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Opening extract from

Mayfair Mysteries: The Case of the Ruby Necklace

Written by

Alex Carter

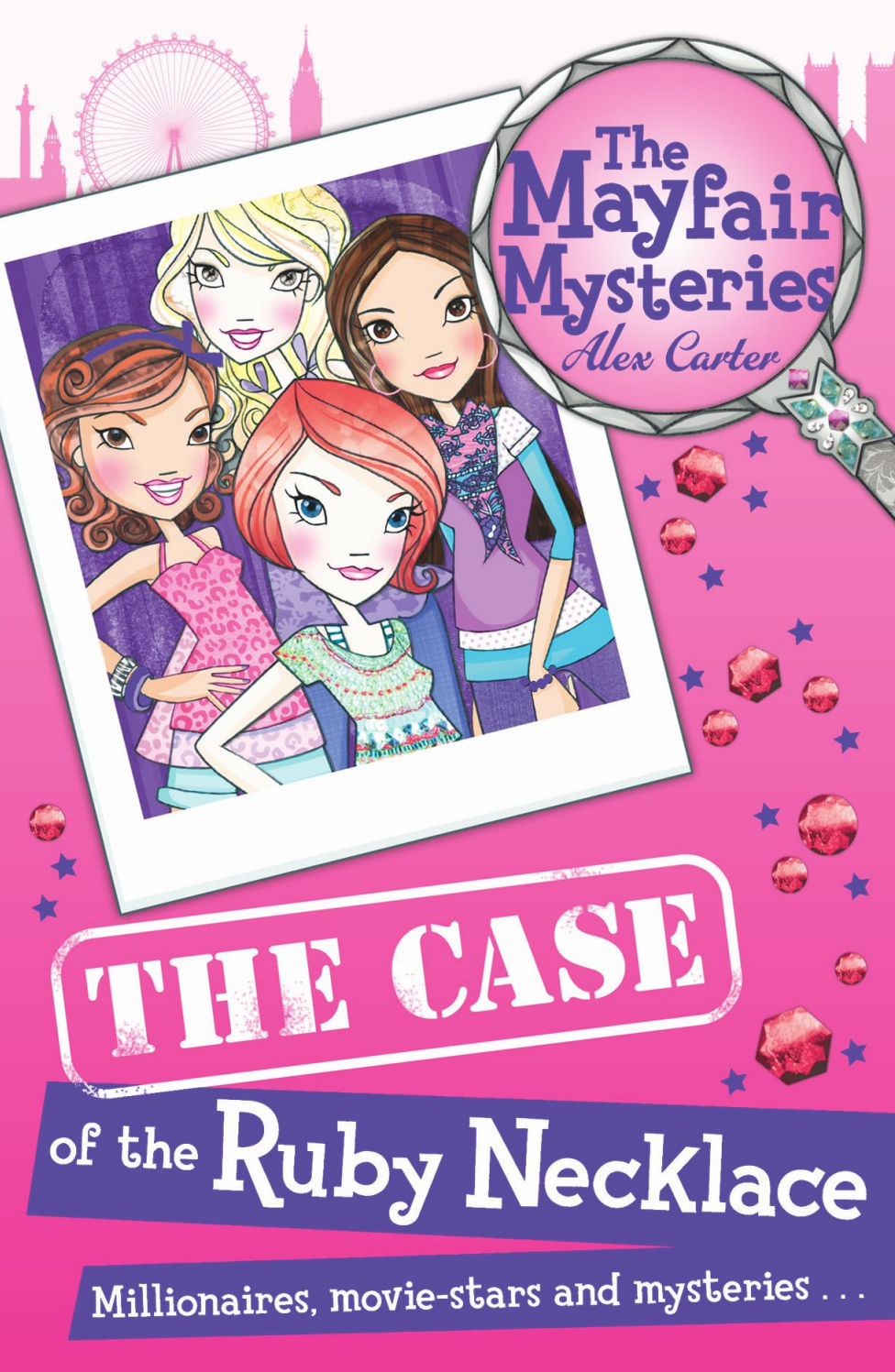
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The Mayfair Mysteries
Alex Carter
THE CASE
of the Ruby Necklace
Millionaires, movie-stars and mysteries . . .

Becky caught her breath as she got her first glimpse of the world-famous star. Isabella was very slender and slight, and was somewhat shorter in real life than she looked on-screen. But she was just as beautiful, with her very long, very dark hair and her tanned, golden skin.

Isabella smiled warmly as she posed on the steps for pictures. There were more cheers from the fans, who were now waving their autograph books, trying to attract Isabella's attention, while the photographers' flashguns blazed away as they shot picture after picture of the star. As Lauren's dad hurried forward to welcome the actress, Becky gave herself a mental shake. This was it! Time to put their plan into action . . .

Also available in

The Mayfair Mysteries

series:



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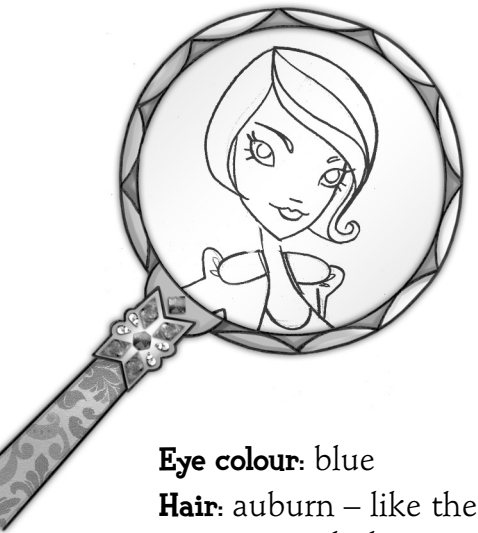
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With special thanks
to Narinder Dhami



Lauren

Eye colour: blue

Hair: auburn – like the rest of the family – cut into a bob

Style: jeans, T-shirts and Converse

Siblings: Charlie, an annoying little brother

Likes: anything sporty, especially swimming in the lush hotel pool

Dislikes: tidying her room

Prize possession: mobile phone, for keeping the other girls up to date with all the action at the Mayfair Park

Dreams of: running her own chain of luxury hotels, one in LA, New York, Paris, Dubai . . . a home on every continent!

Jas



Eye colour: brown

Hair: shoulder length Afro-Caribbean curls

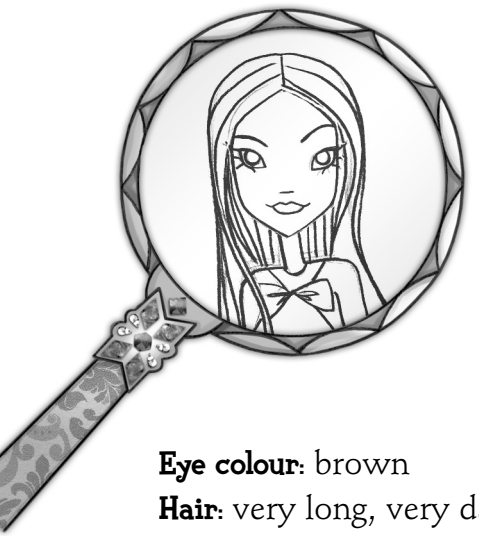
Style: glam and wild! Favourite items include super-sparkly shoes and anything with animal print

Likes: spending time with her BFFs

Dislikes: sitting still, Maths lessons, sitting still in Maths lessons . . .

Secret talent: impressive acting skills – useful in getting the girls out of several sticky situations with The Snoop

Dreams of: becoming the next Beyoncé or Tyra Banks – Jas is definitely the diva of the group!



Mia

Eye colour: brown

Hair: very long, very dark, shiny and straight

Style: eclectic – Mia mostly wears bright colours, layered with one of her mum's vintage Spanish scarves

Siblings: two geeky older brothers

Likes: all animals, especially those in need of some TLC

Prize possession: a top-of-the-range laptop – Google can help solve almost any mystery!

Dreams of: working for the United Nations, or becoming a vet

Becky



Eye colour: grey

Hair: blonde, shoulder-length curls

Style: pretty and girly . . . floaty skirts, floral tops and high heels

Likes: organizing things for everyone, especially her forgetful dad . . . and chocolate!

Dislikes: untidiness – the total opposite of super-messy Lauren!

Prize possession: her collection of celeb memorabilia. The Mayfair Park is the perfect place for celeb-spying . . .

Dreams of: being a high-flying celebrity agent – Becky was born super-glam and super-organized!

CHAPTER ONE

Hurry up and get round here as fast as u can – got a gr8 big surprise for u all!!! Lauren x

Her blue eyes dancing with mischief, Lauren Bond hit the SEND button on her phone and forwarded the mysterious text to her best friends, Mia, Becky and Jas. Her mates would be *dying* to find out what was going on, Lauren thought gleefully. She'd hardly been able to believe it herself when her parents had told her earlier that morning. Now she couldn't wait to see the looks on her friends' faces when she told them the amazing news . . .

I bet Jas is first to get here! Lauren thought, smiling to herself. Her phone beeped, signalling that she had a text, and she flipped it open and read the message.

Ooh, can't stand the excitement! Tell me!!! Jas x

Typical Jas – she was always in a rush and could never wait for anything!

No way! Not until you get here! Lauren texted back, adding a kiss and a smiley face.

Lauren curled up more comfortably in a corner of the squashy black leather sofa and glanced around the huge hotel reception, its interior tastefully decorated in cream and blue. It was Saturday morning and the hotel was busy with weekend guests. Some were checking in, others were checking out, and the smart glass-and-chrome café-bar on the far side of reception was full of people enjoying breakfast. Although it was still quite early, the hotel spa, swimming pool and gym were already busy. Lauren had been for an early-morning swim, and the spa had already been filling up with guests relaxing in white robes.

Lauren sighed with contentment. She'd been absolutely thrilled when her parents had come to work at the Mayfair Park, a luxury hotel in London. Her dad was the hotel manager and her mum was head of hospitality, and although most of the staff lived off the premises, Lauren, her younger brother Charlie and their parents had a flat in a wing of the hotel.

Lauren *adored* living at the Mayfair Park. She never got bored with people-watching because there was always so much going on. Lauren

loved everything, from the huge, noisy kitchens where Louis Henri, the temperamental French chef, ruled with a rod of iron and produced mouth-wateringly delicious meals for the hotel restaurant, right up to the exclusive luxury suites on the top floor. She just couldn't imagine living anywhere else. Mia, Becky and Jas loved hanging out at the hotel too, so whenever the girls got together out of school, it was always at the Mayfair Park. Lauren's parents were very laid-back about the girls being in the hotel and using the facilities, as long as they didn't annoy any of the guests or get in their way.

At that moment Lauren's dad popped out of his office near the reception desk to shake hands with a group of departing American guests.

'What a fabulous hotel you have, Mr Bond,' one of the women in the party said in a Southern drawl. 'We've enjoyed our stay so much.'

'It's been a pleasure,' Lauren's dad replied. 'We look forward to seeing you again in future.' As the guests left, he waved at Lauren and then disappeared back into his office.

A few minutes later Lauren spotted her mum on the other side of reception. Mrs Bond looked brisk and efficient in her dove-grey trouser suit with her wavy auburn hair, the exact same

shade as Lauren's short bob, tied neatly back. Clipboard in hand, she was deep in discussion with a couple of her assistants. There was a big medical conference taking place at the hotel over the weekend, and Lauren's mum was in charge of organizing it.

Lauren felt a rush of enormous pride. It was her parents who between them kept the hotel running smoothly and efficiently, and they were *brilliant* at it . . .

Suddenly Lauren sat up as Jas, long legs flying, came dashing up the marble steps between the stone columns that flanked the entrance to the hotel. Lauren giggled quietly to herself. Jas never walked anywhere if she could run. She watched Jas say a breathless hello to the doorman, James, looking very smart in his blue and gold uniform, and then hurry into reception, weaving her way between guests and their suitcases.

Lauren waved. Jas's face lit up when she spotted her and she rushed straight over.

'Hi, Lols,' she said, plonking herself down on the sofa next to Lauren. 'So, come on, spill it! What's going on?'

Lauren shook her head tantalizingly. 'I couldn't *possibly* say until Mia and Becky get here,' she replied.

'*Nooooo!*' Jas groaned, ruffling her shoulder-length black hair in frustration. She dived into her jeans pocket and pulled out a bar of chocolate. 'Not even for *this*?'

'Bribery and blackmail won't get you anywhere,' Lauren said firmly, her eyes twinkling.

'Then I'll just have to eat it myself,' Jas sighed, unwrapping the chocolate. But, with a grin, she broke it in two and gave half to Lauren.

'It must be something to do with the hotel,' Jas speculated knowingly as they ate the chocolate. 'Can't you just give me a teeny-tiny little clue?'

'No,' Lauren retorted. 'No, no, NO! No clues!'

'I guess that's a no, then,' Jas said with a pretending-to-be-offended sniff.

'You won't have to wait much longer,' Lauren went on. 'Here's Mia now.'

Mia was coming up the steps. She smiled shyly at James and then slipped quietly through the glass doors, stopping to pick up a newspaper and hand it back to the guest who'd dropped it.

'I *thought* you'd be here first, Jas,' Mia remarked with a smile as she joined Lauren and Jas on the sofa. 'Have you been attempting to bribe Lauren with chocolate?'

'Ooh, as if I'd do such a thing,' Jas said with mock-indignation, breaking off some of her own chocolate and handing it to Mia. 'What a totally suspicious mind you have, Mia Lopez.'

'She tried, but I didn't give in,' Lauren added, winking at Mia.

'That figures!' Mia laughed, flicking back her long shiny waterfall of dark hair. Mia was so pretty, with her gorgeous hair and big brown eyes, Lauren thought, as she'd done a million times before. But Mia was so quiet and unassuming, she didn't even seem to realize. 'Look, Becky's just arrived.'

Becky was strolling confidently up the steps, blonde curls bouncing. She smiled at James and walked into reception, looking around until she spotted the other girls waving madly at her.

'Sorry I'm late, guys. My dad decided to cook bacon and eggs this morning, and managed to set his tie on fire!' Becky rolled her eyes. 'Honestly, how can a Professor of Environmental Biogeochemistry be *so* useless in the kitchen?'

'I don't even know what Biogeochemistry is,' Mia said.

'Neither do I!' Becky confessed as Lauren handed her some chocolate.

'Oh, never mind about bio-whatcha-ma-call-it!'

Jas said impatiently. 'Now we're all here, can you *please* tell us what's going on, Lols?'

'She doesn't need to,' Becky butted in, amusement in her wide-set grey eyes. 'I've already guessed!'

Lauren stared at her, amazed. 'You can't *possibly* know, Becks,' she declared. 'It only happened this morning.'

'Tell us, Becky,' Jas demanded eagerly.

Becky shrugged. 'Well, I reckon Lauren has *finally* tidied up her bedroom and she's invited us all round here to admire it!'

Lauren burst out laughing. Whenever Becky came to the Mayfair Park, she was always desperate to get her hands on the (admittedly terrible) mess in Lauren's bedroom and tidy it all up. Becky was the queen of organization and efficiency. Secretly Lauren really admired her friend because ever since Becky's mum had died a few years ago, she'd been left on her own with her absent-minded-professor dad. Somehow Becky was managing to cope very well.

'If that's all it is, I'm afraid I shall have to get *extremely* angry, and shout and throw things,' Jas said sternly. She threw Lauren a beseeching glance. 'It's *not* that, is it, Lols? *Please* tell me it isn't.'

'As if!' Lauren laughed.

'OK, then, I think I know what it is.' Mia flashed Lauren a cheeky grin. 'Lauren has finally gone all girlie and bought herself a dress! Or maybe some lip-gloss?'

Lauren looked horrified, and this time it was Jas, Mia and Becky's turn to burst out laughing.

'No way!' Lauren exclaimed. She wasn't into stuff like clothes and make-up at *all*. 'Come on, let's go up to our flat, and I'll tell you there. Charlie's gone for a swim with his mate Joe, so at least we won't have him hanging around, annoying us.'

'OK, but I think we'd better hurry,' Becky said, 'otherwise Jas is literally going to burst with excitement, and that could get very messy!'

The girls jumped to their feet and headed across reception, Lauren leading the way. There were six lifts close by, and the girls summoned one to take them up to the first floor, where Lauren's flat was.

'Mia, I hate to worry you, but your bag appears to have a life of its own,' Becky remarked as they stood in the lift. Lauren and Jas both stared down at Mia's embroidered Indian bag and saw that a corner of it was bulging and twitching.

'It's Dillon,' Mia explained as they piled into the lift. 'He's a bit off-colour, so I'm keeping an eye on him.'

'And who is Dillon?' Jas enquired as the lift zoomed upwards.

'One of my gerbils,' Mia replied solemnly. She opened her bag and Lauren, Becky and Jas peeped in. A tiny, furry gerbil was settling down in the corner, next to a handful of seeds.

'Hi, Dillon,' Lauren said, stroking the gerbil gently with her finger. Mia loved animals and had a whole menagerie of pets – gerbils, rabbits, cats, dogs and guinea-pigs – at the home she shared with her parents and two older brothers.

'Can Dillon breathe OK inside that bag?' Becky asked.

'Course he can!' Mia replied a little indignantly. 'Dillon really enjoys coming everywhere with me!'

'Remind me never to visit London Zoo with Mia,' Jas said as Mia closed her bag again. 'Who knows *what* kind of animal she might try to smuggle out? Enormous, hairy-scary tarantula, anyone?'

The girls laughed as the lift drew to a halt and the doors slid open. Lauren's heart sank, though, as she saw the tall, thin, upright figure of Mrs Stoop, the hotel's housekeeper, standing outside.

'Good morning, girls,' was all Mrs Stoop said as she stepped into the lift. But she didn't smile, and Lauren could see that she looked distinctly annoyed. Mrs Stoop – or The Snoop as the girls called her – was excellent at her job, but she'd never approved of Lauren, Charlie and their friends hanging out at the hotel. She had often complained to Lauren's dad about it.

'I know The Snoop is just *dying* to catch us doing something naughty so she can tell my parents,' Lauren grumbled as they went down the corridor towards the Bonds' flat. 'Thank goodness she doesn't know Mia's carrying Dillon around in her bag! Can you imagine her face if he'd popped his head out?'

Jas, Becky and Mia giggled.

'She's such a busy-body,' Lauren went on. 'Some day I'm going to walk right up to her and tell her to leave us alone—'

'Ssh, she just got out of the lift again and she's right behind us!' Jas hissed in Lauren's ear.

With a horrified gasp, Lauren whipped round. But the corridor was empty. Jas, Mia and Becky collapsed in hysterics.

'Jas, you big fat liar!' Lauren squealed, her shoulders sagging with relief.

Jas was almost helpless with laughter as

Lauren grabbed her arm and gave her a shake. 'Serves you right for not telling us the secret!' she gasped through her giggles.

'Maybe I won't now,' Lauren teased, unlocking the flat door. Her bedroom was just inside the front door, off the hallway, and she led the girls inside.

'Yes, I can see now that a tidy bedroom definitely *isn't* the surprise,' Becky remarked, looking around at the unmade bed, the clothes piled everywhere and the untidy heaps of CDs, books and magazines on the desk around the computer.

'Don't let Dillon out of your bag, Mia,' Jas advised as she stepped over a pile of books lying on the floor. 'You'll never find him again in here.'

'Well, we *could* spend some time tidying up and I'll tell you my news when we've finished,' Lauren suggested breezily, plonking herself down on her rumpled duvet. 'It'll probably take three or four hours to get everything sorted, but I'm *sure* you won't mind waiting that long—'

With a blood-curdling shriek of frustration, Jas rushed over and leaped on Lauren. Becky joined her and so did Mia, after placing her bag carefully on the desk.

'Tell us now, Lols!' Jas begged, bouncing up

and down on the bed. 'I can't wait a minute longer!'

Lauren laughed. 'OK, here goes!' She took a deep breath, but then stopped and frowned. 'What's that noise?'

'Oh, just stop it, Lauren, and tell us the secret!' Jas groaned. But Lauren put her finger to her lips. She tiptoed across the room and suddenly yanked open the bedroom door. Two boys fell into the bedroom with yelps of surprise.

'*Charlie!*' Lauren glared at her younger brother. 'How many times have I told you not to sneak around listening at my bedroom door?'

'But that's what secret agents do!' Charlie complained, climbing to his feet. He had curly auburn hair, big blue eyes and a smattering of freckles across his nose. 'We *have* to know what's going on.'

'Yes, so we can be ready to spring into action,' added Joe, Charlie's best friend.

Jas, Becky and Mia started laughing, but Lauren rolled her eyes.

'Just because your surname is Bond, Charlie, it doesn't mean you're a secret agent!' she pointed out. Her brother and his friend were obsessed with playing spies, and Charlie had even been known to go up to guests and

introduce himself with the line, *My name's Bond, Charles Bond*. 'And anyway, spies shouldn't make any noise so you ought to go away and practise being quiet. I heard you outside the bedroom door just now!'

Charlie and Joe tiptoed off, talking to each other in whispers. Lauren closed the door again, pulling a face at the others.

'I wonder what that pair are plotting now.' Then she grinned as she spotted the look on Jas's face. 'Oh, yes, I've got something to tell you, haven't I! Well, there's a very, *very* special guest arriving at the hotel next Tuesday . . .'

Wide-eyed with anticipation, Jas, Mia and Becky stared at Lauren. Plenty of famous people had stayed at the hotel before, and the girls had even met some of them, but they could tell from the look of excitement on Lauren's face that this guest was extra-special.

'Who?' Jas breathed.

Lauren grinned from ear to ear. 'ISABELLA DUVAL!' she announced.

There was a stunned silence.

'Isabella Duval?' Jas repeated, dazed. 'Our favourite actress, Isabella Duval? Coming to the hotel? *The* Isabella Duval?'

'Yep!' Lauren nodded, enjoying the amazed

looks on her friends' faces. 'The one and only world-famous actress Isabella Duval is going to be staying right here at the Mayfair Park. Now *that* was worth waiting for, wasn't it?' She glanced at Becky, who was so shocked, she was speechless. All the girls loved Isabella Duval, but Lauren knew that Becky in particular was a *massive* fan of the actress. 'Say something, Becks,' Lauren went on. 'You look like you're about to faint!'

'I *feel* faint!' Becky squeaked, almost unable to get the words out. 'Why is Isabella Duval staying here? Is she on holiday or something?'

Lauren shook her head. 'Mum and Dad told me this morning that she's in London for five days to launch a new collection for Kaspari – you know, the *really* expensive Italian jewellers? They're exhibiting the collection at a gallery, and I think Isabella is going to model some of the jewellery.'

'Oh, I *loved* Isabella in *Where Two Rivers Meet*, and that film about the twin sisters where she played a double role,' Mia said. 'She was fab! Didn't she get nominated for an Oscar for that?'

Becky nodded. 'Do you think we'll get to meet her, Lols?'

'I don't know,' Lauren admitted. 'She's staying in the Ruby Suite on the top floor, and she

might just want to be left alone – you know how some superstars are!'

'Well, wouldn't it be *brilliant* fun to try and come up with a top-secret plan to get to meet Isabella?' Mia suggested with a grin. 'That would be a bit of a challenge!'

Becky jumped off the bed and began to pace up and down the room.

'I *have* to meet Isabella and get her autograph!' she declared. 'There's *got* to be a way . . .'

There was silence for a moment and then Jas also leaped to her feet.

'I've got a plan for that,' she announced.

'Jas, you've always got a plan for *everything*!' Lauren said, smiling. 'It had better be a good one, though, because if it all goes wrong, I'll be grounded for life by Mum and Dad, and The Snoop will be thrilled!'

'Nooo!' Jas shook her head. 'That won't happen. This is foolproof – well, almost!'

'Tell us then, Jas,' Becky said eagerly.

'Right!' Jas began. 'This is what we'll do . . .'

CHAPTER TWO

Clutching her phone in one hand, Becky loitered just inside the hotel entrance, trying to make herself look as small and insignificant as possible. She was breathless with excitement and her heart was hammering like crazy. It was Tuesday afternoon, and the girls had rushed home from school to put their plan to meet Isabella Duval into action.

Becky peeped through the glass doors at the scene outside the hotel. There was a crowd of photographers waiting in a roped-off area, as well as a group of fans who'd obviously found out somehow that Isabella was arriving today. James, the hotel doorman, was also waiting attentively for Isabella's car to appear.

'That's brilliant, Jas,' Becky had said approvingly when Jas had finished outlining her plan. 'But it'll have to be organized to the very *second* if it's going to work.'

'Well, if anyone can do that, you can, Becks,' Jas had pointed out. 'It'll be more like a military operation! But don't forget this is supposed to be fun too . . .'

Since Saturday, Becky had gone through the plan in her head over and over again, day and night. It *seemed* pretty foolproof. Jas had reminded the girls that whenever a guest stayed in the luxury Ruby, Diamond, Sapphire or Emerald suites on the top floor of the hotel, Lauren's dad always sent up a welcome drink just after they'd checked in.

'So how about if *we* take an *unofficial* drink up to Isabella before the *real* one arrives?' Jas had suggested, her dark eyes dancing with glee.

'Great idea,' Mia had agreed. 'But we'll have to time it perfectly in order to get there before the bar staff do.'

'We can do that,' Becky had said confidently. 'But we need to make sure no one guesses what we're up to, so that Lauren doesn't get into any trouble.'

'Thanks, guys,' Lauren had said gratefully. 'I can just imagine The Snoop's face if she found out what we were plotting!'

Impatiently Becky peered out through the glass doors again, but there was still no sign of

Isabella's car. Suddenly, though, she saw Lauren's dad come out of his office, straightening his tie. Becky slipped discreetly out of sight behind a large potted palm, and her heart began to thump even harder as Mr Bond hurried over to the hotel doors. He'd obviously had a message to say that Isabella Duval was on her way . . .

A few moments later, a sleek black limo drew up outside the hotel steps, and the fans erupted into loud cheers and whoops. Becky felt so excited, she couldn't stop her knees from shaking. She edged out slightly from behind the palm and fixed her gaze on the car.

James had opened the door and was helping Isabella Duval out. Becky caught her breath as she got her first glimpse of the world-famous star. Isabella was very slender and slight, and was somewhat shorter in real life than she looked on-screen, Becky realized. But she was just as beautiful, with her very long, very dark hair and her tanned, golden skin. She wore a floaty maxi-dress in shades of pink and lilac and very high-heeled, strappy, pale lilac shoes. She looked stunning, Becky thought dreamily.

Isabella smiled warmly as she posed on the steps for pictures. There were more cheers from

the fans, who were now waving their autograph books, trying to attract Isabella's attention, while the photographers' flashguns blazed away as they shot picture after picture of the star. As Lauren's dad hurried forward to welcome the actress and her companion, a man in a dark-grey suit, Becky gave herself a mental shake. This was it! Time to put their plan into action . . .

Mr Bond was now escorting Isabella up the steps to the hotel doors, the actress stopping to sign autographs along the way. As James opened the glass doors to admit them, Becky hit a button on her mobile to call Lauren. Now it was up to Lauren and Jas to sort out the next phase of the plan, Becky thought, peeping out from behind the palm to get a closer look at Isabella as she passed by . . .

'Right, Jas, Becky's just buzzed me,' Lauren whispered. 'Here we go!'

The two of them were sitting at a table in the hotel café-bar, which was empty at the moment apart from Kyle, the bar manager, who was polishing glasses behind the counter. There had been a few guests in there a little earlier, but they'd all gone out into reception to watch Isabella arrive. *Which is perfect for our plan*, Lauren thought, relieved.

'OK, leave this to me,' Jas whispered back. 'Ready, Lauren?'

Lauren nodded. Jas cleared her throat and stood up, pushing her chair back.

'Oh!' Jas gave a little scream. 'Kyle, Kyle, come quick!'

'What is it, Jas?' Kyle ran out from behind the bar, dropping the cloth he was holding.

'I saw an absolutely massive ginormous spider running along the wall over there!' Jas wailed, pointing at the far end of the café-bar.

Kyle grabbed a beer glass and coaster and rushed over. 'Where did it go?' he asked Jas. 'I'll trap it in this glass and put it outside.'

'I think it ran under that table,' Jas told him, pointing to the very far end of the café-bar. 'You *have* to catch it, Kyle, or the guests will freak out when they see it!'

While Kyle and Jas went to search for the non-existent gigantic spider, Lauren immediately ducked behind the counter and grabbed a silver tray. Quickly she opened the fridge behind the bar. Becky had spent hours on her computer Googling to find out Isabella's favourite drink, and had finally come up with the answer – pink champagne.

The bottom of the fridge was full of

mini-bottles of champagne. Carefully Lauren got one out and whipped off the foil top. She twisted the stopper out carefully, and then checked over her shoulder. Jas now had Kyle crawling around on the floor, looking for the imaginary spider. Trying not to giggle, Lauren took down a tall crystal champagne flute, placed it on the tray and filled it almost to the brim with the pale pink bubbly liquid.

'What are you doing?' asked a curious voice behind her.

Lauren jumped guiltily, almost spilling the champagne. She hadn't heard Charlie come into the bar, and now he was standing there staring at her.

'Nothing!' Lauren spluttered. At the other end of the café-bar, Jas had just glanced round, and was miming frantic 'hurry up' gestures at Lauren. They didn't have much time . . .

'I want to know,' Charlie insisted, his eyes mischievous. 'Tell me or I'll tell Kyle you're stealing champagne!'

'Look, it's for Isabella Duval, the actress in the Ruby Suite,' Lauren hissed quickly. 'We want to get to meet her, that's all.' Suddenly she had a brainwave. 'Anyway, listen, I've got a secret mission for you!'

Charlie's eyes widened. 'What is it?' he asked eagerly.

'Find me a white rose to put on the tray,' Lauren told him. 'It has to be a white rose, because they're Isabella's favourite flowers.'

'I'm on the case!' Charlie promised solemnly, and he dashed off. With a sigh of relief, Lauren picked up the tray and slipped out of the café-bar into the hotel lounge next door, which was thankfully pretty empty.

'Sorry, Kyle, maybe I was just imagining things,' Lauren heard Jas call apologetically. Then Jas came skipping out of the café-bar and joined Lauren in the lounge.

'Great stuff, Lauren!' Jas gasped with a huge grin. 'Everything's working brilliantly so far.'

At that moment Becky rushed in, phone in hand.

'You two are stars!' she exclaimed, thrilled when she saw the champagne. 'I've just seen Isabella, and she's gorgeous! She's on her way up to the Ruby Suite with Lauren's dad right now, so I'm just going to buzz Mia to let her know.'

'So far, so good!' Lauren laughed. 'Now it's all down to Mia . . .'

On the top floor of the hotel, Mia was lurking

around the lifts, phone in hand. The plan was that Becky would buzz her as soon as she saw Isabella leaving reception and getting into the lift on the way to her suite. A couple of the hotel porters had already arrived with Isabella's designer luggage and had placed it in her rooms, so Mia knew the star couldn't be far behind . . .

Mia peeped into her bag to check on Dillon. She was relieved to see that he'd eaten some of the seeds and was now fast asleep. The gerbil had been off his food for a few days, and Mia had almost decided to take him to the vet, but it looked like he was getting better all on his own. Mia felt very relieved. She hated to see an animal under the weather.

Suddenly Mia almost leaped out of her skin as her phone buzzed. Quickly she hit the STOP button and then scuttled out of sight behind a mahogany bookcase that stood in the corridor. Isabella was on her way!

A few moments later Mia heard the lift doors open and the sound of footsteps.

'And if there's anything you want or need, Miss Duval, anything at all,' Lauren's dad was saying, 'please don't hesitate to let us know.'

'Thank you, Mr Bond,' Isabella replied, 'that's very kind.' Mia felt a thrill run down her spine as

she heard the actress's familiar tones. She longed to take a peep at Isabella but it might ruin their whole plan, so she restrained herself.

Mia waited silently behind the bookcase as she heard Lauren's dad unlock the suite and show Isabella in. A few moments later he came out, and this time Mia risked a quick peep. She saw the lift doors close as Mr Bond left the top floor and went downstairs again.

With a huge sigh of relief, Mia quickly buzzed her friends' phones. All she had to do now was hope that the other girls were on their way . . .

As Lauren and the others waited in the lounge for Mia's signal, Charlie sidled into the room, glancing left and right as if he thought he was being followed.

'What's *he* doing here?' Jas whispered as Charlie hurried over to them.

'I sent him on a mission to get him out of the way!' Lauren explained.

'Here's your flower.' Charlie produced a white rose from behind his back. 'I took it from the display on the reception desk, but don't worry' – he looked very proud of himself – 'nobody saw me.'

'Good work, Mr Bond!' Lauren said, winking

at Jas and Becky as she laid the rose carefully on the tray. 'I suppose you'd better come with us and meet Isabella, then.'

Charlie didn't look very impressed. 'I don't know who she is,' he said with a shrug. 'I haven't seen any of her films. Has she ever played a spy?'

'I don't think so,' replied Becky.

'What about an evil scientist then?'

'Nope,' Jas told him.

'An SAS soldier?'

Jas, Becky and Lauren shook their heads.

'Oh.' Charlie yawned. 'She sounds really boring. I won't bother. I've got better things to do.' And, nicking a couple of apples from the large bowl of fruit on the coffee table, he began trying to juggle with them.

The three girls glanced at each other and laughed, but they stopped abruptly as all three of their phones began to buzz, one after the other.

'That's Mia's signal,' Becky said breathlessly. 'Let's go for it!'

Leaving Charlie chasing the apples he'd dropped, Becky, Lauren and Jas hurried off to the lifts. They waited for an empty one to come along and then slipped inside. The girls stood silently as the lift glided towards the top floor,

Lauren still holding the tray. Becky hardly dared to breathe, she was so worried. She felt hot with embarrassment and fear at the thought that someone like The Snoop might get into the lift and then they'd have to explain why they were carrying a glass of champagne on a tray . . . Becky fixed her eyes on the display of floor numbers above the door, willing them to keep moving upwards.

At last there was a *ping* as the lift reached the tenth floor. Becky heaved a huge, shaky sigh of relief as the doors slid open and they stepped out to find Mia waiting for them.

'Oh, you got the champagne, guys!' Mia exclaimed. 'Well done, you.'

'The plan's worked beautifully so far, Mia,' Becky confided. 'Did you catch a glimpse of Isabella? She is so beautiful!'

Mia shook her head regretfully.

'Lauren and I haven't seen her yet either,' Jas said, whipping out a brush and smoothing down her hair. 'We can't wait! Hey, has anyone got any lip-gloss?'

'I have.' Becky pulled a tube of strawberry-flavoured gloss out of her pocket. She handed it round and the girls tidied themselves up, brushing their hair and applying the lip-gloss. Even

Lauren, who hardly ever wore make-up, put a slick of gloss on.

'Right!' Becky said with a nervous gulp, wishing her knees would stop knocking together. 'Let's do this, guys . . .'

Lauren picked up the tray again and the girls tiptoed over to the door of the Ruby Suite.

'Why are we tiptoeing?' Jas whispered.

'And why are we whispering?' Mia asked.

'Because we're incredibly nervous!' Becky replied in a low voice. 'Well, I am, anyway . . .' She stopped outside Isabella's door and stared at it, but made no move to ring the bell. *Isabella Duval is behind that very door,* Becky thought, her heart racing. She was so scared and excited, she didn't know what to do.

'I realize this suggestion might be a bit out-there,' Jas remarked, 'but shouldn't you ring the bell, Becky?'

'I can't!' Becky wailed, trying to quell the butterflies swooping around inside her tummy. 'I'm too nervous.'

Jas patted her comfortingly on the shoulder. 'Look, Becky, we've done the hard bit,' she pointed out. 'If you won't, I will!' And reaching out, she pushed the bell.

'Isabella's probably tired after her flight from

the States,' Becky gabbled nervously. 'We'll just hand over the drink and leave.'

'I thought you'd brought your *Where Two Rivers Meet* DVD for Isabella to sign?' Lauren reminded her friend.

'I have,' Becky mumbled, 'but I don't want to bother her.'

'I'll ask for you, then,' Jas said in her usual direct manner.

'Ssh!' Mia hissed. 'Someone's coming!'

Becky could hardly contain her excitement as the door opened. There was Isabella Duval herself, standing right in front of them.

'Hello?' Isabella said enquiringly, smiling at them.

Becky knew she was staring. She also knew that her mouth had fallen open, but she couldn't help it. She was completely star-struck! Even Jas, who always had a comment for every occasion, was speechless.

Isabella was still smiling. 'Is that for me?' she asked, pointing at the glass of champagne.

'Er – yes,' Lauren stammered. 'It's a welcome drink, compliments of the hotel management.'

'We know it's your favourite, Miss Duval,' Jas added, finally finding her voice.

'Oh, how kind,' Isabella said, her almond-

shaped eyes twinkling. 'You're right, pink champagne *is* my favourite drink! Thank you so much.'

'Um, Miss Duval, would you mind signing my mate Becky's DVD for her?' Jas asked, sounding quite shy for once as she nodded at Becky. 'We're all big fans of yours, but Becky's your biggest fan *ever*!'

Becky blushed as Isabella smiled directly at her.

'Of course I will.' Isabella opened the door wider. 'Do come in, girls. And please call me Isabella.'

Hardly able to believe their luck, the girls walked into the huge luxury Ruby Suite. The living-room was full of antique furniture and dark-red leather sofas, with oil paintings and gilt-framed mirrors on the walls. Beautiful displays of exotic red orchids were positioned carefully here and there. Off the living-room, other doors stood ajar. Through one of them, the girls could see an enormous bedroom with a four-poster bed draped with deep red silk curtains trimmed with gold fringes, and through another, a spectacular bathroom of chrome, marble and glass.

'That bathroom's bigger than the whole of my house!' Jas whispered jokingly to Becky.

'I've never stayed at the Mayfair Park before, but I love it already,' Isabella declared as Lauren put the tray carefully down on the coffee-table. She glanced around the living-room. 'This is one of the nicest suites I've ever stayed in. I adore the red décor.'

'There are three other suites called the Diamond, Emerald and Sapphire suites,' Lauren explained. 'And they're all decorated in the gem-stone colours too.'

'Well, I'm very glad I'm in the Ruby Suite because red is one of my very favourite colours. I think Kaspari booked it especially for me because I'm launching their new ruby collection. Wasn't that kind of them?' Isabella picked up the champagne glass and took a tiny sip. 'Thank you for making me feel so welcome, girls,' she went on. 'Now, where's this DVD you want me to sign, Becky?'

With a broad smile, Becky took the DVD out of her shoulder bag and handed it to Isabella. She was still a teeny bit nervous, but Isabella was so natural, warm and friendly that Becky was feeling much more relaxed.

To Becky, my biggest fan! Isabella wrote with a flourish. *Lovely to meet you. Best wishes, Isabella Duval.*

'Thank you!' Becky gasped.

'You're very welcome,' Isabella declared, taking another sip of champagne. 'So, tell me, girls, how are you connected to the hotel?'

'I'm Lauren, and my dad, Mr Bond, is the manager,' Lauren explained. 'Jas, Mia and Becky are my best friends.'

'Oh, Lauren, please do tell your father how much I *love* my suite,' Isabella said enthusiastically. 'There's only *one* thing missing . . .'

'What's that?' Mia asked shyly.

'A tub of double chocolate fudge ice-cream,' Isabella replied.

Becky and the others stared at her in surprise and then began to laugh.

'I know, isn't it shocking?' Isabella sighed, her face breaking into a smile. 'Double chocolate fudge ice-cream is my favourite thing *ever*, and I eat far too much of it. So I guess it's probably a good thing that there isn't any!'

'I'll ask my dad to send some up,' Lauren promised, as there was a knock at the door.

'That will be Max,' Isabella guessed, hurrying to open it. A tall, dark-haired man in a grey suit stood outside, holding a silver box in his arms, and Becky recognized him immediately as the

man who'd arrived in the limo with Isabella earlier.

'Ooh, my shoes!' Isabella squealed excitedly, taking the box from him. 'Girls, this is my PA, Max Carroll. Max, meet my new friends, Becky, Jas, Mia and Lauren.'

'Delighted to meet you, girls,' Max said smoothly, nodding at them. 'Any friends of Isabella's are definitely friends of mine.'

Becky smiled politely at him, but secretly she couldn't help thinking that Max was *just* a little bit smarmy. There was something about his slicked-back hair, dazzlingly white teeth and general manner that she just didn't warm to. She glanced at Jas, who pulled a quick face at her, and Becky guessed she was thinking the same thing.

Meanwhile Isabella had put the box on the bed, and was eagerly unwrapping swathes of the palest pink tissue paper. Then, with a cry of delight, she pulled out a pair of glittering, ruby-red shoes with twinkling crystal stiletto heels.

'Oh!' Becky breathed. 'They are just *gorgeous*!'

'I've never seen anything so sparkly,' Jas sighed enviously, staring at the shimmering heels. 'You'll look like you're walking on light, Isabella!'

'They're to go with my dress for the Kaspari

jewellery launch,' Isabella confided, turning the shoes this way and that to admire them. 'Are you sure they're the right size for me, Max?'

Max nodded. 'Size three. But maybe you'd better try them on, just to be sure.'

'*I'm* a size three too!' Becky blurted out. Then she blushed as the others smiled.

'Would you like to try them on, Becky?' Isabella asked, holding out the sparkling ruby shoes.

Becky was so excited, she could hardly kick her flip-flops off fast enough. She took the shoes from Isabella, handling them as carefully as if they were made of glass, and then slipped one onto her right foot. She tried to stand on one leg to put the other shoe on, but the heels were so high, she wobbled a little and had to hang on to Jas.

'They look fabulous!' Mia said, eyes wide.

Becky tried to take a few steps, but now she began wobbling about even more on the glittering, skyscraper heels, and with a grin, she collapsed onto one of the sofas.

'They're beautiful but too high for me!' Becky said, handing the shoes back to Isabella.

'Oh, I *love* high heels,' Isabella told her. 'I'm so short, I've always worn them and so I can walk

for miles in them now. Just don't ask me to run the London Marathon in heels, that's all!' She put her hand on Max's shoulder to steady herself as she slipped the shoes on. 'Look! I can actually talk to Max face to face when I'm wearing these,' Isabella said with a huge smile. In the ruby shoes, she was now as tall as he was, Becky could see. 'Usually I only come up to his shoulder!'

'What outfit are you wearing with the shoes, Isabella?' Lauren asked curiously.

Isabella whisked across the room, crystal heels twinkling in the light, and unzipped a clothes bag lying on one of the sofas. Then carefully she took out a long red velvet gown with a square neckline, nipped-in waist and flowing skirt.

'Oh, you'll look so beautiful!' Becky exclaimed, wishing that there was some way she and the other girls could go to the jewellery exhibition and see Isabella launch the new collection in her gorgeous dress and glittering shoes.

'Thank you,' Isabella replied, looking pleased as she zipped the dress into the bag again.

'Maybe we should go now,' Mia whispered to Becky. 'Isabella must be tired.'

Becky nodded. 'We'll leave you to rest now,

Isabella,' she said. A look of relief flashed across Max's face, Becky noticed, but it was gone so quickly, she wasn't sure if she'd imagined it. 'It was lovely to meet you. Thank you *so* much for the autograph.'

'And thank you for showing us your lovely shoes,' said Jas gratefully.

'*And* your dress,' Mia added.

'I won't forget to ask my dad about the double chocolate fudge ice-cream too!' Lauren told her.

'It was lovely to meet you, girls,' Isabella said warmly as she saw them to the door. 'I do hope we meet again before I leave.' She sounded as if she *really* meant it too, Becky thought. 'Bye for now . . .'

'Was that a dream or did I *really* meet Isabella Duval?' Becky murmured as, with a friendly wave, Isabella closed the door behind them.

'Well, if it *was* a dream, I was having the exact same one!' Jas laughed. 'Wasn't Isabella *lovely*? I can't believe how nice she was.'

'Yes, she must meet hundreds of new people every day, and she even remembered our names,' Lauren marvelled.

'She doesn't act a bit like a star,' said Mia as

the four of them headed off down the corridor, 'and she *must* be one of the most famous people in the world!'

Just before they reached the lifts, the door opened. Becky's eyes widened as she saw Kyle, the bar manager, step out of the lift, carrying a glass of champagne on a silver tray. She glanced at Mia, Jas and Lauren and the four of them exchanged a huge grin.

'Here comes Isabella's *official* welcome drink,' Becky murmured. 'Time to make a run for it, girls!'

The Mayfair Mysteries

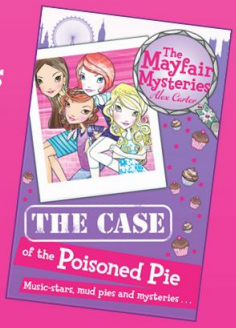
FOUR best friends
ONE priceless necklace
And an actress with TWO personalities . . .

For Lauren and her friends, living in a luxury London hotel definitely has its perks . . .

Like getting to meet the glamorous movie-star Isabella Duval.

But it seems there are two sides to their famous guest and so the girls turn detective.

Can they solve the mystery of which is the real Isabella – and which is the act?



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