

## **Holly Day and the Jewelled Dagger**

**Gail Vallance Barrington**

Holly didn't stop to admire the cast iron canopy and beautiful art deco lamps as she rushed into the old apartment building. She also didn't take time to savour the scent of history wafting through the stately lobby. Yesterday, when she'd been here to interview Margot Strathearn, aging icon of stage and screen, she was so starstruck she'd forgotten her new faux designer tote bag.

This morning, as they wolfed down their Cheerios, she said to her roommate, Malcolm, "I need that bag to carry my lunch. It's much better than the ratty old Walgreen's sack I've been using."

Now she was picking it up but there was no time to lose.

*I need to get to the studio before Robart does. He's on the warpath.*

Just back after the LA fires, he was trying to whip the cooking show staff back into shape while still dealing with his own losses. His contempt for them was boundless.

Today, the ornate elevator did not surround her in a welcoming embrace. Instead, it felt distant and sad, as if it were saying, "Are you sure you want to go up there?"

*Don't be silly. It's only an elevator.*

But once on the fifth floor, a strange sense of foreboding trickled down her back. Margot's door was ajar. Holly's knock went unanswered. She tried again. Only echoing silence replied. She tiptoed inside.

"Margot, are you here?" she called. "It's me, Holly. I forgot my bag. Are you okay?"

Heavy drapes darkened the living room, so bright and full of life yesterday. A small shaft of sunlight slipped through and caught something that sparkled on the floor.

Holly bent to see what it was.

*Gosh. Is that Margot?*

A body was sprawled on the carpet, arms wide, a jewelled dagger deep in its chest. It was the very dagger Holly had

examined yesterday. She looked more closely through the gloom. It was Margot alright, and she was definitely dead. An intense, meaty smell filled her nose. She began to gag. Covering her mouth with one hand, she fumbled in her purse with the other, tugged out her phone, and called the police.

After that, she had a lot of time to think because she couldn't do anything else.

"Sit there," said one of the two large police officers who burst into the apartment. He pointed to the chair she'd been in yesterday. "Don't move. We'll get to you eventually."

So, here she was, gripping her tote bag, thinking of yesterday.

#

Margot greeted her warmly.

"Come in, dear," she said. "Let's have a good visit."

They went through the shadowy hall, a gallery of head shots at different points in her career, and into a tall, narrow room full of sunlight. It was littered with cushions, knick-knacks, books, and scripts, the artistic chaos of a well-traveled actor.

Holly pulled her gift from the tote bag. "I hope you like this," she said. "It was one of my grandmother's favourites."

Margot opened the box of Earl Grey tea and sniffed with delight. "Thank you, dear. I like it very much. Now, how can I help you?"

It had taken a month to pin Margot down for an interview. Holly's question tumbled out.

"I want to know how you fall into a part so completely. Your Ophelia is breathtaking."

Margot smiled. "That's kind of you to say. I'm not acting, though. I become her."

"What do you mean?"

"You dig into the role and try to understand the character's background. Their time and place. How they arrived at this particular moment. What they plan to do next."

“Is that it?”

“No. It’s just the beginning. Then, you need to mine your own life. Find a time when you felt something similar, even if it was in a very different situation.”

Holly laughed. “Like I’ve hardly been a soldier in fourteenth century Denmark.”

“No, of course not,” Margot agreed, “but what do soldiers do? They fight. They guard. Most of the time they stand around and wait for the next thing to happen. Have you ever done that?”

“Sure, lots,” said Holly. “I’ve waited ages for auditions.” She thought some more. “Last month I was in a ton of lines at banks and insurance companies, on errands for my boss.”

Her eyes narrowed as she ran her tiny diamond back and forth on its fine chain.

*He never thanked me. I guess I need a new job.*

She went on. “Well, I have been a guard, sort of. I used to teach Grade One before I came here, to pay for my acting lessons. I had to stand on duty in the playground to make sure the children were safe.”

“There you go,” said Margot. “Teaching is full of different experiences. How did you feel on a cold, windy day?”

Holly shut her eyes. “Bored. Shivering, stamping my feet, waiting to get inside, wanting my coffee.”

“Right. Bring those feelings into your role.”

“But what about Ophelia?” Holly’s brow wrinkled. “I mean, you haven’t been suicidal, have you?”

“No, thank God,” said Margot, “but I have felt dismissed, demeaned, passed over, told I didn’t count. You don’t get great parts off the bat, you know. It’s a long, hard battle for recognition.”

Holly nodded, “And the more life you live, the more experiences you have to draw on.”

“Right. Find the parallel, that emotional sweet spot, and work from there.”

“You’ve given me a lot to think about. Thank you so much.” Holly smiled. “I also wanted to ask you about my grandmother.”

Margot glanced at her antique watch. “That’ll have to wait for another visit, I’m afraid. I’ve another appointment in a few minutes. Someone I’ve heard about for years who I’ve never actually met. It’s a bit odd.” She frowned.

As Holly rose to leave, something on the nearby desk sparkled. A jewelled dagger.

“It’s gorgeous,” she said, picking it up. Rubies sparkled from the curved jade handle. The red enamel sheath decorated with gold filigree felt smooth and cool under her fingertips. Unable to stop herself, she pulled out the graceful blade. It was engraved with lilies.

“Careful,” said Margot.

“It looks almost real.”

“It is real. When I was on the London stage long ago, I was in a murder mystery. The villain had stolen the family fortune, and I had to murder him with a butcher’s knife to get it back.” She laughed. “At the time, I had an admirer. He was a student, from some kind of minor royal family in India. Despite his promises of eternal love, at his mother’s urging, he went home for the marriage she had arranged. Years later, he sent me this dagger which had been in his family for generations. His note said, ‘This is more your style than a butcher’s knife. I’ll never forget you.’ It’s been my letter opener ever since.”

Holly smiled, thinking of all the secret admirers in her future. Margot gave her a hug. “Thanks for coming, dear. Good luck.”

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Holly emerged from her reverie to discover a hum of activity in the apartment. A troop of people in white hazmat suits milled around. One of the officers squatted in front of her with a challenge in his eyes.

“Walk me through all your interactions with Ms. Strathearn. Don’t leave anything out.” His voice was stern.

For the next hour, she described her relationship with Margot, especially yesterday's visit. He asked the same questions over and over. Her answers remained the same. His face was inscrutable. Hers was resolute.

Then he attacked. "You want to be an actress, right? A leading lady, like her? Maybe you're a bit jealous? Maybe a lot jealous? Maybe you wanted to do away with your rival?"

Holly gasped. She shook her head. Having watched enough cop shows, she knew that things weren't going well.

*Wait till they find my fingerprints on the dagger.*

She turned quite pale.

"You'd better come with us. We need more information."

His hand was on her arm. Then she was in the cop car. At the station, she was allowed one call.

"Malcolm," she whispered into her phone. "I need a lawyer. They think I murdered Margot."

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