard in the shin," said Jimmy, rubbing his injured shin as he narrated what happened after I left to call for help. Henrietta handed him a block of ice wrapped in a cloth to place against his shin.

"You should have beaned her on the head with the candlestick again," I said unsympathetically. Really, he was going on about a kick to the shin while I had been kidnapped and almost shot!

"I couldn't do that to a woman," he exclaimed, recoiling in horror.

Henrietta and I exchanged a knowing grin, and I was relieved to see that the prospect of becoming a millionaire hadn't changed my brother too much.

"I can't believe Maude and Mr Manton hatched such a big conspiracy right under our noses," she murmured.

"Oh, they are a very wicked pair," I replied with a sigh. "They have been pilfering antiques from Dinpore Palace without anyone knowing. But this time, they bit off more than they could chew."

"I don't understand, Miss Goring. How did Princess Noor come to be at the Emporium?"

DI Burton cleared his throat and we all looked at him.

"She insisted on giving a statement to the police as soon as she regained consciousness. According to her, she saw Maude going into Brockley's shop on two occasions, and she found it very strange because it wasn't the kind of shop a lady's maid would frequent unless she was sent there on a commission by the lady herself. She began to wonder if Maude had anything to do with the theft and murder. So, when she saw her slinking out of the house without informing anyone, she decided to follow her to see what she was up to."

"Did she see the necklace in the shop?" I asked.

"When she entered the antique shop, Maude was nowhere to be seen. She described her to Brockley and asked him if her maid had come in. They must have realised that she was hot on Maude's scent, so Brockley lured her to the back of the shop, where Maude knocked her out with a candlestick. The princess says that someone hit her on the head when she stepped into the inner room, and she remembers nothing that happened after that until she woke up in the hospital," explained DI Burton.

"I hope this means you will stop investigating us, Detective Inspector," said Miss Derwent cheekily from the sofa where she was ensconced.

"Yes, I have no motive for stealing anything since Flossie used her savings to help me pay off my debts. I'm going to marry her as soon as we return to Dinpore and spend the rest of my life making it up to her," declared Prince Jay. "Even if my mother disapproves of our union."

“And I want nothing to do with the Celestial Necklace,” added Miss Derwent with a shudder. “It demands a very heavy price from those who wear it.”

CHAPTER 25



Two weeks later, my mother hosted a farewell ball for the royal family of Dinpore because they insisted on cutting their trip short and returning home immediately.

"I wish to return home to support my father as we deal with the repercussions from the leak of the document that William Dunn was using to blackmail me," declared Prince Vikram.

Despite the best efforts of the Foreign Office, they could not stop Dunn's co-conspirators in India from making the contents of the treaty public as soon as they learnt of his arrest, and Prince Vikram's father had to face a lot of criticism for betraying his own people. Their mother had begged the Princes Vikram and Jay to return to Dinpore to help appease their people.

"We believe Dunn left copies of the treaty with some of his friends in India. He swore to the Foreign Office that his was the only copy, and yet, the contents of the treaty seem to be common knowledge now. There are rumours that our father is planning to step down and hand over the throne to Vikram," said Prince Jay. "And since my brother plans to be more involved with the growing independence movement, a

fact that will anger the British Resident, my place is by his side."

"And my place is by yours," added Miss Derwent dreamily. Princess Noor let out a loud snort.

"It won't be as easy as that, Flossie. You will have our mother-in-law to contend with. Trust me, she will do all she can to keep the two of you apart. But Vikram and I will do our best to support you."

"And I'll do my best to keep my hands off your jewellery," quipped Miss Derwent with a wink.

I was relieved to see the two women on better terms now that Miss Derwent had shown that she wasn't pursuing Prince Jay for money. She did love him for the person he was, and not his title.

Princess Noor had recovered from her ordeal and could even put on the Celestial Necklace with equanimity after she personally took it to Cartier to have the clasp repaired.

"I was such a fool not to do this the first time around," she had said with a sigh as we sipped on complimentary glasses of champagne at the store.

"But you wouldn't have done this at all," I reminded her. "You would have sent Richard, and he would have executed his plan to steal the necklace successfully."

"Yes, but Alden's life would have been spared. A human life is much more precious than a necklace."

"Your mother-in-law would disown you if she ever heard you say that," I said with a smile.

Princess Noor exhaled slowly.

"I'm not as terrified of her as I used to be," she confided. "She will have even less power over me after my father-in-law steps down as ruler."

Jimmy sold all the lands around the manor to Langley, and for the first time since he had inherited the baronetcy, I saw my brother growing into his title and owning it. Mother was ecstatic at being able to host a ball even grander than the

previous one without answering to the Foreign Office for every penny she spent.

"The giant chocolate swan is the perfect centrepiece for the big table, isn't it, Kitty? And we have not one but three champagne fountains this time," she said gaily as we looked down at all the guests who were attending our ball.

"Your mother's finally happy now that her financial worries have been resolved. Let's make sure she doesn't see another bill in her life," proposed Lord Huntley with a chuckle. "Now, are you ready to host another esteemed guest from Vienna, Kitty dear? The Grand Duchess of Volksgarten wants to visit London, and cannot do without a companion of high social standing."

"Absolutely not," I declared. "I have no intention of turning into a political hostess anytime soon, Lord Huntley."

"Bah, you Bright Young Things just want to while away your time and money when you can do so much more with it," he complained. "Don't you want some excitement, Kitty?"

"No, thank you," I replied tartly. "I've had enough excitement to last me a lifetime. Now I want to do nothing more than visit nightclubs and have balls, champagne breakfasts and picnics in the park for the rest of my life."

"And what about murders?" asked DI Burton dryly, who was one of the special guests at the ball. "Have you given up on murders?"

"I want nothing to do with them," I said with a shudder. "I want peace and calm from now on."

"Come now, Miss Goring. Don't give up so easily. You cannot want calm when you're the very embodiment of chaos," he teased.

I turned my nose up at him and wished him a very icy good evening before I joined my friends.

"Hullo, Bingo! You're looking particularly glum this evening. What's wrong?" I asked, taking a large sip of my gin fizz.

"I am in love, Kitty," he announced.

"What? Again?" I asked, shaking my head in amusement.

"Yes, but for real, this time. Only, my mother disapproves of my choice...as always," replied the Earl of Belling, known to his closest friends as Bingo. "She won't give me my grandmother's ring to propose to the woman I love."

"So what? Buy her another one. I saw a beautiful sapphire ring at Cartier...wait...never mind about sapphires," I said with a grimace. "But there are plenty of rings you can choose from."

Bingo sighed deeply.

"You don't understand, Kitty. I can't just propose to Maria with an ordinary ring. A woman of her incandescent beauty deserves something special," he whined.

"I beg your pardon, Lord Belling," said Victor Langley smarmily, as he inserted himself into our conversation. "Did I hear you say you were looking for a special ring?"

"Why, yes. But who the devil are you?" asked Bingo in his usual way.

"Victor Langley at your service, Lord Belling. Land developer and antique dealer. Now, I happen to know of an exquisite ring with the provenance to match its beauty and value," he said, as he slowly detached Bingo from my side and led him away.

I wondered if I should intervene since I still did not trust Langley as far as I could throw him, but then I reasoned that Bingo was a big boy. He could protect himself. And if he couldn't, his mother certainly could.

"Miss Goring, would you like to dance?" asked a gruff voice, and I turned to find DI Burton at my elbow.

I stared at him warily for a moment.

"Do you plan to scold me some more?" I asked.

"I wouldn't dream of it," he replied, with a twinkle in his eyes.

With a slow smile, I placed my hand in his and allowed him to lead me to the dance floor.

"Your brother is looking particularly pleased with himself," he said as he twirled me around slowly.

"He has just found a very efficient manager for our estate in Buckinghamshire. Meanwhile, he finds himself flush with money for the first time since our father died," I explained.

"Which makes him a target for fortune hunters of all kinds," warned DI Burton.

I sighed unhappily because he had just voiced the worry that had been simmering at the back of my head for a while now. Jimmy had the worst taste in friends, not because he was drawn to bad habits naturally but because he was extremely gullible. I resolved to keep a stricter eye on his friends from now on, which was all I could do.

"Lord Huntley mentioned that you've been promoted. Congratulations, Detective Inspector," I said, and he shot me a quick smile.

"It is Detective Chief Inspector, now, Miss Goring."

"Very impressive," I murmured as the song wound to an end, and we walked towards the refreshments room. He left soon after, although I did convince him to try a Whiskey Sour before he left.

The royal family of Dinpore left early the next morning, and although I was sad to see them go, I was glad to have our home to ourselves. I spent a leisurely afternoon in the parlour with Mother, helping her make plans for her next house party.

"We must invite General Shaw's lovely granddaughter, Celia. I think she would make Jimmy a wonderful wife. I wonder if she has a brother."

"Mother! It is time to give up on your matchmaking," I scolded. "We do not need rich spouses anymore."

"That does not mean you don't need spouses at all," she replied tartly. "Jimmy needs a wife even more now that he's a rich, eligible bachelor. Do you want your brother to be taken in by a fortune-hunting hussy?"

Before I could reply, Bingo Belling burst in on us just as Romley was serving the tea.

"Beg your pardon, Lady Goring. I didn't mean to interrupt your tea. But I had to share the good news," he said excitedly. "Kitty, you won't believe it. I've just asked Maria to marry me, and she said yes!"

"That's wonderful," I cried.

After all the congratulations had died down, he turned to me again.

"And it's all because of that man I met at your ball. Victor What's-his-name... He put me on to the most wonderful ring in the world, and Maria absolutely loved it."

"Is it very expensive?" asked Mother eagerly. "Is it beautiful?"

"Even better," he replied with relish. *"It is cursed."*



A Cursed ring, a clueless Earl, and a case of Murder Most Fashionable!

When charming but scatterbrained Lord Benjamin "Bingo" Belling proposes to an opera singer with a glamorous antique ring, he is sure he has found true love. What he does not know is that the ring comes with a sinister reputation - it is cursed, and anyone who wears it dies within a week.

When his fiancée tragically succumbs to the curse, Bingo finds himself the prime suspect in a scandalous murder case. The police are circling, and even Bingo's famous connections cannot save him.

Enter Kitty Goring, Bingo's childhood friend and an amateur sleuth with a sharp eye and sharper wit. Determined to clear his name, Kitty dives into a world of whispered superstitions, jealous rivals, and secrets hidden beneath the glittering surface of 1920s London.

With a little help from her loyal Scottish Terrier and a reluctant Detective Inspector Henry Burton, Kitty must untangle the truth before the real killer strikes again—or poor Bingo's goose is cooked!

*Fans of light-hearted, vintage mysteries and delightful amateur sleuths will love **The Case Of The Cursed Ring**, a sparkling tale of glamour, intrigue, and murder set against the dazzling backdrop of the Jazz Age.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ella Strike, author of historical cozy mysteries and chief sleuth of The Cozy Crime Club, lives in London.

When she's not penning murder mysteries or drinking copious amounts of Earl Grey, you can find her with her nose buried in a book or listening to true crime podcasts as she cooks.

Her stories are a mix of history, a dash of intrigue, and a whole lot of cozy, old-world charm.

She loves to hear from her readers, so feel free to write to her or follow her on Instagram.

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