

ANGELS OF REGENT STREET



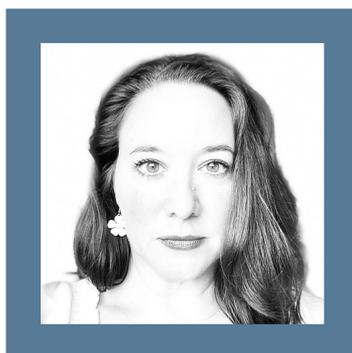
A SHORT STORY BY

Ashley Gargeant Hagan

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ANGELS OF REGENT STREET

by

Ashley Sargeant Hagan

It all began with the apple. If Eve hadn't succumbed to the temptation to bite that apple back in the Garden, then none of Emerald Donnelly's problems would have occurred. Or so she decided as she sat in the interrogation room across from the portly constable, his shirt buttons testing the laws of gravity as he leaned back in his metal chair.

Emerald squinted at him from under her red, wool cloche hat. She had chosen this hat, with its array of roses and holly, for her Christmas shopping foray on Regent Street precisely because it rode low on her forehead and shadowed her eyes, allowing her the freedom to people-watch without censure. She did so now, since the constable's eyes were focused absently on the stained ceiling tiles. He was a little younger than she was, probably in his late fifties, she decided, with gray tufts of hair that edged around his beefy ears. Needs a haircut. Single, then? Divorced? Or does his wife not harass him enough to get him to the barber?

The constable folded meaty arms over his ample middle and sighed audibly. Emerald frowned and turned her head slightly as a waft of cigarette-laced, minty breath assaulted her nostrils. She blinked her dark, beady eyes rapidly to dispel the odor, then quirked her lips into a tight smile. No wedding ring, she remarked to herself, glancing at his left hand. Nobody on him to keep his hair trimmed. Or to quit smoking for.

"Like what ya see?"

At the sound of the constable's voice, Emerald's squatty body jerked to attention in the rigid chair, and she pulled her houndstooth wool coat closed to protect herself. Her eyes met his across the table. He was grinning at her—leering, she decided—his tongue searching for hidden food in his teeth. He laughed gratingly, then put his large hands on the table and pressed himself to a stand.

“Let me see wot’s keepin’ DI Roberts,” he said, grabbing his black-and-white hat from the table and heading for the door. He chuckled under his breath. “Can I get you some tea, Miz Donnelly? Make it a proper date?”

Emerald didn’t respond. She sucked her lips into a pout and glared at the man instead. But he hadn’t waited for an answer as he lumbered from the room.

Favors his left side, thought Emerald. Probably pain in his hip. Or his feet.

Emerald rolled her feet in circles under the scarred table. She’d been wearing those boots for hours, and her sixty-four-year-old ankles were swelling.

“Christmas shopping,” she muttered under her breath.

“Why don’t you go Christmas shopping, Mum?” her daughter had said that afternoon when she’d called. “Get you out of the house. You’ve been cooped up in there all week. You don’t have a play going this Christmas, but it doesn’t mean you have to stay home.”

“It’s cold,” Emerald had complained. “And wet. With no snow.”

“But the lights on Regent Street are breathtaking!” Rose had reminded her. “What’s the use of living right there in the West End if you don’t take advantage of it?”

“Hrmmph,” Emerald had responded. “There are lights on my street, too, and they glare through my window. I can never get away from them.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Rose had said. “I’ll come by tomorrow and we’ll go for dinner. Maybe go down to Leicester Square to the Christmas Market.”

Emerald had agreed half-heartedly. When she hung up her mobile, she had grinned. It’s all she wanted in the first place, Christmas shopping with Rose. But sometimes it was hard to get a hard-working marketing assistant to visit her Mum. Even at Christmas. Pretending depression always worked.

But Emerald actually did want to get out of the house. After all, she’d been cooped up there all week. Her last play had ended in November, and she wouldn’t start rehearsals for the next one until spring. If she decided to do it. She was semi-retired, after all, and Richard had left her a tidy sum in life insurance when he passed away. She wasn’t lonely—that would be selfish of her, with a grown girl making her way in the world. Couldn’t expect her

ANGELS OF REGENT STREET

to always come 'round. Still, her heart had fluttered a bit thinking about the next evening with Rose.

"I can't buy Rose's gifts with Rose there," she had thought to herself. So out she had trudged, with her red wool cloche with roses and holly and her long, houndstooth coat, and her Hunter boots.

"Miz Donnelly?"

Emerald removed the reminiscing smile that hovered on her lips and focused on the young man standing in the doorway. Thirty-ish. Not too tall. Brown hair cut short (at least he gets regular haircuts). Plain clothes, no uniform. Bluish-gray eyes set deep under his brows. Intelligent eyes. Kind eyes.

"I need to ask you a few more questions about this evening," Detective Inspector Roberts said, taking a seat across from Emerald. The constable hadn't returned.

Emerald nodded and looked at him expectantly.

"You were walking home after Christmas shopping," Inspector Roberts began, "by way of Farriers Passage. Is that usual? Farriers Passage is a dark, little alleyway at night, and you were alone."

He looked up, and Emerald could feel his intelligent eyes examining her.

"Yes," she said, straightening in her chair, clutching her large handbag in front of her like a shield. "It wasn't even eight o'clock, yet, Inspector."

He nodded.

"It gets dark so early in the winter, doesn't it?" he said with a tired smile.

"Yes," she agreed, "but I know this area like the back of my hand, and Farriers Passage is a shortcut from Brewer to Old Windmill Street. Even when I didn't live here, I was always in the West End. I'm an actress," she explained, batting her eyelashes at him.

Inspector Roberts gave her a polite smile.

"Yes, you mentioned that. So, as you were walking through Farriers Passage, you heard a noise up ahead of you," he continued. "And when you arrived at Smiths Court, you found the body."

Emerald nodded. She closed her eyes and shuddered, her grip tightening on the handbag.

“Don’t forget the shadow that moved,” she said, opening her eyes again. “Someone was there, and slipped around the corner.”

“Can you give a description?”

Emerald shook her head.

“It was too dark,” she admitted. “More like a shadow moving. I looked down that part of the passage before I called 999, but I didn’t see anyone. They must have ducked into one of the shop doorways.”

“I know this must be upsetting,” Inspector Roberts said apologetically, glancing up from his notes. “If you think of anything else, please let us know. We’ve phoned your daughter—Rose, is it? To come take you home after we’re through. It’s been a long night,” he added with a slight smile, his eyes dimming to half-mast.

Emerald’s lips copied his smile, and her beady eyes twinkled beneath the shadow of the cloche.

“Rose is on her way?” she asked, then allowed her cheeks to droop slightly in her favorite old-lady-in-distress-but-trying-to-keep-a-stiff-upper-lip expression. “How kind of you. Rose works in the Shard. She’s a very successful marketing assistant, but that means she has no time for dating. Like you,” she commented, her sharp eyes flicking to his left hand, absent of a ring.

“What makes you think I don’t have time to date, Miz Donnelly?” DI Roberts asked with a guarded look.

Emerald pursed her lips and squinted her eyes at him.

“Bags,” she replied.

DI Roberts’ mouth fell open slightly. He eyed her suspiciously, like he was checking her mental state.

“I don’t have any bags with me,” he said carefully.

“Under your eyes,” she said. “Lack of sleep means you work long hours, like my Rose, and don’t take proper care of yourself. You need a wife.”

“I—“ began DI Roberts.

ANGELS OF REGENT STREET

“Ah! Rose!” said Emerald, her smile brightening as the door opened once again. “Just in time.”



“That Rose, she’s such a lovely girl,” Portia Valentine commented as she poured strong tea from a Royal Albert tea pot. “It was nice of her to take the tube with you here. I’m sorry she couldn’t stay for tea.”

Emerald took the pink floral china cup offered to her and stirred in sugar and milk as she smiled at her friend. They were in the kitchen of Portia’s Kensington terraced house, a fact that proved the closeness of their relationship, as elegant Portia almost always entertained in her sitting room. Portia exuded elegance like a perfume, Emerald always thought; once a blonde, she wore her now-white hair to her shoulders, and she always dressed impeccably in tailored clothes.

“Busy,” said Emerald. “Rose is always busy. And now that this has happened, she’s over-protective. Didn’t want me walking around at dusk. She’ll be back later to fetch me. We’re going Christmas shopping in Leicester Square. She’s a good girl,” she added. “Not a beauty, but a nice-looking girl, all the same. I just wish she wouldn’t work so hard. I know she’s lonely.”

Portia nodded sympathetically.

“There was a time I hoped she and Edwin—but, then, you can’t force your children to fall in love,” she said, waving the thought away. “It will happen for Rose.”

Emerald gave Portia a sly look.

“I’m working on it right now, in fact,” she admitted. “Inspector Roberts.”

“The detective working on the case?” asked Portia, setting her cup down on the table in front of her and selecting a scone from a nearby plate. “You know, you haven’t told me the details. Only that you stumbled upon a body in Farriers Passage.”

Emerald’s beady eyes twinkled. It was no accident that she was visiting her old friend. Portia Valentine—a well-known actress from stage and screen, at least in her heyday—had always been a favorite with Emerald since their days as ingenues in off-West End theatres. But it wasn’t just

old friendship that brought Emerald to Portia's door that afternoon. And it wasn't because Portia's son, the very famous movie star Edwin Sterling, had been Emerald's top pick for Rose when they were in school. That dream had vanished long ago when the two made it clear to their meddling mothers that there would never be more than friendship between them. It was Portia's innate ability to solve problems that had brought her to Emerald's mind; her acute observational skills and keen understanding of human nature was something Emerald admired more than her friend's theatrical abilities. And after last night, she needed those skills more than ever.

"Well, I didn't want Rose to hear the details of what happened," admitted Emerald. "She'd worry."

"About your safety?" asked Portia.

"About my impending arrest."

Portia leaned in.

"Did you kill someone?" she asked calmly, her crystal-blue eyes sparking with interest.

Emerald barked a laugh, her bobbed, unnaturally-red hair swinging as she shook her head.

"Of course not!" she said with a grin. Then she sobered. "But Inspector Roberts will probably think so. And I can't have that. He'll never marry Rose if her Mum is in the slammer."

Portia narrowed her eyes at her friend.

"If you think you'll end up in 'the slammer,' you have a lot more to worry about than your daughter's make-believe impending marriage."

Emerald leaned forward across the table, her hands folded in front of her, fingers entwined, as if in prayer.

"I'll tell you the story from the beginning," she offered.

"I think that would be wise," agreed Portia, settling in.



"It's Apple's fault," Emerald began.

"What do apples have to do with anything?" asked Portia.

ANGELS OF REGENT STREET

“Not apples,” corrected Emerald. “Apple. The computer shop. I wanted to buy something for Rose.”

“Ah,” Portia replied, relaxing in her chair.

“So I walked down Regent Street to the Apple Store. You know the one, with windows the size of Buckingham Palace. It’s down at the end, past Liberty London.”

“Why didn’t you take the tube to Oxford Circus?” asked Portia.

“I needed the exercise,” Emerald explained, patting her middle. “But I’m not as young as I used to be, you know, so when I got there, I was a bit knackered. Might have been a bit snappish. I don’t know. So a young man with a wispy beard and glasses came over and asked how he could help me, and I told him I wanted something computerish for my daughter. He was showing me some kind of Home Pod. Said it connected to everything and talked back to you and played your music. So I was asking him how it worked. But he just kept telling me how to work it.”

“What do you mean?” asked Portia. “What’s the difference?”

“He told me that it plays music, and controls the tellie, and it will answer your mobile for you, but he wouldn’t tell me how it actually works. My father tinkered on cars, and he taught me a thing or two, and I understand how they work, not just what they do. But computers—I don’t think the young man even knew how it worked himself, much less could tell me. He just kept saying not to worry about it, just do what he said and it would make my life easier. I said, I don’t want my life easier, I want a gift for my daughter, and he said, ‘Just buy it because your daughter will understand how to work it,’ with that smug smile underneath that wispy beard. I mean, a man who can’t even grow a proper beard treating me like I was the baby! Or worse, a senile old woman! I humored him for a while, but it only got worse.”

“What happened?”

“He said to tell Sari what I wanted her to do. Just speak at the Home Pod—this circular object that looks like the Death Star from Star Wars—and tell Sari what I wanted her to do. So I tried, but it wouldn’t work. He laughed at me. Not so much out loud, but sort of snorted like he was trying not to laugh, and his coworkers looked over at us. He told me it was SEERIE not

SAREE, and that's why it wouldn't work. And still with that smug smile. I wanted to slap the glasses off his face, I'll tell you!"

"Did you?" asked Portia.

"Of course not!" Emerald huffed. "I am a civilized woman."

Portia sipped her tea knowingly, waiting for her to continue.

Emerald furrowed her brow.

"I may have told him a few choice places he could put his Home Pod and SEERIE," she said, her face flushing crimson.

"I see," said Portia, averting her eyes.

"He was a know-it-all, and he liked making an old woman feel stupid," Emerald said defensively. "The manager came over, all high heels and tall hair, looking fierce. Sheila from my building, as a matter-of-fact. Small world, I thought, Sheila working here. Wispy beard ran behind Sheila like it was his Mummy's skirts, and I stomped out of the store so they wouldn't throw an old woman out into the street. Looking back, I may have overreacted a bit," she admitted, pouting, "but they don't seem to understand how foreign it all is. We didn't grow up with computers, not like they did. The computers I remember took up a whole room. Now it can sit in the palm of your hand, and you can talk to it, although it doesn't like having it's name pronounced wrong. It's a bit overwhelming, and nothing to be laughed at."

Portia nodded her sympathy.

"Did you go straight home afterward?" she asked. "Or did you shop some more?"

"I was so frazzled, I could barely think," Emerald said. "I marched out into Regent Street. It had stopped raining, but it was still misty and cold. Before I knew it, I was already back near my flat. So I stopped in at the Leicester Arms, which is a quaint little Victorian pub right there on Glasshouse Street. Felt like I needed a cup of tea after that ordeal, and the cold and rain."

"Of course you did," Portia agreed.

"And when I came out a little while later, it had started raining again, so I put up my umbrella and was thankful for my Hunter boots," Emerald continued. "I always take Farriers Passage from Brewer Street to Old Windmill because it's a shortcut."

ANGELS OF REGENT STREET

“Even at night with the shops closed?” asked Portia. “It’s nothing more than a narrow alley.”

“I’m not the type to shy away from dark alleys,” Emerald assured her. “And I had my mace handy. Anyway, I was trudging along when I heard a noise up ahead. I thought I saw a shadow slinking away around the corner. I slowed down a bit, not wanting to be taken by surprise if it was a mugger, but then my boot hit something and I almost fell over. I looked down, and there he was, staring up at me!”

“Who was staring up at you?” asked Portia.

“Wispy Beard, from the Apple Store. His eyes were just blank, staring up at me, and all I could think was that he must not be able to see because he wasn’t wearing his glasses. But then I realized he wouldn’t see me even if he did have his glasses, because he was dead!”



“I read on the news that the dead man you found worked at the Apple Store,” Rose commented as she and Emerald turned the corner onto Regent Street.

“Oh?” Emerald replied, her eyes straight ahead.

They had just finished dinner at The Crown, and were heading toward the Christmas Market at Leicester Square. Rose shivered as she buttoned the Burberry trench coat her mother had given her for her last birthday (she couldn’t afford the brightly-lit Burberry store they had just passed).

“Where’s your scarf?” she asked her mother.

“Which scarf?” Emerald asked.

“The one you’ve been wearing all the time,” said her daughter. “The cashmere one with the green design on it.”

“Oh, that one,” said Emerald with a shrug. “I haven’t been able to find it. I’m afraid I must’ve dropped it somewhere. Again.”

Rose pursed her lips. Her mother was always losing things like scarves and gloves. It had stopped raining, but the air felt like an ice bath against her face, and she knew her cheeks were

red from the cold. Like cheery apples, her mother used to say, but Rose always felt they made her look more like a lobster, and there's nothing cheery about lobsters. She wore her straight hair long, with a fringe of bangs to blow out of her gray-green eyes. It was a lighter shade of red than her mother's, even when her mother's hair had been her own natural color.

Rose glanced at Emerald out of the corner of her eye. Last night, she hadn't wanted to talk much about her ordeal. The Inspector had been kind, she remembered, almost apologetic when she had arrived at the police station. But he hadn't told her any details about the case; all Rose knew was what she had read on the internet.

When she picked her up from Portia's, her mother had insisted they not talk about the murder during their meal, but the meal was over, and Rose wanted answers.

"The reports said it wasn't robbery," she continued. "His wallet was still in his pocket, and his phone. It's being speculated that he knew his attacker, that it wasn't a random mugging. Are you sure you didn't recognize him?" Rose asked, turning toward her.

"Not from Adam," her mother said, her gaze straight ahead. "Why would I? And I hope you don't think I'd ever do a thing like that? Oh! Look at the angels!"

Emerald paused on the pavement, turning her appreciative eyes upward at the gigantic angels made from lights that spanned Regent Street every block or so. They twinkled above their heads; the mist rising from the wet pavement swirled around the heavenly beings, causing them to tremble as if they were alive.

"It's like a myriad of faeries!" Emerald whispered in an awe-struck voice. "I never get tired of the lights. Every time I see an angel depicted, even in lights, I think that's God giving me a sign that he's sent angels to protect me."

"I don't think your angels were working last night," said Rose, pulling her attention away from the celestial beings and glancing at her mother again. Emerald might be a fine actress, but she was Rose's mum, and she had long ago recognized the tell-tale signs that she was playing a role.

"Mum, why do I feel like you're keeping something from me?" she asked, pulling on her mother's arm. "I could tell the Inspector thought so, too. That's why he kept asking you if there was anything else you wanted to tell him. That's why he gave you his card."

ANGELS OF REGENT STREET

Emerald turned a gleaming eye to her daughter's face.

"The Inspector, hmm? He is such a nice man," she said. "So polite toward me, which I especially appreciated after—"

"After what?"

"Will you be seeing him again?"

"Who? The Inspector?" Rose asked. "I don't consider retrieving you from the police station our first date."

Emerald made a humming sort of noise and twitched her mouth around.

They had begun to walk again. The shop windows matched the festive feel of the Christmas lights above them, each decorated in splendor. Rose could smell the comforting aroma of roasting chestnuts from a roadside stand, the steam from the cart joining the icy mist that swirled around the angels.

"Mum," she said with a serious expression. "Did you know the man who was killed?"

Emerald sighed. She seemed to make up her mind about something, her beady eyes flashing beneath her red cloche hat.

"Let's grab a coffee, and I'll tell you everything," she said wearily, and trudged toward the coffee shop, shuffling her rain boots through the wet street.

The brightness of the café lights reflected onto the pavement outside, causing the puddles to shimmer with an iridescent light. Rose was thankful for the warmth within, though she knew instinctively that her face would become more cheerily-lobsteresque with the change of temperature.

After buying their drinks, they squeezed through the crowded tables to an empty one in the back.

"Now," prompted Rose, "you were going to tell me everything?"



"What else do you need to know, Inspector?" Sheila Watson asked.

DI Roberts assessed her from across the table. They were sitting in the meeting room

upstairs at the Apple Store. Sheila was thin, with heavy eye makeup and dirty-blond hair done up in a fluffy bun on top of her head, increasing her already tall height. The bright, LED lighting of the room accentuated the dark circles under her eyes and gave her skin a deathly pallor. She wore a crisp, white blouse underneath her blue Apple shirt, a black, short skirt, and high-heeled black dress shoes. An unusual outfit for the tech store, he thought, when the other employees were decidedly more casual.

Mid-thirties, he guessed, noticing the crow's feet at the corners of her eyes.

"Thank you for meeting with me, Miz Watson," he said, readying his notebook and pen. "I was surprised you came to work this evening, after—"

"It's Christmas, Inspector," she said, a bit sharp. "Our busiest season. And now I'm short an employee. Two, actually, at least temporarily. Otto's on the sick. He and Jonathan were flatmates."

"Otto Dunbar?" Inspector Roberts clarified. "Would you say they were close friends?"

"Yeah," said Sheila with a shrug. "They were flatmates and they had a business on the side. Computer repair."

"Are they allowed to do that?" the Inspector asked. "I would think it a conflict of interest."

"Nah," Sheila said with a yawn. "They worked on 'out-of-warranty' stuff. If someone's iPhone or Mac was vintage. Or sometimes PC stuff."

"I was wondering if you could tell me more about Jonathan," Inspector Roberts asked, eyeing her closely. "Was he a good employee? His general habits. Stuff like that."

"Well, I didn't know him very well," Sheila admitted, looking down at her hands and examining her fingernails. "I'm a few years older than the lot of them. They often go out after work, have a pint. Don't usually invite me. So I don't know how much help I can be. As far as being a good employee, I would say he'd been a stellar example, but he'd gotten a bit cocky lately. Like that display in the store last night, with Emerald. We're not supposed to treat customers like that, talk down to them. We're not even supposed to correct them if they mispronounce Siri's name or whatever. It's part of our customer service policy. I spoke to him after Emerald left. Told him it was a warning, but next time his job was on the line."

“How’d he take that?”

Sheila shrugged.

“Cocky,” she said. “He apologized, but I wasn’t convinced. I figured I’d be firing him before Christmas, and then where’d he be with all his cocky ideas? Out on the street, that’s where.”

Inspector Roberts shifted in his chair and gave Sheila a nonchalant smile.

“You said ‘Emerald’ just now,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Do you know Emerald Donnelly?”

Sheila colored slightly, and Inspector Roberts watched as she swallowed nervously.

“Of course,” she shrugged, with a roll of her heavily-made-up eyes. “She lives in my building. Which reminds me. There’s something I should probably tell you.”



“Why didn’t you tell me you recognized the man?” asked Rose after Emerald finished relaying her story. “Last night, you only told me you found a dead body and called 999, which was horrible enough!”

“I know,” Emerald said sullenly, “but I knew you would worry if I told you everything.”

“Well, now I’m worried,” Rose admitted. “Did you tell Inspector Roberts that you recognized him?”

Emerald took a sip of her coffee.

“Not in so many words,” she admitted.

“Mum!” Rose said, exasperated. “He’ll think you kept it back for a reason!”

“I did keep it back for a reason,” said Emerald. “I didn’t want to become a suspect!”

Rose rolled her eyes at her parent.

“Well, he probably will, now!” she said. “Did Inspector Roberts mention any suspects last night?”

“Not to me,” Emerald admitted. “He just told me not to go anywhere, in case he needed to ask me more questions.”

Rose frowned.

“How did he die?” she asked.

“I believe he was strangled,” said Emerald. The couple at the table next to them glanced over. Emerald lowered her voice. “I’ve watched enough *Vera* to know the signs.”

Rose rolled her eyes again.

“You can’t diagnose someone from a TV show,” she warned.

“He had something wrapped around his throat, and his eyes were all bugged out,” Emerald explained. “He’d lost his glasses, so he probably tried to fight him off.”

“You think it was a man?” asked Rose.

“Of course!” said Emerald. “A woman couldn’t strangle a man. So that puts me off the hook, right?”

Rose looked thoughtful.

“You said he had a wispy beard. Was he young?”

“Twenties, I’d say. Kind of anemic-looking. Looked like he stayed inside and played computer games all day.”

“So, not a muscle-bound guy,” said Rose. “Not an athlete.”

“No,” Emerald admitted. “He was wimpy.”

Her face grew serious.

“You think they’ll suspect *me*, don’t you?” she asked. “Since I was the one who found him?”

Rose shrugged.

“It’s been twenty-four hours,” she said. “If the Inspector was concerned about you, I imagine he would be asking you those questions he wanted you to stay in town for.”

“If you don’t mind, Miz Donnelly,” said a deep voice. “I hope I’m not disturbing you?”

Rose jumped and Emerald grinned brightly at Inspector Roberts, who had suddenly appeared near their table.

Rose felt her cheeks redden cheerily, and she couldn’t blame it on the warmth of the room.

“Were you following us, Inspector?” asked Emerald, her beady eyes shining.

Inspector Roberts shook his head, a smile on his lips.

ANGELS OF REGENT STREET

“No, ma’am,” he said, “I was just getting coffee and saw you sitting here.” He glanced shyly at Rose. “Thought I’d take the opportunity to ask you a few more things. And call me Mark.”

“Of course you’re welcome to join us, *Mark*,” said Emerald, her eyes sparkling across the table at her daughter.

Inspector Roberts pulled a chair from a nearby table, turned it backwards, and straddled it, his arms leaning on the back of the chair.

“You’re sure you don’t mind?” he asked. “I can do this another time if you’d rather. I don’t know how much of the details you’ve told Miss Donnelly,” he said, his eyes once again on Rose.

“She’s fine,” said Emerald, waving away his concerns. “She’s a plucky girl, *Mark*. And please, call her Rose. And call me Emerald.”

Mark grinned at Emerald.

“That’s an unusual name,” he said.

“Is it?” she asked, her eyebrows raised. “People are named Ruby, or Coral, or Pearl. Why not Emerald?”

“Good point,” said Mark, shrugging. “By the way, the coroner will need you to attend the inquest when it’s scheduled. To give your evidence about finding the body.”

“Of course. Now, what would you like to know, *Mark*?” Emerald asked

“Well, I wondered if you remembered anything more about the person you thought you saw in the alley,” he said. “The shadow figure.”

Emerald shook her head.

“It was really only a vague impression that someone was there and had hid around the corner when I came up,” she admitted. “After that, I was focused on calling 999.”

She frowned for a moment in thought. Then she shook her head.

“No. Sorry,” she said. “I thought there was something else, but it’s gone out of my head.”

“Could you tell if it was a man or a woman?” the Inspector asked.

“Do you really think a woman could have strangled him?” Rose interrupted, her eyes wide. “I mean,” she stammered when Mark looked her way curiously, “I just thought it would be difficult for a woman to strangle a man. I’m sure you’re not supposed to comment on the

case. Sorry.”

“Why do you say he was strangled?” he asked casually.

“Well, my Mum said—“

“He was clearly strangled, Mark,” said Emerald. “He had all the signs. That scarf across the throat, bugging eyes—“

“A scarf!” Rose whispered, glancing around to see if anyone had heard them. “You didn’t mention he had a scarf around his neck!”

“Oh, didn’t I?” asked her mother with a shrug.

“The post-mortem is still underway, so I can’t comment,” said Mark, giving Emerald a serious look. “But to answer your question, Miss Donnelly—“

“Rose,” corrected Emerald.

“To answer your question, Rose,” he said, turning toward her, “yes, a woman could strangle a man. If she approached him from behind and surprised him. Especially if it was with her own scarf.”



“I should have known that scarf would get me into trouble,” grumbled Emerald as they plodded along Coventry Street toward Leicester Square. “It was given to me by that ridiculous buffoon of a man, Gerald Partridge.”

“Who’s Gerald Partridge?” asked Rose.

“My husband in *All That Shimmers*, remember?” said her mother.

“You mean from The Ambassadors Theatre back in the spring?” asked Rose.

“Yes. Always asking to come home with me for a drink because I lived in the area. He was so full of himself, I don’t think it occurred to him that I would say no.”

“Why’d he give you a scarf?” asked Rose. “And why’d you accept it, if you didn’t like him?”

“It was for my birthday,” she explained. “Remember I told you the cast had a party for me?”

Rose nodded.

ANGELS OF REGENT STREET

“Besides, it was a cashmere scarf from Liberty,” Emerald added. “I could hardly say ‘no.’”

Her mother was a bundle of contradictions, Rose thought, turning away to hide her smile. As she did so, she narrowly avoided tripping over an open guitar case on the pavement, and she nodded to the player singing Christmas carols as she passed. Coventry Street connected Piccadilly Circus with Leicester Square, and it was usually crowded, especially at night, and especially at Christmas. The wide pavement did little to alleviate the crush of people, but Rose found it exhilarating; there was something about the excitement of a crowd, especially at the holidays, that thrilled her. It reminded her that there was a world outside her tiny flat. She adored her flatmate—they’d been friends at university—but they both worked hard to advance their careers. There wasn’t a lot of time, or money, for outings. So sometimes Rose just walked around, pretending she had somewhere to go and people to see. It was better than staying inside the dark, old building she called home.

“It was a tough time for Gerald,” Emerald mused. “He had a scathing review in the *Times*, I kept turning him down for dates, and his identity was stolen. Had to get all new cards. The thief got almost 600 quid!”

“That’s a lot of money!” said Rose. “That seems to be happening a lot lately. Identity theft.”

Emerald nodded. “Several of my friends had it happen this year. Two from my building. Mrs. Tuttle from two doors down told me the person who got her credit card numbers bought groceries and petrol.”

“Did they ever find the person who stole from her?”

“No,” Emerald said, “but her bank took the charges off her account. They didn’t find Gerald’s thief, either. I should probably not tell him that the scarf he gave me was used to kill someone.”

“You are one lucky lady,” said Rose, glaring down at her. “Inspector Roberts should have arrested you on the spot.”

“It’s *Mark*, and once I admitted it was my scarf, and that I recognized the young man from the Apple Store, he seemed satisfied.”

“For now,” Rose grumbled.

Her mother hurrumphed in response.

After a few moments of silence, Rose spoke up.

“I don’t need a Home Pod, by the way.”

Emerald barked a laugh.

“Well, you’re not getting one now, that’s for sure.”

As they walked closer to the square, they could hear music wafting toward them. Groups of families passed, the children wide-eyed with excitement as they ran toward Santa’s Grotto. Fairy lights wrapped around light poles and draped the clusters of small, wooden cabins that circled Leicester Square, each cabin filled with food or drinks or hand-crafted items for sale. Rose was immediately drawn to the cabin that displayed Christmas wreaths; she hadn’t purchased one for the flat yet.

“Emerald!” someone called. They turned to see Portia Valentine standing with a group of ladies near a cider stall.

“You go ahead and say hello,” Rose encouraged, waving to the group. “I’d like to see about a wreath for the flat.”

There were so many to choose from, Rose became engrossed in all the tiny details and didn’t notice Inspector Roberts come up beside her until he spoke.

“I like the one with roses,” he said, pointing to a wreath wrapped in red plaid ribbon.

Rose turned to him in surprise. Was he blushing, or was that just the holiday lights?



Mark pulled on his collar. He felt his cheeks grow hot, and hoped Rose wouldn’t notice. Was she noticing?

He knew he should’ve just walked on past. She was the daughter of a “person of interest” in the case. But not quite a suspect, so that was all right. Right?

But when he saw her pale face light up with delight while she admired all those wreaths, like a child let out for the school holiday, he just couldn’t help but stop and speak to her again.

ANGELS OF REGENT STREET

“Are you following *me* now, Inspector?” Rose asked, a glint of humor in her eye.

Mark chuckled.

“Can’t the police Christmas shop?” he asked, grinning.

“I suppose,” said Rose, smiling and rolling her eyes.

After purchasing her wreath, Rose and Mark strolled to the next cabin stall.

“You don’t *really* think my mother strangled that man with her scarf?” she asked, glancing up at him.

Mark looked down into her gray-green eyes. She was looking at him with so much trust. He desperately hoped he wouldn’t have cause to disappoint her.

“I just finished checking her alibi, actually. At the pub,” he said.

“The Leicester Arms?” asked Rose. “And did they verify she was there having a cuppa?”

Mark nodded.

“She had a cuppa,” he said. “And a pint.”

“What?”

Mark pulled her out of the stream of shoppers into a display of ornaments made from pinecones.

“The barman says she ordered tea, and then ordered a pint after,” he explained, watching her face.

Rose furrowed her brow.

“I suppose she was that upset,” she mused. “But she wasn’t drunk?”

“It doesn’t sound like it, although she’s not very tall, so a little goes a long way.”

Mark’s eyes flitted around her face as he watched Rose think about this revelation. She didn’t seem concerned, just surprised. As he was examining the curve of her lips—for observational purposes only—he realized he was still holding on to her arms; he dropped his hands.

Rose looked up quickly, then took a steady breath.

“But that means her alibi checks out, right?” she asked. “She was in the pub when the young man was killed.”

“Maybe,” Mark admitted cautiously. “From the pathologist’s time of death, it’s a little

difficult to tell the difference between Emerald happening upon a murder that has just occurred and—“

“Murdering him herself,” said Rose, her expression serious.

“Murderer!”

Both Mark and Rose turned toward the high-pitched screech. A tall, slender woman with her hair in a floofy bun on top of her head was glaring furiously at an angry-looking Emerald.

“Sheila Watson,” Mark muttered, edging closer.

A crowd had surrounded the two women, like a prize fight. Rose could see Portia Valentine watching the Apple Store manager with interest.

“You killed Jonathan!” Sheila shouted, pointing her long, manicured nail at Emerald. “He laughed at you for being a stupid old woman who can’t understand computers, so you strangled him with your scarf!”

“I did not kill anyone!” Emerald barked back, her hands clenched in fists at her side. “How dare you! As if a wimpy kid being rude to me is motive enough for murder!”

“It is if you’re a batty old woman who only cares about herself!” Sheila screeched.

“That’s enough!” Mark said, putting a muscular arm between them. “If you have something else to say, Miz Watson, say it to me. Do you have proof of these accusations?”

Sheila brushed his arm away and stepped back, smoothing her coat.

“I don’t need proof,” she grumbled, teetering away in her high-heeled shoes.

Mark gave Rose an apologetic look as he ran to catch up with Sheila.



“Sheila Watson has been out to get me since I moved into the building!” Emerald grumbled over her cider.

“It’s obvious you’re not one of her favorite people,” Portia agreed.

They were sitting at a small table near the cider cabin. Rose had joined them, though Emerald did notice she glanced around from time to time, as if looking for someone in the crowd. Inspector Roberts had not returned after the Sheila incident. Emerald inwardly gloated.

ANGELS OF REGENT STREET

“Sheila’s the one who told Mark the scarf was mine,” she continued. “And obviously she told him about the ‘incident’ at the shop. How did she know it was my scarf, anyway?” she wondered. “I mean, it didn’t have my name on it.”

“Perhaps she saw you wearing it in the Apple Store,” Portia suggested.

“Either in the shop or around your flat,” said Rose. “It does have a distinctive pattern.”

Portia furrowed her brow, her blue eyes narrowing at Emerald.

“Why does Sheila hate you so much?” she asked.

“Well, if she thinks I murdered her employee, that’s enough, don’t you think?” Emerald replied, raising her eyebrows defiantly.

Portia waited, her expression serious as she eyed her friend. Emerald squirmed in her seat. She could never hide anything from Portia.

“Oh, all right!” she said finally. “When I first moved in two years ago, after Richard passed away, I kept hearing this yapping dog. All night long, yap, yap, yap! I couldn’t tell where it was coming from or whose it was. It kept me up at night. So I may have mentioned it to the landlord, and he may have told me that pets weren’t allowed in the flats, and when he went investigating, it was Sheila who had the dog.”

“So you were responsible for Sheila having to give up her pet,” Portia said, nodding.

“She knew pets weren’t allowed!” Emerald declared. “And I didn’t have it out for her, in particular. I really just wanted a quiet night. Somehow, Sheila found out it was me. So she started doing things to make my life miserable.”

“What kinds of things?” asked Portia.

“Oh, little pranks, you know. Like gluing my mail slot shut. Or ringing my doorbell in the middle of the night. Last Christmas she stole my wreath and I found it in the garbage bin in the lobby.”

“I remember that,” said Rose. “I didn’t realize it was ongoing!”

Emerald shrugged.

“The wreath was the last one,” she admitted. “She still gives me evil glances, but the pranks have stopped.”

“And you’re sure it was Sheila?” asked Portia.

Emerald nodded, her mouth a thin line.

“She would never tell me outright,” she said, “but she would say little things to let me know. Like when my doorbell would be rung at two in the morning. The next day she’d pass me and say ‘Did you have a good sleep last night?’ Why would she ask me that unless she knew I’d been disturbed?”

“I wonder,” said Portia, deep in thought, “if she accused you of murder because she actually thought you did it, or because it would be one more way of getting back at you?”

“I wouldn’t put it past her to have murdered the chap herself just to spite me,” said Emerald.

“Mum!” Rose warned.

“Well, she’s a spiteful cat!” said Emerald defensively. “I just hope they find the murderer soon. It’s a little unnerving to know there’s someone out there sneaking around in alleyways, killing people.”

“Yes,” agreed Portia. “And why Farriers Passage? The shops were all closed. Does Jonathan live in your building?”

“No. I’d never even seen him before that night. I don’t know why he would have been in the Passage. Maybe he was meeting someone. Oh! I remember what I was going to tell Inspector Roberts!” she said, wiggling in her seat. “The noise I heard just before I stumbled upon poor Jonathan. It sounded like someone was hitting something against the pavement. Kind of rhythmic. And also crunchy.”

“Crunchy?” asked Rose.

“You know, like someone was walking on gravel or something. After I found the body, I looked for the shadow person I’d seen. You know how the Passage takes a turn right there at Smiths Corner. But there was no one there, or they were hidden in a doorway. So I pulled out my mobile to call 999, and as I was speaking to the dispatcher, I heard that noise again. Something hitting or clicking against the pavement. Or maybe the brick wall? It seemed odd.”

“Did it sound crunchy that time, too?” asked Rose.

“No,” said Emerald. “Just the clicking that time.”

“I thought you told all that to the police?” her daughter said. “Didn’t they search the alley and didn’t find anyone hiding there?”

“I told them I heard a noise and saw a shadow, but I didn’t describe the noise I heard, and I didn’t tell them that I heard it a second time. Just didn’t think about it, I was so focused on *not* telling them that it was my scarf he had wrapped around his neck.”

“Or that you had a pint in addition to your cuppa,” mumbled Rose.

Emerald froze.

“Who told you that?” she asked, glaring across at her daughter.

“Your new friend *Mark*,” she sneered.

“I had endured an ordeal,” Emerald defended herself. “And there’s nothing wrong with having a pint.”

Emerald briefly considered why she was bothering to matchmake for her obviously ungrateful single daughter.

“I wonder what happened to the glasses,” murmured Portia.

Emerald gave her friend a confused look.

“The pint glasses?”

“No,” said Portia, biting the inside of her lip in thought. “The young man’s glasses. You said they were missing. I wonder if the police found them when they searched Farriers Passage?”

“Why do they call it Farriers Passage anyway?” asked Rose. “Is it someone’s name?”

“No,” replied Portia. “A farrier is someone who puts horseshoes on a horse and takes care of their feet. Originally, the passage led to the blacksmith who made the horseshoes, so the farriers used that passage from the street to get to Smiths corner.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” said Rose, nodding. “Out of the way of traffic. But in this case, also out of the way of witnesses. Mum, you shouldn’t take that way home anymore!”

Emerald pursed her lips. She had already determined not to use it again. A dead body in the dark was hardly worth the shortcut. But it wouldn’t do to let her daughter tell her what to do.

“I’ll make my own decisions, thank you,” she said stiffly. “I don’t need anyone treating me like a child.”



Rose pushed open the heavy arched door to the Westminster Coroner’s Court and held it open for Emerald and Portia. Emerald had been called in as a witness for the inquest, and Rose glanced nervously at her mother wearing her cloche hat and jaunty attitude. Rose wasn’t worried about her mother being afraid to testify; she was worried the court would see how excited Emerald was to be in the spotlight. Most ordinary people didn’t understand the mind of an actress, and she didn’t want her mother to come across as callous and unconcerned that a young man’s life was cut short.

A young man she had fought with a few hours before he was found dead.

Emerald beamed a smile around the room as she entered the courtroom and settled into the wooden seat, and Rose sighed. This was going to be a long afternoon. A British inquest wasn’t a court trial, but a way for the coroner to pronounce his findings and declare the cause of death. She just hoped nothing her mother did or said made her appear any more guilty than she already did.

Rose glanced away from her mother to examine the other occupants of the room. A tall, thin man stood with some authority in the center, with a wisp of white hair carefully combed across an otherwise shiny skull. The coroner, she guessed. There were a few media personnel, but the case hadn’t caused a major stir in the news. The death of a young computer salesman wasn’t sensational enough, Rose thought, and grimaced. There was a teary-eyed woman in her fifties sitting on a bench next to a young man who looked to be still in school. Jonathan’s mother, Rose decided, and probably a younger brother. She couldn’t help but feel sorry for them. How awful to lose your son, especially around Christmas.

She frowned, blinking back sympathetic tears. As she turned away, she caught her breath. Across the room was Mark Roberts, and he was watching her with a strange expression on his face. *Inspector Roberts*, she corrected herself. He was a professional, after all. No one to be

thinking about other than as the officer who had the potential to haul her mother to gaol. She certainly shouldn't be thinking about the dimple in his cheek that she hadn't noticed before. He had given her the briefest of smiles when their eyes met; Rose's lips quirked awkwardly upward, but she wasn't actually sure it was a smile. Should she smile? They were in coroner's court, after all, and this was murder.

Another person entered the courtroom, drawing Rose's attention. It was Sheila Watson, dressed in her typical white blouse and short, black skirt, clicking across the wooden floors in her high-heeled shoes. She wore her long hair down this time, but the top was hairsprayed up like a 1980s heavy-metal singer, her heavy eye makeup adding to the image. Her face was pinched in a scowl as her eyes roamed the room, finally landing on Emerald. Sheila's lip curled in disgust. Rose could feel her mother stiffen beside her. She reached out and patted her arm, and Emerald gave her a brief smile.

When the inquest began, the police officers testified first, explaining the call they had received from Emerald, and what they had found when they arrived. All of it was information Rose was familiar with. Jonathan was found strangled, with a ladies' scarf around his neck. There were signs that he struggled against his perpetrator, although he was wearing gloves, so no DNA was found on his hands.

Inspector Roberts avoided eye contact with her during his testimony, and Rose wondered if it was because he still considered Emerald a suspect and didn't want to give that away. She sighed. How did her mother get herself into these messes, she wondered? She couldn't think of a single friend of hers whose mother had to testify in a murder inquest.

The pathologist testified that the death was attributed to strangulation by means of the scarf around Jonathan's neck, and that the perpetrator would have attacked from behind. The size and strength of the attacker could not be pinpointed because, with the element of surprise, the attacker would have an advantage, even if he or she were smaller or weaker than the victim.

Otto Dunbar was called next, a thick young man wearing jeans and a knit cap. Rose noticed he was perspiring a little, and he picked at his fingernails as he stared at the coroner like a child brought to the headmaster's office.

“Mr. Dunbar,” the coroner began, giving him what Rose could only assume was his attempt at a smile, although it looked more like a straight line, “you knew the deceased, Mr. Jonathan Green?”

Otto nodded, then had to be asked to speak his answer so it could be recorded.

“How did you become acquainted?”

“We were mates in school, and after we became flatmates.”

“And you both were employed by the Apple Store on Regent Street?” the coroner asked.

“Yes.”

“How long have you worked for Apple?”

“Since last Christmas,” Otto replied. “We both got jobs there when they were hiring extras for the holiday.”

“And you and Mr. Green have an additional computer repair business outside of Apple?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve stated that on the night of the eighth December, you and Mr. Green were to meet for dinner after work. What time was that?”

Otto swallowed nervously.

“The shop closes at seven, and it usually takes us a half hour or so to finish up,” he said. “We usually just walk on over to the bar around the corner, but that night, Jonathan said he had to take care of something first, so how about dinner at Nando’s? He said he’d meet me and Jessica there. But he never showed. And he never answered any of our texts.”

“That would be the Nando’s restaurant near Piccadilly?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know where he went after work that night? Or what he had to take care of?”

“No,” said Otto. “He never said.”

“Did Mr. Green seem nervous or upset about something that evening?” asked the coroner.

“Not really,” said Otto, “other than being annoyed by the dame who yelled at him.” His eyes shifted in Emerald’s direction and then snapped forward again. He stared at the coroner with wide eyes, as if he were trying not to blink.

ANGELS OF REGENT STREET

“Are you referring to the incident involving Emerald Donnelly?”

“Yes,” said Otto, his eyes never flinching off the coroner’s face.

“Did Mr. Green seem afraid of Ms. Donnelly, would you say?”

“Not so much afraid as annoyed,” admitted Otto, thinking back. “He was put out that he got a bawling out by Sheila for it. She told him what for and that the customer was always right. Threatened his job a bit. He was right pissed off about that. I figured we’d be jawing about it later, and he’d shrug it off. He always shrugged off what Sheila said.”

Otto’s face froze. Rose guessed he had just realized his boss was also in the room. The younger man cleared his throat uncomfortably. He glanced apologetically at someone in the audience. Rose followed his gaze to see a tearful young woman in her early twenties sitting on the same row as Jonathan’s family. From the row behind her, Sheila Watson was glaring at the back of the young woman’s head, causing Rose to wonder if the girl could feel the hatred piercing through her skull from behind. As she turned her attention back to Otto, Rose noticed Portia Valentine’s eyes were on the young lady as well, her expression unreadable.

“Your statement says that the last time you spoke with Jonathan Green was about 7:30 when you left to head to Nando’s. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Otto replied.

“Did Mr. Green leave the Apple Store at that time, or was he still there when you left?”

“He was leaving. We walked a block or so together, then he turned off at Kingly next to H&M. I went on to Nando’s from there.”

“And was anyone with him when you last saw him walking down Kingly Street?” asked the coroner.

“No,” said Otto, his face falling with emotion. “He was alone.”



“I’ve got to get back to work, but I’ll check back in with you later,” Rose said after the inquest was over. “I’m proud of you, Mum. You did your part. And you didn’t over-do it.” She kissed Emerald’s cheek before heading for the tube station.

“What do you think she meant by that?” asked Emerald, turning back to Portia. “And what are we supposed to do now? It seems so anti-climactic for the finding to be ‘death by strangulation by person or persons unknown.’”

“Let’s get something to eat,” said Portia, squinting at something down the street. Emerald followed her gaze to see Otto Dunbar and the crying blonde girl from the coroner’s court walking toward a local pub. Emerald’s dark eyes twinkled at her friend.

“Let’s go!” she said.

The Royal Oak was an everyday local pub, established in the early 1800s and housed in a corner building that jutted out into the pavement. It was surrounded with tall windows adorned with wreaths, with large balls of holly and mistletoe hanging off of hooks set in the old stone between the windows. Inside, the interior was updated with colorful album posters overlapping each other and covering every inch of the walls. Wooden tables and chairs were squeezed into the tight floorplan, and a large wooden bar dominated the back of the building’s ground floor.

It didn’t take long for Emerald to spot Otto at a corner table.

“Now what?” she whispered to Portia.

“Follow me,” said her friend.

Emerald watched in awe as Portia straightened her back, lifted her head regally, and swept across the narrow space between tables before towering over Otto and his companion, who cowered under her imperial gaze. It wasn’t Portia’s height that caused their reaction; she was fairly average in that category. But there was something about the actress’ comportment that exuded authority.

“Mr. Dunbar?” Portia enquired.

“Yes?” said Otto, gazing up and leaning away from her toward the wall.

“We were at the inquest, and we just wanted to express our sincere sympathy in the loss of your friend.”

“Thank you,” Otto said uncertainly, glancing across at his companion, who sniffed and wiped at her eyes with a paper napkin.

ANGELS OF REGENT STREET

Emerald peeped around Portia, attempting to look just as regal, but feeling like a handmaiden in her shadow.

“Wait,” said Otto, his brow creasing, “you’re the woman Jonathan got in trouble over.”

“But I didn’t kill him,” Emerald announced.

Portia scowled down her nose at her friend in an attempt to shush her.

Emerald ignored her signal and pushed in closer to the table.

“I fought with him over computers, yes,” she went on, “but I wouldn’t have killed him over it.”

Otto shrugged and dropped his eyes.

“I didn’t think so,” he admitted, “but I wish I knew who did do him in. Seems so senseless.”

“Even the most senseless crimes have reasons,” said Portia. “Though they may not make sense to us.”

She shifted her attention to the young woman with puffy eyes sitting across from Otto.

Otto shook himself, then indicated his companion.

“This is Jessica,” he said. “She’s—she was Jonathan’s girlfriend.”

Jessica swallowed noticeably, holding her paper napkin up to her mouth as if to hold in her emotion.

“We’re so sorry for your loss,” Portia told her, giving her a maternal look.

“Do you mind if we join you?” asked Emerald, pulling a chair over and plopping herself into it.

“Sure,” Otto said, surprised, and ducking his head to avoid being clobbered by Emerald’s oversized handbag. “I guess.”

Portia turned another wooden chair around to join the group, smiling at them like a queen giving her royal blessing.

“You were supposed to meet Jonathan at Nando’s that night as well, weren’t you?” Portia asked, turning to Jessica.

She nodded, wiping at her eyes.

Otto looked at her protectively.

“We sat and waited,” he explained. “We texted, and called. But he didn’t text back.”

“And you have no idea what he was going to do?” she asked. “Who he was going to meet?”

They both shook their heads.

“It wasn’t like Jonathan to be secretive,” Jessica said. “At least, not to us.”

“You said he wasn’t upset about anything,” Portia said. “Other than possibly being fired because of Emerald,” she added with a wry smile. “Do you think Sheila would have terminated him?”

“Nah,” said Otto. “Sheila’s all talk, especially with Jonathan. She’s always had a soft spot for him. Goes back and forth between being kinda mean and lettin’ him get away with murder—oh, sorry.”

“Are you saying she and Jonathan had a romantic relationship?” asked Emerald.

“Course not!” Otto answered, his face flushed. His eyes strayed to Jessica, who stiffened. “Jonathan wasn’t interested. Besides, she was old, and it would’ve been weird with her being the boss and all. I’m just sayin’ she let him get away with a lot. Being late, stuff like that. More bark than bite, ya know? She chewed him out, didn’t she? She wouldn’t have let him go without a really good reason.”

A bell jingled as the door to the pub swung open and a couple in their forties walked in. As the man surveyed the available tables, his eyes landed on Otto and he raised an arm in greeting.

“Hiya, Mr. Goodfellow,” said Otto, quickly plastering a pleasant expression on his face.

Emerald turned.

“Jim!” she called. “Nancy! Good to see you. They live in my building,” she explained.

“Is Otto helping you out with your computer problems?” asked Jim, strolling toward the group.

Otto gave a self-conscious laugh.

“Oh, did he help you with yours?” asked Emerald.

“Yes,” said Jim. “Really knows his stuff. Had to have him come back and take care of some security issues, though, after my identity was stolen.”

“There seems to be a lot of that,” said Emerald.

“Otto took care of it for me,” Jim said with a grin. “Well, enjoy your meals.”

“I’d forgotten that you had a business on the side,” said Emerald, turning back to Otto, who looked a bit more pale than he had a moment before. “Maybe Jonathan was meeting with a client.”

Otto shook his head, wiping his brow with his hand.

“We never kept that kinda stuff from each other,” he said. “Fifty-fifty, all the way. He would’ve told me if that’s what it was.”

“What about you, Jessica?” Portia asked. “Do you have any idea why Jonathan would have been in Farriers Passage? Was it somewhere he frequented?”

She shook her head sorrowfully.

“I don’t think he’d ever been there before,” she said. “It wasn’t on the way to his flat. Or mine. It just doesn’t make any sense.”

“How long had you been together?” Portia asked, patting her arm sympathetically.

“Just a few months, really,” she admitted. “I work at H&M, across the street from Apple. He would come in sometimes, and we just hit it off.” She swiped at her eyes again and shuddered a sigh. “I’m sorry,” she said, her tears starting again. “It’s just—I thought we’d be getting married! He used to buy me stuff, and when I’d tell him to save his money, he’d tell me not to worry. He and Otto were gonna be rich someday. Move up in the world. He said knowing computers was gonna pay off. But it didn’t for him,” she said, shaking her head and staring at her hands in her lap. “It didn’t for him.”

“So you were supposed to meet Otto and Jonathan at Nando’s?” asked Emerald.

Jessica nodded.

“Was it planned?” asked Portia. “Or was it a spur of the moment kind of thing?”

“Oh,” said Jessica, frowning. “I mean, we often met up after work,” she said. “But that night, Jonathan texted that he’d like to meet at Nando’s instead of the bar around the corner from Apple. He said he’d meet me there. I guess I thought Otto and Jonathan would come together, but when Otto arrived, he was alone.”

“You arrived before Otto?” Portia clarified.

Jessica nodded.

“I wasn’t working that night, so I went there directly from my flat.”

“And what time was that?” asked Emerald, her beady eyes bright and her nose quivering with excitement.

“Um,” Jessica furrowed her brow and looked across at Otto, who shrugged. “I got there around a quarter to eight, and I waited about ten minutes before Otto showed up.”

Emerald gave a small hurrumph, and Portia eyed her suspiciously.

“Do you think they’ll find him?” Jessica asked, her tear-stained face pleading with them.

Portia placed a soft, wrinkled hand over her fist that clutched the napkin.

“The police will do their job,” she said reassuringly. “There’s a good man on the case.”



Mark Roberts returned to the station feeling unsettled. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but something didn’t seem quite right about the Jonathan Green case. Why would a young computer salesman get himself strangled in a dark alley? There was no evidence of robbery. There didn’t seem to be a reason for his death. And yet, he was undeniably dead. And only hours after he’d had a run-in with a customer.

Mark pictured Emerald in his mind and shook his head. No matter how hard he tried, Mark couldn’t picture the aging actress lurking in a dark alleyway, ready to strangle the man who embarrassed her in a shop. First of all, how would she have lured him in? By all accounts, it wasn’t a shortcut Jonathan frequented, so Emerald wouldn’t have been able to wait for him there, and it seems unlikely she followed him to the spot. No, he went there on purpose that night. To meet someone, apparently. But who? And why?

Thoughts of Emerald shifted to thoughts of her daughter, and Mark gave a long sigh, wiping his hand across his face as he leaned back in his desk chair. He’d had trouble keeping his eyes, and his mind, off of Rose during the inquest. She’d looked across at him before it began, and his mouth had smiled against his will when she caught him looking at her. Stupid, he thought, shaking his head. He’d realized it in the moment. Her expression had been questioning, and he

knew he had to focus on the case, not the daughter of the woman who found the body. After that, he kept his eyes to himself. At least until it was over, and he watched her file out of the courtroom with her mother and another woman who looked vaguely familiar but he couldn't quite place. Rose had glanced back over her shoulder, but he'd turned away quickly to speak with another officer. Wouldn't do to have her know he was watching her. Unless she was looking for him?

I'm an idiot, he thought, closing his eyes and sighing again.

"Something the matter, Guv?"

Mark looked up to see Constable Clark looming in front of his desk, his ample mid-section at eye-level, allowing him to see what Emerald had noticed a few days before: he needed a larger uniform shirt.

Mark shook his head.

"Nah," he said. "Just thinking about this case."

"Well, you're in luck," said the constable. "There's someone here says she has somethin' to tell you."

Mark entered the interrogation room to find Sheila Watson perched on the edge of a metal chair, long legs crossed, one of her high-heeled shoes dangling from her foot.

"Miz Watson," he greeted her as he took a seat in front of her. "What can I do for you?"

"I just found out something I think you should know," she said with a smug look.

"And what's that?"

"Jonathan and Otto are using their employment at Apple to get clients for their side business."

"I thought you said their side business was sanctioned?" Mark said quizzically.

Sheila smirked.

"The legit side of their side business is allowed by Apple," she said, "but I'm guessing identity theft isn't something they'd want their employees doing."

Mark stared back at her, stunned.

"No," he admitted, "I don't guess so. Do you have proof that's what they were doing?"

“More than one of their clients had identity theft problems,” she said. “I know of a couple of people in my building where I live. Otto or Jonathan would fix their computer or work on their device, and then that same client would have their identity stolen within a month or so. Sometimes the client would hire Otto or Jonathan back to ‘fix’ the security issue. It’s diabolical, if you ask me. Preying on old people who don’t know computers.”

“And you have proof of this?”

“Well, I can give the names of some of the clients,” she admitted. “But I assume you lot have the ability to look into bank records and all that. One of my neighbors was praising my stellar employee, talking about how he helped him out with his computer problems. It just popped in my head that the same guy also had his identity stolen. Figured it wasn’t a coincidence.”

She sat up tall in her chair, reminding Mark of the tattletale girl in his school growing up who always snitched on him for every minor infraction. Of course, what Sheila was telling him wasn’t a minor infraction. If it was true, and Otto and Jonathan were part of an identity theft scheme, it brought a whole new light to Jonathan’s death. And a whole new motive. Several, in fact.

“How long have you known about this?” he asked suddenly, glancing up from scribbling in his notebook.

Sheila’s face blanched.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, you didn’t mention it before. I was wondering when you knew? Why did you wait to tell me now?”

“I didn’t know for sure,” she said, shifting her legs and smoothing her skirt. “I only recently put two and two together. I mean, it’s not something I can prove by myself, is it?”

“Hmm,” said Mark, making a note in his book.



“It’s Otto Dunbar,” said Emerald, nodding and pursing her lips as she quivered with excitement beside Portia’s serene exterior.

Portia gave her a skeptical look as they walked through the streets of Westminster.

“What makes you say that?” she asked.

“Didn’t you hear?” asked Emerald. “Otto didn’t go to Nando’s right away! He says he left Apple at seven-thirty, but Jessica says he didn’t arrive until almost eight! That’s at least twenty minutes, and it takes less than ten minutes to walk from Apple to Glasshouse Street where Nando’s is. I should know. I walked it that night as well.”

“Maybe he was taking his time,” Portia suggested. “Or there were a lot of Christmas shoppers in the way.”

“I don’t know why you’re defending him,” said Emerald. “He’s the perfect suspect! The business partner who killed his friend over money. I mean, Jonathan was meeting someone without him. Just because Otto says it wasn’t a client doesn’t mean it wasn’t. Maybe Otto felt like he was undercutting him.”

Portia frowned.

“Even if that were true,” she speculated, “I just can’t see Otto getting so upset about being undercut that he would strangle his friend. It would be much easier to believe that he killed him to win Jessica. He clearly has feelings for her.”

Now it was Emerald’s turn to frown.

“That seems a bit dramatic, don’t you think?” she asked.

Portia gave an elegant shrug of her shoulders.

“Besides,” she added, “how did he get your scarf?”

Emerald pouted.

“How did anyone get it?” she wondered.

“Clearly, you dropped it, either in the Apple Store or on Regent Street. The murderer picked it up and used it. Whether it was just a coincidence or if they intended to frame you is a question I’m still pondering.”

Emerald shivered.

“Me, too.”



Otto Dunbar swallowed hard as he sat in the hard chair of the interrogation room. The harsh overhead lighting illuminated the sheen of sweat across his brow and that pooled in the creases of his thick neck.

“Mr. Dunbar? Otto,” Mark corrected himself with a reassuring smile.

“Yes?”

“It’s come to our attention that your computer repair business may have something to do with the rash of identity theft going on in the area.”

Otto stared at Mark but didn’t speak.

“We looked through Jonathan’s bank records,” Mark continued, “and we found that after the initial payment for computer services rendered to—let’s say, Gerald Partridge—Mr. Partridge’s credit card information was used to make some large purchases, to the tune of 600 pounds. Strange, wouldn’t you say?”

Otto remained silent, his eyes widening.

“We contacted a Mr. Goodfellow, and he says he used your services to fix his home computer a few months ago. Mysteriously, he also had his identity stolen, and his information was used to get a personal loan of £2,000. What do you want to bet, if I were to look at your bank account, there’d be a deposit of £2,000?”

Otto’s expression fell.

“Okay,” he mumbled. “Yeah, maybe we were helping ourselves a bit. But all those blokes could spare it,” he said defiantly. “It’s not like we took anything from folks who were skint, like us.”

“So what went wrong, Otto?” asked Mark, squinting his eyes at him. “What did Jonathan do that deserved killing?”

“What?” Otto squeaked. “You don’t think I killed him?”

“He was meeting someone that night,” Mark continued. “Maybe it was a client you didn’t know about. Maybe he was making arrangements without you.”

ANGELS OF REGENT STREET

“No!” Otto said, squirming in his seat. “We went fifty-fifty. It didn’t matter who got the client, we both worked the identity stuff. Share and share alike, we always said.”

“What if Jonathan was thinking of getting married? Needed a little extra cash and wanted it all for himself?”

“That would have been okay with me!” Otto shouted at him, finally losing his temper. “He would’ve had my blessing! I wouldn’t have killed him over it, even if he did go behind my back! What kind of mate would do that?”



“Hey, Guv,” Constable Clark said, tossing a sheet of paper across Mark’s desk. “Just got an eyewitness says he saw Emerald Donnelly enter Farriers Passage ‘round about our murder time.”

Mark’s heart sank.

“Who’s this eyewitness?” he asked, trying to remain unaffected.

“Fella eating sushi at the Japanese place on the corner of Brewer,” Constable Clark said. “He says he read about the case, and remembered thinking it odd that an old dame would venture into Farriers Passage after dark.”

“How do we know it was Emerald?” asked Mark, trying not to raise his hopes.

“Noticed her hat,” the constable smirked. “Hard to miss, if ya know wot I mean.”

Mark nodded, scowling.

“Did he happen to see Jonathan Green go in?” he asked.

“He’s not sure if it was Jonathan,” said Constable Clark, tapping a fat finger on the paper on the desk, “but he did notice a man and a younger blonde woman, who went in the alleyway before our Emerald. Ya want me to bring anyone in?”

“Not tonight,” said Mark, pondering the information. “We’ll question all the women in this case again in the morning.”



Emerald trudged to the doors of her block of flats. It was located above the shops of Haymarket Street, down the road from the Theatre Royal. She had just opened the outer door that led to the lobby when a small voice spoke to her from the darkness of the street.

“Curse this dark winter,” Emerald thought. It was just after five, but the light poles and Christmas lights were the only illumination on the street. Emerald peered cautiously behind her, her free hand clutching the mace from the safety of her large handbag.

“It’s only me,” said Jessica, stepping forward, her blonde hair falling out of a messy bun, making her resemble an unkempt Barbie doll.

“What do you need, child?” asked Emerald. “And how did you know where I lived?”

Jessica hesitated, her body giving an obvious shiver under her puffy coat.

“Come in,” said Emerald, waving her through the door.

“I just wanted to ask you something,” Jessica said, glancing around the lobby nervously. It was a large, square room, tiled in black and white marble, with a rather grand, dark-wood stairwell that led to the upper floors and a lift tucked in the corner. The mail slots lined one wall, and a sofa and two chairs congregated in the center of the room, elegant but unused, like a magazine photo. “Jonathan and Otto said you and Sheila lived in the same building, and one time me and Jonathan met Otto here after a job. Otto was telling us that he saw Sheila in the lobby, and how he was nervous about it because they were doing computer repair on the side. Felt kind of weird, I guess, to have your boss see you doing another job.”

Emerald led Jessica to the sofa and chairs, thankful for the warmth of the radiator against the far wall. Jessica perched on the edge of one of the chairs, her hands stuffed into her puffy coat. Emerald noticed her face was long and thin, making her dark eyes huge as they looked out at her and darted warily around the room.

“Now,” she began once she was settled on the sofa opposite, “what can I help you with?”

Jessica swallowed.

“I wanted to ask you if you thought Jonathan was seeing someone else,” she said, biting her bottom lip.

Emerald blinked her beady eyes.

“Do *you* think he was?” she asked, stalling for time. It seemed like an odd question.

“I didn’t,” she admitted, her eyes welling up with tears. “But then Otto said that about Sheila, and she’s tall and pretty and everything. Probably makes a lot more money than me, since she’s the boss. Maybe he wanted her instead?”

Emerald frowned. “I believe Otto said Jonathan wasn’t interested in Sheila.”

Jessica bit her lip again and nodded, her brow lined with worry.

“Did Jonathan ever talk about Sheila, or any other woman, in a way that made you think he was interested?”

“No,” she shrugged. “I mean, he said we would get married. Just needed a bit more time. But you saw a shadow when you found him,” she said. “I wondered if you got a good look at whoever it was?”

Jessica watched Emerald closely, holding her breath.

“How did you know I saw a shadow person?” asked Emerald.

“You mentioned the shadow at the inquest,” Jessica explained, confused.

“Right,” Emerald said, remembering. “Well, unfortunately, as I told the coroner and the police, I didn’t see who it was, not even if it was a man or a woman. I’m sorry.”

Jessica nodded, her face crestfallen.

“But I can tell you this,” Emerald continued. “I don’t think a man who talks of marriage to a girl is stepping out on her. In this day and age, where marriage seems to be an afterthought, not a first step, why would he have been talking about a commitment to you if he had someone on the sly?”

Jessica’s face crumpled into tears. She wiped her nose with the back of her gloved hand.

“Thank you,” she said, giving Emerald an appreciative look. Emerald watched as her shoulders relaxed, as if a weight had been lifted.



The next day, Inspector Roberts looked across his desk at Emerald Donnelly. Today she was hatless, but her neck was hidden by an abundance of fluffy scarf that looked like a poodle was wrapped around her throat. A pale blue poodle. He had decided to call in all of the women of the case again, just to see if anyone got rattled. Beginning with Rose's mother.

Now why did he have to think of her like that? Rose's mother? Best if he didn't think of Rose at all, just in case. It wouldn't do to have romantic thoughts about a woman whose mother could be a murderer. She seemed innocent, he told himself, but she was an actress on the West End. Could she be pretending? Could she have murdered a man and then fooled them all with her innocent act? It was her scarf that was the murder weapon, after all.

Mark had been disappointed when Emerald had arrived alone without Rose. She had looked so subdued at the inquest, and he'd wanted to tell her it would all be okay. But he didn't know that for sure, did he? What if this interview proved it wouldn't all be okay?

Constable Clark blocked the light in the doorway of his cubicle.

"Another visitor," he announced, moving aside.

Mark's heart leaped for a moment as his eyes searched for Rose, only to settle back down when Portia Valentine swept past the constable, holding a dramatic pose against the slate-grey partitioned wall.

"I hope you don't mind," said Emerald, smiling at Mark. "I called my friend Portia Valentine to come in. I know you have questions for me," she said, a gleam in her dark eyes, "but we have a few things to say to you."

Portia Valentine, thought Mark. Of course. The movie star from his parents' time. He was glad to solve the mystery of why she had looked so familiar. A bit older now, but she hadn't lost her elegance and poise.

"Have a seat, please," he said, waving Portia to the other cheap office chair crammed into his tiny space. "Now what is it you wanted to say to me?"

“Otto Dunbar,” said Emerald, nodding her head knowingly.

“What about him?”

“There’s a discrepancy about his timeline,” she continued. “He says he left work at 7:30, but Jessica said he didn’t arrive at Nando’s until almost 8:00. Since it only takes about ten minutes to get from the Apple Store to Nando’s, he must be lying.”

“I asked Mr. Dunbar about that,” said Mark. “He told me he stopped at the Bose shop on the way. They sell speakers,” Mark explained to the two confused faces across from him. “And his alibi checked out.”

Emerald frowned, clearly disappointed that her theory was disproved. Mark had also been disappointed by the news. It canceled his own theory that Otto Dunbar killed his business partner. He wondered for a moment if he should reveal that Otto was still in custody on identity theft charges, but decided to keep it to himself.

“What about Jessica?” asked Portia, her head to one side. “She wasn’t working that day. Could she have lied about when she arrived? Maybe she was the one to meet Jonathan?”

“I don’t think so,” said Emerald before Mark could speak. “When she came by my flat last night, she was concerned that the shadow person I saw was someone Jonathan was having a romantic liaison with. I assured her I didn’t think he was stepping out on her.”

“You spoke with Jessica last night?” asked Mark, sitting up straighter in his chair.

“Yes, but I told her Jonathan sounded like a man intending to marry her, not sneaking around on her. When we were in the Royal Oak pub after the inquest, Otto mentioned that Sheila had a soft spot for Jonathan, and it made Jessica think maybe he was having a fling with his boss. I told her—“

“You went to the pub with Otto and Jessica?” Mark demanded, his eyebrows raised and his mouth a stern line.

Both actresses raised their own eyebrows at him in innocent surprise.

“Yes,” said Emerald cautiously. “It was very informative.”

“You are not investigating this case,” Mark warned, his jaw tightening. “In fact, need I remind you that you are a person of interest?”

“Am I a suspect?” she asked, her hands clasped together. Mark discerned a gleam of excitement in her beady eyes.

“Not yet,” he grumbled, “but if you keep doing things like meet with other persons of interest, you may find yourself in that role.”

Emerald preened.

“So, Jessica wanted to know if you could identify the shadow person?” he clarified.

“Well, I think she was more concerned that her boyfriend wasn’t meeting another woman in a dark alley.”

Mark sighed. Jessica’s whereabouts were harder to prove. She said she was at home until she went to meet Otto and Jonathan at Nando’s, but her flatmates had been either at work or school, so she had no official alibi. He rubbed his tired eyes.

“What about the glasses?” asked Portia, watching his movements with a thoughtful expression. “Were they ever found?”

“Yes,” Mark answered, surprised. “We found them in the alley, a few feet away from the body. I have them right here,” he said, tossing a few papers to the side and sliding an evidence bag toward them. “They just returned from processing. No DNA. Except Jonathan’s.”

Portia and Emerald leaned forward to examine the glasses.

“Oh!” gasped Emerald, her hand to her blue poodle scarf. “That must have been some fight.”

The wire-rimmed frames were twisted, and the lenses showed scratches and a few chips, as if they’d been smashed. One earpiece was broken off the frame.

“The lenses are made of polycarbonate, so they don’t break easily on impact,” Mark commented, looking down at the demolished eyewear. “Not that someone didn’t try.”

Portia glanced up at him, her crystal-blue eyes shining and the tip of her nose pink. Mark was almost sure he saw the tip quiver with excitement, like a hound on the scent.

“I know who did it,” she said triumphantly. “But now we have to prove it.”



ANGELS OF REGENT STREET

Emerald pulled her houndstooth coat closer around her.

“Of course it would be foggy tonight,” she grumbled to herself as she peered into the darkness of Farriers Passage. The light poles were few and far between, shining down like spotlights from the ancient brick and stone walls; they illuminated only the area directly below them, the contrast causing the unlit areas to appear even more murky. Mist streaked across the cones of yellow light and wrapped around Emerald as she stood in a little courtyard where Farriers Passage became Smiths Corner. She stood just outside the reach of the light pole; she didn’t want to be exposed by it, or blind to anyone approaching in the dark. She shivered, glancing nervously down at the ground, as if expecting to find another body at her feet. No body. At least, not yet.

She was thankful for her cloche hat. She’d stopped by the flat to grab it before her meeting in Farriers Passage. The cold, damp air nipped at her cheeks and lips.

“I’m going to need a full steak and ale pie for this,” she thought to herself. “With a pot of tea. And a pint,” she added for good measure. She was just crinkling her nose at the faint odor of human urine when she heard a footstep from the end of the alley.

Emerald squinted into the darkness, attempting to see past the single cone of light that was between her and Brewer Street where Farriers Passage began. The faint sound she’d heard at first became louder and more distinct, and Emerald smiled triumphantly as she waited.

Click. Click. Click.

The very same sound she’d heard that night.

Click. Click. Click.

The sound the shadow figure had made just before she’d come across Jonathan’s body. Minus the crunching sound. But she didn’t expect that part of it tonight. She waited impatiently as the sound slowed and a shadowy figure approached the yellow cone of light from the light pole.

Click.

Click.

Click.

The unmistakable sound of a woman's high-heeled shoes. Why hadn't she realized it until now?

Sheila Watson emerged from the dark mist like a Star Trek actress teleporting onto a new planet.

"Emerald Donnelly," she said, tilting her head to the side, her blonde, floofy bun shifting beneath its layers of hairspray. She had obviously just come from work, although this time she wore black pants with her heels, her dark coat accentuating the red scarf she wore loosely around her neck.

"I have to say, I was a bit surprised to hear from you," Sheila continued, her voice like silk. "Thought you'd be the upright kind. Not stoop to something like blackmail."

Emerald shrugged, her gloved fingers nervously fidgeting as she clutched her hands in front of her. She licked her lips and swallowed.

"Did you bring the money?" she asked, voice low, her eyes darting around the darkness as wisps of fog flitted past her face like ghostly fingers.

"I brought what you need," Sheila purred. She pulled an envelope out of her handbag and gave it to Emerald. "It's all there," she said, "but you should count it to make sure."

Emerald grabbed the envelope greedily, turning away slightly to rifle through the bills.

"It's a shame you figured it out," said Sheila, adjusting her scarf. "I thought I'd covered all my bases. I even used the scarf you dropped in the shop. What a piece of luck. And I still have luck on my side, it seems," she continued, fingering the red scarf around her neck. "I brought this one from lost property, but you've gone and brought your own."

With a sudden movement, Sheila grabbed the ends of Emerald's blue scarf and began to pull. Emerald gave a strangled cry, dropping the envelope and clutching at her scarf where it was tightening against her windpipe. Emerald gurgled as Sheila spun her around, pressing her against the wall just out of range of the streetlamp's golden circle.

Which means she didn't see Inspector Roberts as he approached.

"Good evening, Miz Watson," he said casually.

Sheila stiffened, then relaxed her grip on Emerald, allowing her to begin coughing and

spluttering as she wrenched the tightened scarf from her throat.

Mark held Sheila's arm firmly as he whipped his handcuffs out of his pocket with his free hand.

"It's about time!" Emerald yelled at him hoarsely, her face red, beady eyes flashing. "Were you waiting for me to die first so you'd have her on more charges?"

"My apologies, Miz Donnelly," Mark said, reaching for Sheila's other hand to clamp on the final handcuff. Noticing his distraction, Sheila wrenched away from Mark, twisting past him toward the other end of Farriers Passage that emptied into Old Windmill Street, her heels clicking against the pavement as she ran. Unfortunately, Constable Clark stepped suddenly out of a doorway, and the consequent collision sent Sheila flying backward to the ground.

"None o'that, now," said Constable Clark, reaching down to haul her up and finish the handcuffing job. "No one's allowed to hurt our Emerald."

Emerald paused in her self-examination of her double-chin to stare into the darkness toward the constable's huge shadow.

"Did he just say what I think he said?" she asked Mark.

"I believe you have an admirer," he admitted with a wry grin.



"It was the glasses," said Portia with a firm nod of her head. It was several hours after Sheila's arrest. Seated with Portia in the booth at the Leicester Arms was Emerald, who after more police questions and statement signings, was finally devouring a steak and ale pie, a pot of tea at her right hand and a pint at her left.

"I don't understand," said Rose, glancing up shyly at Inspector Roberts seated next to her.

"When I saw Jonathan's smashed eyeglasses," Portia continued, "I knew that the person who killed Jonathan didn't kill him over business. It was a crime of passion. Everyone thought there'd been a struggle and the glasses got knocked off during the fight, but when I saw them, I knew it wasn't a fight that crushed those lenses; it was hate."

"You have to really hate someone to want to destroy their glasses," added Emerald, looking

up from her dinner, “especially after you’ve already strangled him to death. That’s the sound I heard. Sheila Watson’s high-heeled shoes as she stomped on Jonathan’s glasses, trying to break them. And then sneaking away down the alley when I was calling 999.”

“But why did she hate him so much?” asked Rose, wrinkling her forehead.

“Love,” said Portia, compassion shining in her blue eyes.

“Sheila found out about Otto and Jonathan’s identity theft scheme,” said Mark. “One of her neighbors praised her employees for ‘fixing’ his computer after his security breach. She put two and two together, and realized they’d caused the breach in the first place. And she’d noticed his new clothes and more frequent trips to restaurants like Nando’s.”

“Why didn’t she just turn them in?” asked Rose. “Why kill Jonathan?”

“Because Otto was right,” said Portia. “Sheila did have a soft spot for Jonathan. She’d been flirting with him all year. Then she found out about Jessica.”

Rose gasped.

“I saw Sheila glaring at her at the inquest!” she said.

Portia nodded. “She was extremely jealous. So, when she found out about the identity theft, she thought she could win his affection by showing him she knew about his crimes, but was willing to overlook them.”

“That night, after Emerald’s incident in the shop,” Mark explained, “she gave Jonathan a warning about his dealings with Emerald. She didn’t fire him, but she did ask him to meet her near Farriers Passage after work to discuss something important that had come to her attention. She warned him not to tell Otto, but to meet her at the bar across from the sushi place on Brewer. Instead of going in to the bar,” Mark said, “she convinced him to walk through Farriers Passage, so their conversation wouldn’t be overheard.”

“Let me guess,” said Emerald between mouthfuls, “she declared her love for him right there in Farriers Passage.”

“She did,” said Mark, “but only after she’d let him know what she knew about the identity theft racket. She told him she wouldn’t tell the police or Apple on one condition: that he drop Jessica and have a romantic relationship with her instead.”

“But he didn’t go for it,” said Emerald.

“No,” Mark agreed. “According to Sheila, Jonathan laughed in her face. He called her bluff, told her he wasn’t interested in a relationship with an ‘old dame like her.’ He offered to cut her in on their goings on instead.”

“But Sheila wanted love, not money,” finished Portia. “In the end, she’s got neither.”

“She’d picked up Emerald’s scarf when she’d dropped it in the shop,” Mark went on, “probably intending to give it back to her since they lived in the same block of flats. But when things took a turn, and Jonathan humiliated her, she used it to kill him. He turned his back on her to walk away, and she caught him by surprise. She says—sorry Emerald—that she’s glad she used your scarf. You deserved to be under suspicion because you are a ‘selfish, stupid old woman.’”

Emerald smirked.

“How stupid does she think I am now, I wonder?”

“It’s amazing that she would call my Mum that, but be so offended when someone accused her of being the same,” said Rose.

“Well,” said Emerald after taking a swig of her beer, “I am a bit sorry for her. But then again, she did try to frame me!”

Mark smiled.

“And Otto, when that wasn’t going anywhere,” he admitted. “She’s the one who told me about the identity theft connection.”

“So it wasn’t a senseless crime,” said Portia, her gaze far away. “At least not to Sheila.”

Emerald shivered.

“Well, I for one am ready to go home,” she announced. “It’s been a long day.”

Portia agreed, rising to her feet.

“Thank you, Ms. Valentine, for your intuition,” said Mark. “You saw what I didn’t. And thank you, Emerald, for being willing to be the bait,” he added with a smile. “Those were some great acting skills, making her think you were blackmailing her. I almost thought you were truly nervous.”

“That’s the secret, Mark,” Emerald winked. “An actress is *always* nervous. Keeps us on our toes.”

As Portia headed for the door, Emerald turned back to the table.

“Aren’t you coming, Rose?” she asked.

Rose glanced at Mark.

“I think I’ll just stay a few minutes longer,” she said as Mark smiled down at her.

Emerald pursed her lips into a secret smirk as she joined her friend.

“Oh!” said Portia, as they got closer to Regent Street. “Look at the angels!”

Emerald looked up. The Spirit of Christmas lights were glowing against the blackened sky.

“Rose told me she didn’t think my angels were with me when I found that dead body,” she said, a smile playing across her lips. Then she glanced back toward the Leicester Arms. “But if I hadn’t found Jonathan Green, Rose wouldn’t be sitting back there with a handsome detective.”

Portia laughed, warm and musical over the cold evening air.

“I’d say the angels of Regent Street were definitely watching over you,” she said.

“Amen to that!” Emerald agreed, straightening her red, wool cloche hat with holly and roses on it.



THE END