

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

### **Part 3: The Widow's Secret**

**Gail Vallance Barrington**

Holly blew through her blond bangs as she unwound herself from the motorized rickshaw. Riding two feet above the blazing Mumbai pavement, multiple heart-stopping escapes from death, it might be some people's idea of fun, but she wasn't convinced.

As her terror subsided, she checked the address again. A blue-tiled plaque on the high stone wall confirmed it was the Singh residence. The iron gates reminded her of the interrogation room she had so recently left behind. A security camera eyed her sourly.

*Maybe I shouldn't have come. I could be in a lot of trouble when I get home. But I know I'm right.*

She closed her eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, and rang the bell, shifting from one foot to the other as her nerves ran up and down her spine.

Eventually, a woman's tinny voice asked, "What do you want?"

"I'm here to see Gurdeep Singh."

"Sorry. She's not accepting visitors."

"I've come all the way from California to see her. Tell her I have important information about an old friend."

After a long wait, the gate swung open to reveal a large, low-slung villa set in a garden ringed by palms and shade trees. A middle-aged woman in a rose brocade kurta and olive silk pants stared back at her, worry etched on her wide brow. It was Gurdeep's daughter, Amita.

"Please come in. She says she'll see you." Amita sounded surprised. She led Holly up a tiled staircase to a long gallery guarded by hanging ferns and antique photos. A door at the far end led to a sunny balcony overlooking the garden.

"Why don't you wait here," she said. "I'll make tea. Then we can talk."

Holly sank onto the teak sofa strewn with orange cushions. The floor gleamed with intricate tiles as fans turned overhead. A pot of jasmine scented the air. Beyond the wrought iron railing, green leaves shimmered in the breeze. A long sigh slipped from Holly's lips.

Amita returned bearing a heavy tray with a large silver teapot, delicate cups and saucers, and a plate of shortbread cookies. She poured the rich, dark tea for Holly, then for herself, and passed the shortbread. She settled in the chair opposite.

"My mother is seventy-five years old," she said. "She'd never been out of Mumbai in her life. Suddenly, two weeks ago, she decided to fly to America. The whole family tried to dissuade her but she refused to listen. She wouldn't let anyone go with her."

Amita shrugged. "What could we do? We took her to the airport."

"What happened?" Holly sat forward, anxious to track Gurdeep's activities in America. Was she Margot Strathearn's murderer?

"She returned three days later with a nasty bandage on her left hand. She locked herself in her room and hasn't been out since. She won't talk to anyone, she hardly eats, if I scold her, she just cries."

"I don't know what to do." Amita shook her head. "Maybe you can talk some sense into her."

Holly nibbled on another shortbread, realizing she hadn't eaten since she'd left home. "Do you have any idea why she went? Or who she went to see?"

"No," said Amita. "All I know is that since our father died, she's been fussing about the missing dagger."

"Dagger?" Holly sat up.

Amita nodded. "Why don't we go down to the library while we wait. I can show you what I mean."

The large room was lined with books. Stern portraits glared down at them. A bronze chandelier swung gently over a large teak desk. Across from the door, muted afternoon light shone through gauze curtains. At the far end, museum-type glass cases beckoned.

“That’s our collection of jewelled daggers and ceremonial swords.”

The treasures glinted in the soft light, resplendent with jewels, delicate black and gold enamel, glistening jade. Holly was transfixed.

“They’re beautiful.”

Yet as she stared, their wicked steel blades reminded her of Margot’s body sprawled in a pool of blood on her living room carpet, the jewelled dagger winking in the morning light.

Her knees buckled.

Amita took her arm. “Are you okay? You look quite pale.”

“Yes, I’m fine. Please go on.”

“Some of these weapons are from the Mughal empire in the seventeenth century. Scholars come from all over the world to see them, but now one is missing. That’s because our father gave it away.” She pointed to a depression in the blue satin lining, the shape of the dagger Holly knew so well.

“I think she went to America to get it,” said Amita, “but she came home empty-handed.”

Just then, the door opened. A short, elderly woman in a plain white sari appeared. A white shawl was draped over her head. Behind her dark-rimmed glasses, her face was hollow and pale.

“Mother,” gasped Amita. “Why are you dressed all in white?” She looked over at Holly to explain. “It’s our traditional colour for mourning.”

“Have you come to take me back?” the old woman asked. Her voice quavered.

“Yes,” said Holly. “You must go back.” Her voice shook slightly. This was tougher than she had imagined.

“Who are you?” Amita’s eyes narrowed. “What’s going on?” Her voice rose as she grabbed her phone. “I’m calling the police.”

“It’s okay, my darling,” said her mother. “This young woman and I need to have a private conversation.”

Amita was persuaded to leave them alone. "I'll be right outside. Call if you need me."

"Let's sit down, Mrs. Singh," said Holly, guiding her to a chair.

"Call me Gurdie. Everyone else does."

Breathing in, Holly slipped her hand into her jacket pocket and pressed 'Record' on her phone. She needed some kind of evidence or Office Whitelove would never believe her.

"My name is Holly Day. I live in Beverley Hills. I'm here to ask you about Margot Strathearn, the murdered actress. The police think I killed her but I'm innocent. All I did was forget my bag at her apartment. When I went back to get it, I found her dead body. I think you know something about it. Tell me what really happened." She folded her arms.

Gurdie took off her glasses and laid them on the desk. She pressed her hands over her eyes. "Too many tears. I have none left."

"Tell me," Holly said, her voice gentler now.

"Fifty years ago, our parents arranged our marriage. When my husband, Arvi, finished his studies in London, we got married." Gurdie smiled briefly, the smile of a new bride.

Then her eyes hardened. "While he was away, he fell in love with an actress." She looked at Holly. "It was Margot Strathearn."

Relief washed over Holly.

*I knew it!*

Gurdie continued. "From then on, all I heard was, 'Margot this and Margot that.' He was obsessed with her."

She sighed. "He was so handsome. I saw how women's eyes followed him, and I hated them for it. The thing was, he never even noticed them. Margot was all he thought about."

The light coming through the gauze curtains shifted as the afternoon began to fade. The shadows in the library lengthened.

As Gurdie continued her story, Holly zinged the tiny diamond at her throat back and forth, listening.

"Years later, his obsession took over. He sent the most important piece in our family's collection to that woman. To some cheap, second-rate actress.

Holly shook her head. "No, Margot wasn't second rate. She was world famous and a wonderful actress." The words caught in her throat. She remembered Margot playing Ophelia. Making the audience believe she was fifteen again, even though she was over eighty. Showing Holly what great actresses can do, what she could do if she tried hard enough.

"It was worth more than a million dollars US. The collection is ruined without it." Her neck darkened. Her voice grew bitter.

"My husband never loved me because of her. So I waited until he died and then I flew to America to get it back."

"What happened?"

"I went to see her. She was a skinny little thing. Not like me." Gurdie looked down at her own very generous bosom.

"We went into the living room. I could see the dagger lying on the desk in the corner. I demanded that she return it. She refused."

Gurdie's eyes flashed. "I could tell she didn't love him, that Arvy was just another admirer. She liked having such an expensive gift."

"I grabbed it. I pulled it out of the scabbard to see if it was still okay. It was heavy. With my arthritis, it's hard to hold onto things." Tears spilled down her cheeks. Her gnarled fingers twisted in her lap.

Holly reached over and squeezed her hands, feeling conflicted. It was one thing to want to vindicate yourself, quite another to face a frail old woman, wracked with guilt and grief.

"Go on."

"The dagger slipped. At the last minute I caught it by the blade, but it cut my hand rather badly." A bandage was still wound around her palm.

"I bled all over the hilt. I had to use both hands to hold it steady. All I wanted was to take it home."

She sighed. "Then Margot pushed me away with one hand, reaching for the dagger with the other. She yelled, 'Give it to me. It's mine. Get out of my apartment.' I could see the fear in her eyes. She thought I was an intruder."

Gurdie's voice fell to a hoarse whisper. "I tried to explain why I needed it. She kept pushing. I backed up until I hit the coffee table behind me. I lost my balance. We wobbled back and forth together, me holding the dagger, Margot reaching for my hand. Then I slipped. We crashed to the floor."

Gurdie paused for a moment.

Holly held her breath.

"I felt dazed. Then I realized that something hard was poking into my breastbone."

She rubbed the spot, remembering.

"I looked down. It was the handle of the dagger. The other end was deep in Margot's chest. The blade had slipped in so gently, I didn't even realize. There was blood everywhere. She stared up at me. She didn't move."

Gurdie's wail pierced the air.

"She was dead. Murdered. By me."

Amita flung open the door. "What's going on? What have you done to my mother?"

"Well," said Holly, her voice sad, "I guess you can call the police now. Your mother has just confessed to murder."

Later, reaching the hot dark street, she remembered to turn off her phone.

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At LAX, Malcom and Tim, were waiting for her, anxious to hear about her adventures. Before she could reach them, Officer Whitelove intercepted her.

"Ms. Day," he said in his deep voice, his hand on her arm. "You need to come down to the station with me."

She glanced over his shoulder at her welcoming committee.

"Yes, yes. You can bring your little pals," Whitelove sighed.

Back in the same tiny interrogation room, he glared at her with his steel-clad eyes. His brush cut bristled. His boots gleamed.

“You realize what you’ve done? I told you to stay here. Leaving the country when you are under advisement is an offense. You should be in jail.”

Holly shrank.

He looked over at Malcolm and Tim. “You two should know better than to support her shenanigans.”

They managed to look guilty.

As Holly started to reach for her phone, he interrupted. “Fortunately, the Mumbai police have been very cooperative. We’ve made an exchange. The dagger for the suspect.”

“As for you,” he said, giving her the evil eye, “stay out of my hair. No more amateur sleuthing. Next time I won’t be as lenient. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Officer,” Holly said. “It won’t happen again.”

Only her pockets knew that her fingers were crossed.

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[Revised 01-10-25 with thanks to paolo da costa.]

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