

## Holly Day and the Jewelled Dagger (Part 2)

Gail Vallance Barrington

Fear and sweat oozed from the walls of the tiny interrogation room. Holly wrinkled her classic nose. It was not a destination of choice. Then the door juddered open and in walked Rick Whitelove, her arresting officer. His brush cut bristled. His steel-clad eyes glared at her.

“I know you did it, Holly. Don’t waste my time.”

As she started to object, he held up his hand.

“Don’t try any of that ‘But Officer, I’m innocent’ stuff, and don’t bat your eyelashes at me.” He loomed over the table, hands heavy on his belt buckle. Before he could bully her some more, the door crashed open again as Malcolm and Tim burst in.

“I hope you aren’t intimidating my client,” said Tim, looking corporate in a navy suit, crisp shirt, and shiny oxfords. He plunked his briefcase on the floor.

“I’d be interested in knowing why you’re alone in here with Ms. Day,” said Malcolm. “Aren’t you supposed to work with a partner?” He pulled out his notebook, investigative reporter on the beat in skinny jeans, vintage jacket, and pointy tie-ups. Whitelove didn’t have to know he was just a food writer.

The cop stepped back, sneered at Holly and jerked his head towards her friends.

“Who are these guys supposed to be?”

“My friend Malcolm and my lawyer, Tim.”

*At least, I hope he’s a lawyer. Malcolm didn’t say.*

“Timothy Reardon,” said Tim. “My client, Ms. Day, requires an apology for subjecting her to this unlawful arrest.”

Whitelove eyed the clock. “OK. Let’s make this quick. Sit down.”

“Now, Ms. Day,” he said, his jaw flexing. “Tell me again what happened this morning. Don’t leave anything out.”

Her story hadn’t changed. The return visit to collect her bag. Her beloved icon, Margot Strathearn, sprawled on the living

room floor. The jewelled dagger thrust deep in her chest. Holly's frantic call to 911.

"At precisely what time did you find the body?"

"At ten o'clock this morning. I checked my watch because I had to get to work before my boss showed up."

Tim looked at Whitelove. "What was the time of death?"

"We don't have the autopsy results yet. I'm not at liberty to say."

"Even so, you must have a pretty good idea, Officer," said Tim. "It isn't your first corpse, is it?"

Whitelove pursed his lips. "Yeah, well. Rigor mortis had set in, so the incident must have occurred six to twelve hours prior."

"It's obvious Ms. Day is in the clear. Due to the condition of the body, the murder happened between 10 pm last night and 4 am this morning. Ms. Day left the building at six pm. I'm sure if you had checked the security footage, this would have been corroborated."

"Their security camera hasn't worked for at least three years."

"A violation in itself. Aren't you supposed to check security systems?"

Whitelove's nostrils narrowed. "Her fingerprints are on the dagger."

"From the previous day, as Ms. Day has explained." Tim spoke as if to a recalcitrant toddler. "That's when she examined the dagger, when Ms. Strathearn told her how it came into her possession. You're going to need a lot more evidence than a couple of fingerprints to convict Ms. Day. You should be grateful that she was concerned enough to call in the crime. Otherwise, Ms. Strathearn's body would still be lying there, undiscovered. Maybe for weeks."

Whitelove rolled his eyes. He opened the door to let them troop out. As Holly passed, he his big hand clamped around her arm like a vice. "I'm not done with you yet," he muttered. "Don't try leaving town."

#

In the parking lot, Holly gave each of the guys a hug. “Thank you so much.” They did a high five, looking pleased with themselves.

“Are you really a lawyer?” Holly asked as Tim got in the car.

“Just admitted to the bar last week. You’re my first client.”

“Now you’re in trouble,” said Malcom, laughing.

As they rolled down the familiar palm-lined boulevard, Holly processed the last twenty-four hours. Regret lay heavy on her heart. She mourned for Margot, a lovely old woman, gone forever, and in such a violent way. Someone had been nursing a grudge for a very long time.

Back at the apartment, the guys relaxed in the living room over a bottle of wine. “Come and have some, Holly,” Malcom called.

“I can’t. I have to think.” She paced back and forth in the kitchen. Her eyes narrowed. Her fingers zinged the tiny diamond at her throat back and forth. She made herself slow down and take deep breaths. As her stress melted away, a pattern emerged. She gasped.

“I know who did it,” she said, running into the living room. They looked up from their conversation.

“How do you know?”

“Who is it?”

“Well, I have a pretty good idea, anyway. Listen to this.”

The guys looked sceptical.

“Last night Margot said she was still expecting another visitor. That’s why she couldn’t talk to me about my grandmother. She had never met this person but said she knew who they were. She seemed a little worried.”

“Did you tell the police?”

“I tried but they said it was romantic claptrap. They don’t care about Margot. They’ve never even heard of her. All they want

to do is close the case. But it wasn't accidental, and it certainly wasn't random. There was too much anger involved."

She raked her fingers through her blonde bangs. They fell right back into place, her hair still perfect despite her grueling day.

"Margot said the dagger was a gift. When she was young, she starred in an Agatha Christie play in London. She had to kill one of the characters with a jewelled stiletto, but at the last minute, they couldn't find it. She used a butcher's knife instead. Despite the switch, she still got good reviews.

She had an admirer who followed her around, declaring his undying love. He was from India, a member of some minor royal family and quite rich. Then he vanished. It turns out he'd gone home for an arranged marriage. Years later, after she'd forgotten the whole thing, the dagger arrived in the mail, an heirloom from his family's collection. His note said it suited her much more than the butcher knife and that he'd never forgotten her."

Malcolm and Tim rolled their eyes. "What's your point?"

"Nothing was stolen. Any decent thief would have taken the dagger because it's covered in rubies and is worth a fortune. The murderer has to be someone from her past. Maybe it was the admirer's wife, overcome with jealousy."

"Well, it took her long enough," said Malcolm. "When was that play?"

"In the early eighties."

"This would never stand up in court." Tim shook his head. "It's all sheer speculation."

"Stay out of it," Malcolm added. "And stay away from the police. They'll take anyone to close a case."

#

Holly knew they were right. She tried to put the idea out of her mind, but it clung like a survivor to a life raft. And it wasn't just the idea that hounded her. Someone was following her, or so the creepy tickle at the back of her neck said. One morning she saw

Whitelove slouched in a car across from the studio. As she turned to look, he took off.

*Well, I'm pretty busy. He'll have to work hard to keep up.*

Her latest stop was the Margaret Herrick Library in Beverley Hills. She'd loved research in university and her fingers tingled at the thought of all the information that was begging to be found.

After several eye-straining hours peering at microfiche, she found Margot's play, *Cards on the Table*, adapted from a novel by Agatha Christie. It ran at the Vaudeville Theatre in London in 1981.

The next day Holly returned to scan the London society pages. From around the same period, she found a picture of Margot looking young and gorgeous in a low-cut evening dress. A dark, handsome man stood by her side. The caption read, *Margot Strathearn, star of recent Christie hit, accompanied by frequent companion, Arvind Singh.*

Then Google informed her that Arvind had died, just a few months ago. He left his grieving family, Gurdeep, wife of forty-four years, five children, and 17 grandchildren.

Holly was triumphant. She sparkled for the microfiche reader, her only available audience. It remained unimpressed, having seen so many stars over the years.

The murder scene played out in her mind like a cheap thriller. A jealous Gurdeep. A confrontation with Margot. The demand to return the dagger. A blind rage. A struggle gone wrong. A horrified escape.

But then her elation plummeted. No one cared. Margot's murderer would never pay for their crime. What a terrifying end to a stellar career. Holly couldn't bear it. She needed to find the culprit. She opened her laptop and booked a ticket to Mumbai.

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