

# MYSTERY ON VALENTINE'S DAY



BETH  
BYERS

*Lee  
Strauss*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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A GINGER GOLD AND VIOLET CARLYLE MYSTERY  
SHORT STORY

LEE STRAUSS

BETH BYERS

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## **SUMMARY**

The worlds of Ginger Gold and Violet Carlyle collide in this fun Valentine Mystery short story by bestselling authors Lee Strauss and Beth Byers.

While both Ginger and Violet had plans for a romantic evening of dinner and dancing to celebrate Valentine's Day with their husbands, something goes terribly awry. One by one, female patrons discover that they are missing jewelery.

In this closed room mystery filled with a brigade of colorful characters, Violet and Ginger join forces to put their skills of deduction to work. Can they unveil the culprit and solve the mystery in time for dessert?

Don't miss this delectable bite-sized tale. Pairs perfectly with a box of chocolate and a comfy chair!

“*I* feel like we’re being very typical,” Violet Wakefield said to her husband, Jack, as the door to the River Restaurant in the Savoy Hotel was opened for them. She glanced about the restaurant, noting the gold and black art deco floor and the green-blue chairs next to the dark wooden tables. Violet sighed. Typical or not, she loved this restaurant and loved the chance to sit across the table from Jack, drink champagne or one of her favorite cocktails, and revel in being in love. “Dinner at the Savoy on Valentine’s Day.”

“That’s us, Vi darling,” Jack agreed. “Typical. Run-of-the-mill. We’re the same old couple, doing the same old thing. Nothing to note here.”

Violet snorted as they were seated. A part of her was mourning that they were spending Valentine’s Day without her twin and his wife or their best friends Lila and Denny. Both couples were expecting children and had remained in the country. Being in London without them was just lonely and she was especially missing her brother.

Vi saw Jack nod at a man across the restaurant and frowned. The man, handsome with warm hazel eyes and greying temples, sat across from a lovely redhead. Look at Jack with his friends present while she was lonely for hers! Vi paused from teasing Jack and internally whining for a moment to take note of the lady. Wasn’t that...?

Vi was staring and needed to turn away or be caught, so she shifted her gaze to the reflection of the lady in a gold-framed mirror behind her. Yes, it was Lady Gold, Violet was sure.

Violet hadn't met the lady in person, but she felt certain they'd either be excellent friends or instant enemies. The idea made her smirk and she glanced up at Jack who'd noticed her staring at the mirror. Lady Gold—no, Violet corrected herself, the former Lady Gold. She'd given up her title when she married a detective—the event had made the headlines in all the society rags. That must be her husband sitting across from her.

“Who's that?” Violet asked.

Jack glanced back at the man before ordering champagne from the waiter. “Chief Inspector Basil Reed,” he answered. “The lady you're examining is his new wife.”

“Oh, ah,” Violet teased, fiddling with her rose-gold chandelier necklace that Jack had given her that day. It matched the previously gifted rose-gold earrings all of which together highlighted her soft-pink dress accented with gold embroidery, pearl beads, and fringe. “That's so helpful. Basil Reed, of course. He works at Scotland Yard, doesn't he?”

“Yes.” As they were presented with the champagne, Jack nodded his acceptance and eyed Violet. The look on his face told her that he wouldn't be taken in by her playfulness. “He's quite an excellent detective with a wife nearly as troublesome as my own, at least according to the superintendent.”

Violet laughed and declared Basil Reed a lucky man before she let her gaze stray from the chief inspector and his wife to a solid woman with iron-grey hair, a square jaw, and steely-blue eyes. Violet paused to shake her head in mockery. They really were typical. A man and a woman sat together at every table, the flattering candlelight making everyone look glamorous.

Violet's gaze landed on a beautiful blonde sitting across from a man in possession of vibrantly curly red hair. They wore black with silver as though they'd determined beforehand to coordinate. Vi burned with curiosity about whether the couple had prearranged their outfits or been surprised when they'd each set eyes on the other.

The waiters in their dark suits with crisp white napkins draped over one arm seemed to float among them as they delivered cocktails. Violet watched a light-footed fellow deliver two drinks to a table at which was seated an elderly couple with wrinkled hands linked together and aged eyes locked in mutual affection. How delightful!

While they waited for the shrimp starter to arrive, Violet excused herself to go to the ladies to tidy her hair and touch up her makeup.

GINGER REED, known by some as Lady Gold, couldn't believe she'd never been to the River Restaurant at the Savoy Hotel before.

"Basil, love," she said to her husband who was seated across from her on one of the room's deep-turquoise leather dining room chairs. "It's perfect."

Basil had chosen the establishment to celebrate Valentine's Day, and as Ginger glanced about the glamorous room, alight with dense crystal chandeliers, she could see many other happy couples had made the same choice. The gentlemen wore navy or brown suits, the quality of which couldn't be missed, not even in the dimly lit room, and most certainly tailored by a master on Savile Row.

Ginger felt like a botanist at a rose show taking in the sensual delights of each blossom as she gazed with appreciation at the many exquisite gowns and fine accessories. A night out at the Savoy, whether it was the hotel or the theatre, was an excuse to pull out the gems. Along with a pearl choker necklace, a string of pearls hung long and loose around Ginger's neck. The pearls were as real as could be, as if she'd fished the oysters out of the ocean herself, and shimmered against her lavender chiffon evening frock. Ginger knew the color worked with her pale complexion and the red hues of her bobbed and marcelled hair. The lace and sequin trim of the outer panel lavender skirt parted to expose a creamy underslip. Ginger, sitting straight, crossed the matching silk pumps, which had fashionable ties around the ankles.

A waiter, finely dressed in pressed black trousers, a short white jacket, and black bow tie, approached with the menu.

"Would the lovely couple enjoy a glass of wine with their meal?"

The lovely couple certainly would!

Basil ordered a lush French red. As they perused the menu, Ginger caught sight of their neighbors doing the same. Basil's gaze steadied on a table across the room, and he nodded towards the attractive couple seated there.

"Do you know them, darling?" Ginger asked.

"Yes, well, I'm acquainted with the gentleman. He's Detective Inspector Jack Wakefield. Our paths cross on occasion. I've never had the pleasure of meeting his wife."



“We’ll have to make sure to greet them before we leave,” Ginger said, just as the waiter returned with their bottle of wine and two long-stemmed glasses, and began to pour.

The menu items sounded delectable and made Ginger’s mouth water. There were many seafood choices but also chicken and lamb were on offer.

“They all sound so good,” Ginger said with a smile, “I hardly know what to order.”

“Might I recommend the Cornish crab?”

Ginger closed her menu and pushed it towards the waiter. “That sounds fabulous.”

Basil ordered blackened Loch Duart salmon.

The sophisticated older lady at the table next theirs sat across from a much younger man. Ginger raised a brow at the age difference. The lady reminded her of Ambrosia, the Dowager Lady Gold, Ginger’s former grandmother, who resided with herself and Basil at Hartigan House, and had an air of superiority about her, emphasized by the tip of her nose pointing rather upwards. It was only when she overheard the young man speak and call her “Grandmother” that Ginger understood the relationship, and why the younger man’s lips were turned down.

Basil noticed as Ginger attempted to hold in a smile. “What is it? Your beautiful green eyes are sparkling with mischief.”

“Not mischief, love,” Ginger said, “but amusement.”

She leaned forward, holding her wine glass to her face to prevent her words from being overheard.

“That poor young man is celebrating Valentine’s Day with his grandmother.”

Basil risked a glance then said, “We should introduce him to Felicia.”

Ginger chuckled. Felicia was Ginger and Basil’s younger housemate, granddaughter to Ambrosia. The poor dear couldn’t decide on a favorite beau and had ended up with none on this particular day for romance.

Their meals arrived and Ginger couldn’t wait to dig in. The buttery aroma of the crab steaming before her was delectable.

Basil raised his glass of wine. “Bon appetit, my love.”

Ginger returned the gesture, her heart bursting with love and affection for the handsome man staring lovingly back at her. “Bon appetit, mon chéri.”

Ginger blamed her time spent working as a British secret service agent during the Great War for her inability to ignore minute details of events and persons in her periphery. Though she focused on Basil as he regaled her with the Savoy's history "—the first public building in Britain completely lit by electric lights—" she couldn't help but make note of the lady of a certain age and her companion at the table situated behind Basil's back. She looked formidable with striking make-up, dramatic eyeliner, and sharply arched brows. Ginger quite admired her red gown and Egyptian-themed turban with its glittering diamond-shaped pendant attached front and center.

Her handsome companion was younger—not to the same degree as the grandson to Ginger's right—but keenly interested in his date, his eyes never leaving hers.

"—the electricity that generated the magnificent lighting in this room," Basil was saying, "indeed the whole hotel, is provided by steam from the hotel's own artesian wells."

"We simply must stay here sometime," Ginger said. "Now, love, don't look now, but I've only just noticed Lord and Lady Fitzhugh dining. They're at a table by the bar." A once frequent customer at Ginger's fashionable dress shop, Feathers & Flair, Lady Fitzhugh hadn't returned since the rather unpleasant death that had occurred there during the grand opening gala.

With one foot firmly placed in the Victorian era, Lady Fitzhugh's straight posture could only be attributed to what Ginger now considered an archaic corset. The 1920s had come with many new inventions and opportunities, and Ginger was most grateful for the advances made for womankind. She was happy to say farewell to the restrictive dress wear along with the outdated social protocols of the previous generation.

In comparison, Lord Fitzhugh slouched in his seat, looking rather uncomfortable, and Ginger hated to think it, browbeaten.

Lady Fitzhugh caught Ginger's eye, and though the lady acknowledged her with a subtle nod of her tiara-topped head, her scowl never relaxed.

"I suppose I should go and say hello to them," Ginger said. "Her dreary outlook on life is rather tiresome, but perhaps I can win back her patronage."

The meal was delightful and when Basil suggested dessert, Ginger was quick to agree. It was Valentine's Day after all, and it wouldn't do to end it without a bit of chocolate.

“You rat!”

Ginger’s head snapped to the angry voice belonging to a pretty blonde lady who dazzled in a black and silver dining gown. In the atmospheric lighting it looked like an Elsa Schiaparelli, but on further inspection, Ginger thought it a close imitation. The lady pushed away from the table. “You said you loved me!”

Her companion, a roguish-looking young man with hair redder than Ginger’s own, stared back with a look of horror. “But I do love you, darling,”

“You’ve got lipstick on your collar, and it’s not mine.”

The bright young thing held on to a rather large handbag and strapped it to her shoulder. If she’d meant to make a scene, she’d certainly succeeded. Her T-strap shoes marched across the black and gold carpet to the point where it met the similarly designed marble tiles.

Ginger’s gaze returned to the chastised young man, his cheeks flaring as red as his hair.

“Poor thing,” Ginger said, glancing back at Basil. “I suppose not all that appears to be love, is in fact, love.”

On the way back to her table, Violet caught the elderly gentleman kissing the back of his wife's hand. Their skin was spotted with age and crevices that spoke of a shared history. Did they see the younger versions of their spouse when they gazed so lovingly at each other or did it not matter that they'd grown old? She wanted nothing more than long minutes of questioning them about the way their love had changed over the course of their lives, and to receive honest answers.

The redheaded man sat alone at his table, looking rather like a puppy abandoned by his mother. Where had his date gone? Violet wondered. She hadn't seen her in the ladies.

A quick scan of the room, and her eyes found the back of the blonde, stepping rather purposefully to the door of the restaurant. Violet noticed the attention of all the room was on her. Rejoining Jack at their table, she said, "Don't tell me I've missed out on a bit of juicy drama?"

"I'm afraid so."

Not to be outshone by the sparring lovers, the lady with the square jaw and steely eyes, apparently wanted a turn at the show. Her dark eyes flashed with fury as she accused her companion, "It's gone!"

The guests seated around the woman fell silent.

Violet glanced at Jack, noting his deep frown. She could see his frustration at yet another intrusion to their carefully planned evening of romance, but she had to admit, she was entertained. "What's happening?"

"She's gesturing to her neck. I would guess her necklace is missing?"

Violet added wickedly, “It could have slipped into her—ah—generous bosom.”

Jack didn’t answer. His frown deepened and he turned to Violet. “Bloody hell, Vi! Your necklace.”

Violet glanced down, reflexively placing her hand at her throat, and realized that the gift she’d received as they’d left the house was gone. Dumbly, she lifted her hands to her ears, felt the earrings, and then examined her wrist. At least she hadn’t lost everything.

The room filled with gasps and cries of distress. A man in a suit rushed from the kitchens, his expression tinged with horror as wealthy customer after wealthy customer stood. Some were digging through their small clutch bags as though the long strands of pearls they’d been wearing had leapt from neck to bag, while others looked under tables and chairs. Waiters were scurrying about, examining the floor as though pearl-bead necklaces and brilliant diamonds could be lost en masse in the black and gold carpeting.

Violet knew she was spoiled and had jewelry to spare, but her hand returned to her neck time after time until Jack swore. “The thief has to still be here, Vi. You must have just lost your necklace. Did you bump into anyone?”

Violet frowned, thinking back to her trip to the ladies. She’d slid past a waiter carrying a tray of food and stared for too long at the elderly lovers. She’d leaned into the mirror and reapplied her lipstick, then powdered her nose.

The elderly lady was just entering as she’d left, but Vi’s thoughts had been of Jack. She hadn’t been paying attention. On second thoughts, the blonde had been present too. Surely, surely, Vi must have had her necklace when she’d applied her lipstick, but she couldn’t say for sure. In fact, all she could say with any surety was that whoever had taken her gift might well be one of the lightest-fingered thieves known to mankind.

JUST AS THE waiter whisked Ginger and Basil’s dirty plates away, a commotion erupted at the table with the grandmother and grandson.

“My bracelet!” the lady announced. “My ruby and emerald bracelet is gone! Someone has stolen my jewels!”

Ginger and Basil shared a look of alarm. Surely the elderly lady only thought she remembered wearing the bracelet. A telephone call or a swift

messenger would surely bring reassurance.

But then, one by one, more distressing pronouncements were made. “My brooch! My earrings! My necklace!”

It couldn’t be that all these ladies had forgotten what they’d worn out for dinner. Ginger’s hand went to her throat. Her own string of pearls was missing!

“Basil?”

Basil’s eyes went to the bare whiteness of her throat. He pushed away from the table. “I’ll secure the room.”

Ginger watched as Basil sprinted to the door, getting there seconds before the blonde.

Oh mercy. How dreadful to be forced back into the room without the satisfaction of her dramatic exit.

Basil escorted the lady to their table. “This is Miss Harris,” he said. “She’s refusing to rejoin her date, a Mr. Rawlings. Do you mind if she sits with you?”

“Not at all,” Ginger said. “Please, Miss Harris. I’m sure this will be settled quickly and you can be on your way.”

Basil joined Detective Inspector Wakefield to discuss the situation with the staff, and undoubtedly to report the situation to the Metropolitan Police. Basil worked for CID, the Criminal Investigation Department, and primarily dealt with murder cases.

Ginger eyed Miss Harris with compassion. “I’m very sorry your evening hasn’t turned out the way you expected. Surely there’s been a misunderstanding?”

Miss Harris ran a long fingernail under each eye, capturing the moisture tearing there. “You wouldn’t believe it if I told you.”

Ginger patted her hand. “Soon the night will be over, and perhaps, in the light of day, and after a night’s sleep, you can patch things up.”

The way Basil always took charge in a crisis, never failed to make Ginger’s heart hammer with admiration. When Detective Inspector Wakefield had jumped to his feet, Ginger noted a similar look in his wife’s eye.

“Everyone, stay calm,” Basil announced loudly. “I’m Chief Inspector Basil Reed of Scotland Yard.”

Detective Inspector Wakefield said, “I’ll gather the staff.”

“Yes,” Basil agreed. “No one comes in or leaves until we get to the bottom of this.” To Ginger he said, “Would you like to calm the ladies?”

Ginger’s brow jumped. She knew the question behind the question. Basil was asking her to interview the alleged victims. Ginger had proven herself useful to her husband’s investigations on more than one occasion, and she had a tidy record of solved cases through her office of Lady Gold Investigates.

“Of course, love,” she said.

JACK ROSE, swearing under his breath as he got the attention of the fellow who must manage the restaurant. The man was ordering waiters about and wringing his hands simultaneously. The combination of nerves and leadership was at odds, and Violet watched eagerly as Jack introduced himself. She could just bet he was saying something about Scotland Yard and being a detective when Basil Reed approached as well. They were both quick and precise, stealing control of things from the manager for themselves.

Basil headed towards one set of doors while Jack headed towards another and Violet could only hope that the thief—and her brand-new necklace—were still in attendance. Violet shook her head in mockery as she fruitlessly searched her clutch bag for her missing necklace and then checked under her chair and table.

She wasn’t surprised, of course, to find nothing, but the bothersome what-if faded. Her idea of entertainment was gone now that she was a victim too and, holding her throat, she watched women and a few men across the restaurant do the same. The pretty blonde in black and silver was searching for an item missing from around her neck. The elderly lady of Violet’s favorite set of lovers reached up to her hat, and with knobbly, shaky fingers searched for what must be a hatpin, now missing.

Violet’s frown deepened and she lifted her glass, assessing. The easiest guesses were that one of the staff was a thief, but she wasn’t so sure. A place like the Savoy would have employees that had been on hand for years. It wasn’t some fly-by-night establishment where the waiters came and went with the crowds. These fellows had steel spines, perfect balance, a cultivated sneer, and delivered food and wine as unobtrusively as possible.

Violet would lay a wager that the waiters serving at the Savoy on Valentine's evening were the best it had to offer and had probably worked there for years. There was no way these men would have a history of stealing and it have not made it to the gossip pages. She could say with a fair amount of certainty that there had been no major thefts from the Savoy within the last year. If that were the case, Violet guessed their thief was a patron or a waiter who intended to disappear into the night.

Violet stared around again, this time ignoring the staff and examining the diners. Even those who seemed to have lost nothing had their attention fixed on the manager, the waiters, and the two detectives.

Except, Violet saw, Mrs. Reed. Her gaze, like Vi's, was moving from table to table with a slight furrow between her brows and an analytical expression upon her face. Was that what Vi looked like when she considered suspects? Vi was rather afraid it was. Her gaze met Mrs. Reed's and Violet rose, crossing the art deco carpeting to meet her. Detectives' wives, meddlers, this might well be a case better suited to the two of them than their two mates.



Ginger's gaze moved to Mrs. Wakefield who was standing next to her table and staring back in return. Falling somewhere in age between Ginger, now in her thirties herself, and Felicia ten years her junior, Mrs. Wakefield had a lovely slender figure, bright brown eyes, and brown hair styled with salon expertise. They smiled at the same time and approached one another. Ginger, having put her white silk gloves back on, extended a hand. "I'm Mrs. Reed. The chief inspector present is my husband. You must be Mrs. Wakefield."

"I am. How do you do, Mrs. Reed?"

Ginger smiled at her youthful counterpart. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise," Mrs. Wakefield said, "though these circumstances are less than ideal."

Ginger agreed. "It seems our husbands are acquainted already."

Both ladies' eyes travelled across the room to where their husbands were hard at work taking control of the situation. Jack Wakefield reminded Ginger of what Basil might've been like as a younger man, sharp and enthusiastic. Her love affair with Basil was relatively new, and Ginger still considered them to be newlyweds. Ginger had known young love, its quickness and intensity, and what it was like to suffer loss. Her first husband, Daniel, Lord Gold, had lost his life in France during the Great War.

Those were difficult times, and Ginger was happy to have started this new chapter of her life. The early days of their romance hadn't been without

their bumps and bruises, but her life with Basil and his quiet determination, was everything that Ginger now needed.

Mrs. Wakefield's voice brought Ginger out of her reverie.

"Are you missing any jewelry, Mrs. Reed?"

Ginger's hand went to her throat. "My pearl beads. It's beyond me how the strand has gone missing without my noticing."

"My rose-gold chandelier necklace as well," Mrs. Wakefield said.

"Oh mercy," Ginger said. "I think I might speak to some of the other ladies who are claiming missing items."

"As will I," Mrs. Wakefield said with determination. Ginger liked her immediately.

VIOLET LEFT Mrs. Reed and headed towards where her table was. She sat only long enough to get another view of the restaurant and who might have had a view of things that were happening. A couple of tables caught Violet's eye, and she lifted a chair and took it with her to the elderly couple.

During the hullabaloo, they had moved their chairs around their table, so they were side by side. Unlike Jack and herself, they hadn't yet had their drinks delivered, so Violet put the chair down, winked, and took the champagne bottle from her own table.

"Are you teetotalers? Or is your waiter busy being searched?"

"The latter," the lady said, eyeing Violet as if she were quite odd, but neither of them objected when Violet poured them each a glass of champagne.

Violet held out her hand and introduced herself. They were Mr. and Mrs. Cleary. "I'm trying to sort out who saw what for my husband, Detective Inspector Wakefield. We hope to find the thief before he or she can slip out of the door, and I couldn't help but notice what a good view you have."

Mr. and Mrs. Clearys' gazes met. After a long moment, Mrs. Cleary said, "My hat pin is missing. It's quite valuable with the diamond insert, but I'm more concerned about its sentimental meaning."

Violet gasped and reached out. She knew that they were strangers, but Vi felt as if she already wanted to mature into a version of this lady. It was the sheer love between them. "How dreadful! I'm so, so sorry."

Mrs. Cleary glanced at her husband and Violet could just see him squeeze her hand lightly. "I would say it's all right, but of course it isn't. It wouldn't even be worth anything to anyone but me."

Violet frowned. Her necklace had been unquestionably expensive.

"Did you leave your table?" Violet asked softly.

Mrs. Cleary nodded. "Yes, I did. I popped into the ladies' as soon as I arrived. I tend to be a little odd about washing my hands often and powdering my nose."

"I used the ladies as well," Violet replied, pressing her hand to her throat. "Did you see anything else? It doesn't have to be a crime, just anything that made you pause?"

Without pointing, Mrs. Cleary said, "There is something about that lady. The one with the turban and the shiny red dress. She was visiting the ladies when I was, and I'm certain I've seen her before, though, at my age," she glanced at Vi with a look of self-deprecation, "one can't always count on one's memory."

Violet attempted an unobtrusive glance and then noted Mrs. Reed doing the same. They needed to discuss whoever that woman was. Mr. Cleary's bushy brows joined in the middle as he, too, stared at the lady in the turban. "There *is* something about her. I feel as though I know her although I am sure I do not."

Violet felt the same way. Was the lady famous? Was she a friend of a friend? Why was she niggling Violet's mind so?

"Mrs. Cleary, are you noticing something?" Violet asked.

The elderly lady's attention was still on the glamorous-looking turban-wearing woman. She started to shake her head and then said, "Well I don't know about that lady, but I *did* notice that there wasn't anyone flitting amongst the tables. I do like to people watch, and I would have seen that."

Practically, *only* a waiter or the maître d' could slip about easily. Violet didn't believe it was one of them, but perhaps someone had impersonated a waiter, and the staff, being extra busy, simply hadn't noticed? If so, it would have to be a very clever, daring, and unobtrusive thief.

Violet started to ask another question, but the gentleman from the couple with the matching black and silver outfits, sitting alone a mere table away, leaned in and said, "I couldn't really help but overhear. Surely, it's the staff who are thieves."

Violet wanted to lift her brow and scoff, but she didn't want to alienate a potential witness, so instead she said, "Well, yes. That is certainly why the police are starting with the staff." And preventing anyone from leaving or entering, as well as making sure the restaurant was searched. If the staff weren't thieves, they could be witnesses.

"MRS. REED! MRS. REED!"

Ginger turned toward the sound of her name to see Lady Fitzhugh waving madly in her direction. "Come quickly!"

Ginger, mentally bracing herself, approached the Fitzhugh table.

"Mrs. Reed, my emerald hair comb has disappeared. It's as if it's vanished into thin air."

"Maybe it's that Houdini fellow," Lord Fitzhugh said.

"Arthur! This isn't time to be glib. That hair comb is a family heirloom. My mother brought it over from Russia, and a good thing, now with the empire gone." She stared severely at Ginger. "Nothing is safe there anymore."

Lord Fitzhugh dared another defiant mumble. "Nor here, it would seem."

Lady Fitzhugh glared at her husband.

"A hair comb?" Ginger said quickly, wanting to prevent a verbal attack. "Where?" she floated her fingers around her head.

Lady Fitzhugh was the only female in the River Restaurant without a short bob of some sort, her salt-and-pepper hair in a loose bun on the top of her head. "At the back," she said, as if that were the only obvious place for it.

"And my diamond bracelet is missing." This came from the well-turned-out lady wearing a shimmering red gown and fashionable turban. "It was a gift from Bernard," she motioned to her date.

The man tipped his chin, and eyed Ginger with a look of appreciation. He extended his hand. "Bernard Chatfield, madam, at your service."

The lady flashed her date a look of disapproval then continued. "Bernard gave the bracelet to me just before we came here to dine. Its loss is simply outrageous."

Ginger had to agree. Along with her string of pearls, there were two bracelets, a string of exotic beads, and a hair comb missing. How

extraordinary.

“Please don’t worry your heart, dear,” Mr. Chatfield said. “It was fully insured, and I can get you a replacement.”

It appeared that the young man had deep pockets.

“And what was your name, madam?” Ginger asked.

“Dorothy Mansfield. And yours?”

“I’m Mrs. Reed. My husband is Chief Inspector Reed. Her eyes drifted to the bar where Basil was busy interviewing the staff. “He asked if I’d take an account of the items that have been allegedly lost.”

“Allegedly?” Miss Mansfield held out her bare arm and shook it dramatically. “Hardly, allegedly.”

Since Miss Mansfield and Lady Fitzhugh were seated close together, Ginger positioned herself between them so they could both hear her questions.

“Miss Mansfield, Lady Fitzhugh, please think back to the last moment you recall the lost items in your possession.”

“It’s difficult to say,” Lady Fitzhugh huffed. “It’s not like I’m checking the back of my head while dining on stuffed cod.”

“My bracelet was on my left arm only moments ago,” Miss Mansfield said. “I’m fairly certain, though, now, I can’t be sure when I noticed it last.” She lifted her right arm which jangled with a series of bracelets. “However, I did make use of the ladies. Perhaps it went missing then.”

“Were you alone?” Ginger asked. “Or did you see others?”

“Well, there was that blonde over there.” Miss Mansfield pointed to Miss Harris seated at Ginger’s table.

“I’ve not moved from my seat,” Lady Fitzhugh said. “It must be one of the waiters. Sticky fingers, that lot, I always say.”

Ginger’s jaw dropped. “Lady Fitzhugh, my husband and another detective are questioning the staff, and I’m certain *if* the guilty party is amongst them, they’ll get to the bottom of it.

Basil and Detective Inspector Wakefield were busy making enquiries and taking notes. Ginger caught Basil’s eye and he subtly shook his head, indicating to Ginger that he hadn’t found any leads yet.

Approaching the detective inspector’s wife, Ginger said, “What do you make of things, Mrs. Wakefield?”

“We’re in the midst of a mystery now so we might as well be friends. Please call me Violet.”

“I’m Georgia, but my friends call me Ginger,” Ginger said with a smile. “Now, I’m afraid I haven’t learned much. When Basil and I arrived, we must have shared reservations with several of the couples here, as there was quite a gathering when we dropped off our coats and waited to be seated.”

“Jack and I came early,” Violet said. “We were the first to arrive, actually.”

Ginger thought back to the people who had stood with her and Basil in the foyer. “That lovely elderly couple was part of the early crowd and Miss Mansfield—she’s the one in the red dress—and her friend, Mr. Chatfield.”

Violet wrinkled her nose. “I think I recognize her. I’m trying to put my finger on where.”

“The blonde and the redhead, along with the grandmother and grandson,” Ginger said. “I think I’ll suggest that the maître d’ spread the reservations out in future.”

“I imagine the evening of Valentine’s Day is overly busy,” Violet said.

“Rather,” Ginger agreed. “Lord and Lady Fitzhugh must’ve arrived later, as I didn’t see them come in.”

“I saw them arrive.” Violet’s eyes brightened at the memory. “Are they friends of yours?”

“Acquaintances only,” Ginger said. “Lady Fitzhugh visits Feathers & Flair, my dress shop, on occasion.”

“I love your shop,” Violet said. “You weren’t in when I visited, but I simply love the factory frocks on the upper floor. So convenient. I bought one and wore it home!”

Ginger laughed.

Violet grew more serious. “The lady gave the maître d’ quite a difficult time. Seems she didn’t like the table she’d been assigned.”

“How did I miss that drama?” Ginger asked, then remembered that she, too, had made a quick trip to the ladies. Had her necklace been in place at that time? She’d made use of the sink and spent a moment checking her reflection in the mirror, fixing the tips of her bob so that they rested in curls on her cheeks.

The mood in the room was unsettled, but everyone had remained seated, at least for the most part. Though no one was allowed to leave the restaurant, the patrons weren’t prisoners and could mingle or answer the call of nature.

Suddenly, a shout—Ginger recognized the scratchy voice of Lady Fitzhugh—commanded everyone’s attention. “There’s a necklace in that man’s pocket!”

Ginger followed the direction of Lady Fitzhugh’s bejeweled finger. Miss Mansfield’s companion had removed his dinner jacket and rested it over the back of his chair. Indeed, the outline of a necklace, a string of black opal beads, nearly overflowed the side pocket.

The blonde’s eyes were drawn to the man’s movement as well. Her heavily made-up eyes grew round and she pointed an accusing finger. “Those are mine. He stole my necklace!”

Violet gasped as she turned to face Miss Mansfield and Mr. Chatfield, a look of utter confusion on his face, even as Lady Fitzhugh repeated her accusations. Ginger frowned as she stared at the man.

Chief Inspector Reed approached as Lady Fitzhugh’s shrill voice rose to a strident level. “Did he take my hair comb?”

Mr. Chatfield’s eyes filled with scorn. “Why would I want your ruddy comb?”

Lady Fitzhugh speared him with a scathing look. “The emeralds are worth a pretty penny, young man!”

Chief Inspector Reed’s calm voice commanded order. “Perhaps you would turn out your pockets, sir?”

Mr. Chatfield’s gaze was dark and furious but there was a deep challenge in his eyes as he turned out his pockets, revealing only a cigarette case engraved with his name, a wallet, and a key. Violet nibbled on her thumb. If she’d been at home, she’d have been pacing. She glanced from the pile of Mr. Chatfield’s belongings to the room where angry gazes were fixing on the embarrassed-looking young man.

Violet narrowed her eyes as she took in the man and his companion. This felt very...easy. What was it about the lady? Vi’s gaze focused again, and she could almost hear the whisper of some description in her mind. She stared at the lady and recalled bits of an article. *The lady was glamorous ... confidence that belied the reality of her features ... charisma, wit, ... she stole every scene she desired and faded into obscurity whenever it was convenient.*

The lady’s physical features had been noted in the article. Hair dark as coal, thin arched brows, rosebud lips, and a nose with a raised bridge that

was somehow charming. Violet stared at Miss Mansfield and said, “It’s not Miss Mansfield, is it? It’s Sofia Draganova.”

Miss Mansfield’s expression smoothed into nothingness for a mere half a second and then she frowned lightly, eyes wide, the very picture of innocence.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.” Miss Mansfield glanced at her companion, blushing slightly at the expression on his face.

Mr. Chatfield had a slowly dawning look of horror on his face and he stared at Miss Mansfield—Sofia Draganova—and asked, “Why do I know that name? Sofia Draganova?”

“She’s manipulated her way across Europe with her charm.”

Miss Draganova glared at Vi. “That is not true,” she said, however, in her distress, her Bulgarian accent seeped through. “I did nothing wrong. Am I a criminal because a man wants to give me a gift? That isn’t illegal anywhere.”

Violet lifted her brows, wanting to reply with a bit of a tirade, but instead she reflected on the newspaper articles about the con woman. She might lie about who she was and where she was from, but she did *not* steal from those who she manipulated. That fact about Miss Draganova was something that even her biggest foes admitted. She used her *wiles* to get what she wanted.

Vi pulled Ginger to the side. “Did you read the news stories about Miss Draganova?”

Ginger shook her head, her attention half kept by her husband and the barely controlled argument.

“I don’t think she’s our thief, and evidence suggests that Mr. Chatfield is her victim not our thief.”

“Rich people do steal things,” Ginger said, “but—” She shook her head. “I think you’re right.”

“There are also repetitive reports of visits to the ladies,” Vi continued, “my own included. If we were stolen from in the ladies, he can’t be our thief, and if she’s our thief, why does he have the necklace?”

MISS DRAGANOVA WAS A CONFIDENCE TRICKSTER, but Ginger concurred with Violet Wakefield, and believed Miss Draganova was innocent of this particular crime.



“Someone wants to draw attention away from themselves in an attempt to frame Mr. Chatfield,” Ginger said. She gazed about the restaurant, the room strangely quiet as all the couples stared back. She’d made her statement rather more loudly than she’d intended.

Staring back at her were Lord and Lady Fitzhugh, the latter now silent, with a deep scowl and pinched, wrinkled lips as if Ginger were personally at fault for the direction the evening had taken; the soft-spoken elderly couple, Ginger now knew as the Clearys looked rather entertained; the con artist Miss Draganova sat back in her chair with her arms folded, put out that her confidence trick had been exposed, while her date, Mr. Chatfield’s expression remained one of disbelief and dismay; the young, broken-hearted lovers cast furtive glances at each other across the room whilst the grandmother, a Mrs. Dawson, looked on with bewilderment and the grandson a wide grin, as if the night’s entertainment couldn’t have turned out better.

“Several of us visited the ladies,” Ginger said, recapping. “Myself and Mrs. Wakefield, Mrs. Cleary, Miss Harris, and Miss Draganova.”

The attention of the room was momentarily taken by the arrival of four police officers. Basil held them at the door, and nodded for Ginger to continue.

“The huddle at the door included the couples the Clearys, the Dawsons, Mr. Rawlings and Miss Harris, and Miss Draganova and Mr. Chatfield.

“The bar was a popular destination for the gentlemen, including Mr. Chatfield, Mr. Rawlings, and Lord Fitzhugh.

Ginger smiled. “This is a two-person job.” Then, glancing back to the only person seated at her table, added, “Isn’t it, Miss Harris?”

Miss Harris looked up with pouty lips. “I don’t understand what you mean.” Basil took long strides to Miss Harris’ side and held out a hand.

“Miss Harris, your handbag?”

Violet spoke up. “And Mr. Rawlings? You don’t mind if Detective Wakefield takes a look in your satchel, do you?”

It should have been obvious from the beginning, Violet thought, as everyone else had released their coats and larger bags to the concierge at the door. Violet and a few other ladies had small clutch bags that held powder, lipstick, and possibly a house key or some money, but there wasn't room in those tiny bags to hold an excess of jewelry.

Violet watched as Jack and Basil dumped the contents of Mr. Rawlings' satchel and Miss Harris' handbag onto one of the tables. When she spotted Mrs. Cleary's hatpin, she reached forward and carefully snatched it. Violet rose from the table and wove her way through the guests and found the elderly Clearys, watching from their table, still hand in hand. Violet unfolded her hand before them, and to her surprise it was Mr. Cleary who took the pin. He pulled it towards himself, but it was only to slide it into Mrs. Cleary's hat.

A tear rolled down Mrs. Cleary's softly wrinkled face, and she touched the pin gently. "It was my mother's."

There was so much feeling in that statement, Vi's eyes filled as well. "I'm glad it's back where it belongs."

Violet rose to leave them to their dinner and found Jack just behind her. Their dinner would be fine in the end when the master chefs returned to their knives and pans. Their dancing would be amazing when they found their place on the dance floor, but nothing would make Vi happier today than returning that hatpin to Mrs. Cleary.

Jack placed Violet's necklace around her neck, clipping it into place, and then Violet introduced him to the Clearys.

"I'll love you that much when we're old," Jack said, giving her the exact words she needed for the day to be perfect.

GINGER CLOSED her eyes as her taste buds danced in delectation. As a gesture of goodwill, the chef had presented all the restaurant customers with a complimentary piece of decadent chocolate truffle cake.

"I think I'm in heaven," Ginger said.

Basil grinned, the fine lines around his eyes deepening. "The evening's turned out rather delightfully in the end, hasn't it?"

Ginger agreed. She admitted to experiencing a certain satisfaction when Miss Harris and Mr. Rawlings (actually a Mr. and Mrs. Rankin) had been handcuffed by the Metropolitan Police and marched off. The couple was wanted, and, Ginger discovered, had rather notoriously pulled off similar thievery in other London restaurants with their well-oiled sleight-of-hand manoeuvres. Miss Harris' fake Elsa Schiaparelli gown had been what had first caught Ginger's eye, and the dramatic argument and the way Miss Harris had stomped off with her large handbag had never really rung true.

The Rankins had purposely requested a table near the powder room so that Mrs. Rankin could follow unsuspecting victims in—which included Violet, Mrs. Cleary, and Miss Draganova. Mr. Rankin had made trips to the bar, the only opportunity someone would've had to collect Lady Fitzhugh's hair comb. And the Rankins were also in the grouping by the door as Ginger and Basil arrived.

The pretend fight was part of the couple's *modus operandi*—a means to leave a restaurant early before lost items began to be discovered. How serendipitous that Mrs. Dawson, the timid grandmother, had noticed her bracelet missing, and that Basil had been present and quick to block Mrs. Rankin's getaway.

Ginger wasn't the only one to be glad the criminals had finally been caught. Everyone in the room who'd been victimized had had their stolen items returned. Even Lady Fitzhugh seemed mollified, though her hand quite often went to the back of her head to make certain her prized comb was there.

Ginger found herself doing the same, her fingers fiddling with the pearls of her necklace.

“If I didn’t know better,” Ginger said, “I would’ve suspected that you’d set up this peculiar episode as a Valentine’s gift for me.”

Basil laughed. “I should’ve done! I know how you like a good puzzle.”

“I do have a birthday coming up,” Ginger said. “We could host one of those murder mystery parties.”

“With our luck, the murder wouldn’t be put on.”

“Surely we can have one night without an actual murder taking place,” Ginger said. “We’ve managed to not stumble across a dead body tonight.”

Basil smirked. “So far.” He held up his glass of wine, newly filled, and Ginger tapped hers against his.

“To us, and a night on the town without a death.”

“To us,” Ginger said.

Across the room, Ginger spied Jack and Violet Wakefield doing the same.

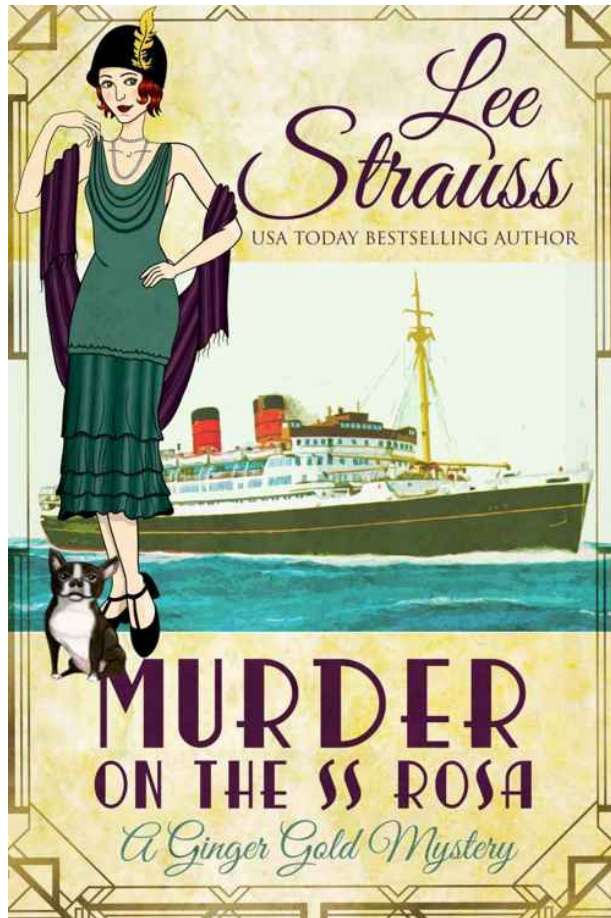
“I do like that couple,” she said. “We must invite them to Hartigan House one day.”

“I’m glad you’ve mentioned that,” Basil said. “I’ve already done so. I think you and Mrs. Wakefield have a lot in common.”

Ginger held up the fork holding her last piece of chocolate cake. “I think we do too.”

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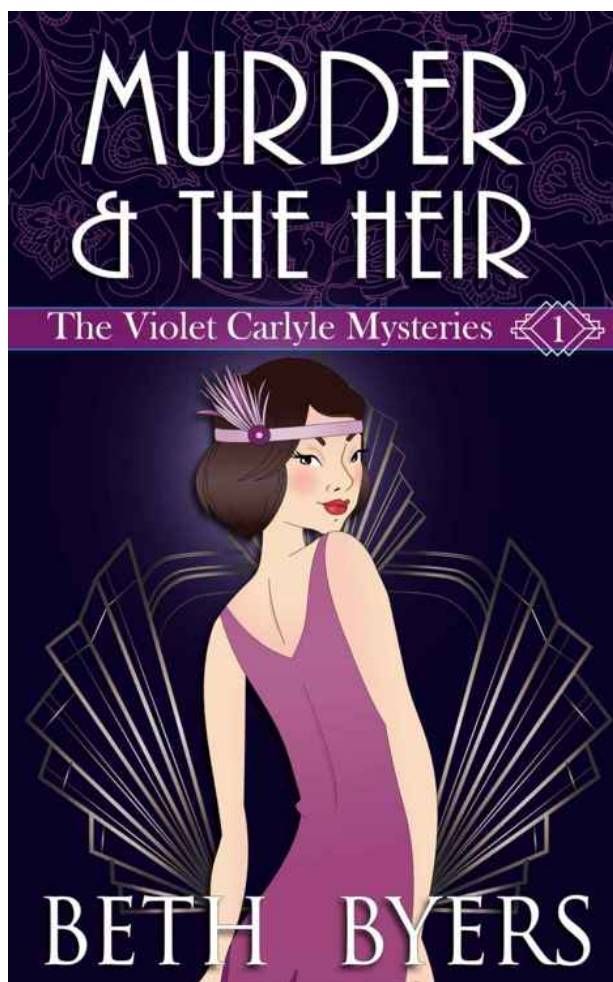
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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lee Strauss is a USA TODAY bestselling author of The Ginger Gold Mysteries series, The Higgins & Hawke Mystery series, The Rosa Reed Mystery series (cozy historical mysteries), A Nursery Rhyme Mystery series (mystery suspense), The Perception series (young adult dystopian), The Light & Love series (sweet romance), The Clockwise Collection (YA time travel romance), and young adult historical fiction with over a million books read. She has titles published in German, Spanish and Korean, and a growing audio library.

When Lee's not writing or reading she likes to cycle, hike, and play pickleball. She loves to drink caffè lattes and red wines in exotic places, and eat dark chocolate anywhere.

For more info on books by Lee Strauss and her social media links, visit [leestraussbooks.com](http://leestraussbooks.com). To make sure you don't miss the next new release, be sure to sign up for her [readers' list](#)!

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Beth Byers is a lover of unique flavors, baking, and experimenting with recipes. These loves are only surpassed by her love of books. She's also a little obsessed with the sound and smell of the rain and enjoys nothing more than curling up with a cocoa and a book. If one of her sweet puppies chooses to snuggle in for the book, nothing could be better.

She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her four children, three dogs.



## **Mystery on Valentine's Day**

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