

"THE BEST-KEPT SECRET IN
CHILDREN'S LITERATURE"
— LEMONY SNICKET

CLEM FATALE HAS BEEN Upstaged



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CHAPTER ONE

Ice-Cream Ambush

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The West End of London – home to theatres playing comedy, tragedy and music of every beat and swing. The place glitters with billboards and buzzes with glamorous people eager to see the latest hits. But when the audiences have gone home and the chorus girls have collected their last bouquets, the West End becomes quiet – never exactly silent, for you can always hear the faint drone of a night bus or the rustle of a discarded playbill, fluttering in the gutter. The lights are switched off. The ushers lock the front doors and walk away with a whistle. But if you're smart thinking, you will know that there's always some mischief and mystery lurking in the shadows when London sleeps.

That night, a man was watching the stage door at the London Palladium. The Palladium was host to the biggest musical stars of the day but this man was not an enthusiastic fan waiting for an autograph. A new billboard had only just been put up that morning – the huge poster showed two starlets in matching sparkly green leotards and headdresses made of green jewelled pears which must have weighed more than all the crockery in Claridge's. Throughout that summer night, the man stood there, a shadow in the moonlight, watching the stage door. He saw no one. No one went in and no one came out; and that, as it turned out, was the strangest thing to happen all night.



Clem Fatale noticed the car was tailing them the moment they left Aunt Euphemia's Ice-Cream Emporium. It was a small green Ford, cruising patiently behind them, like a duck stalking a couple of breadcrumbs in Hampstead Ponds. Clem could spot a tail all right. She was the youngest gangster in the city and she was sharper than a tin of pencils. The driver of the car was hunched over the wheel,

wearing goggles, hat low, collar high – overdressed for such a sunny afternoon. Clem had a nasty feeling that the stranger meant trouble.

She kept the car in her sights, watching its reflection in the gleaming shop windows on Kensington High Street. Beside her, a boy with slicked-back hair and fewer gangster instincts than a hothouse plant (otherwise known as her best friend Gilbert) chatted away happily, completely oblivious to any creeping danger.

“Do you think they’ll do ‘Boogie-Woogie-Woo?’” Gilbert was saying eagerly, holding two ice-cream cones. “Or ‘Rhubarb Cake for My Baby?’”

Gilbert was talking about Betty and Judy Wade, American sister singers, whose repertoire of toe-tapping and sultry warbling had the two friends hooked. Both knew every lyric to every song and Gilbert had even taught Clem a new dance move – which he called “the hop-and-clop” and Clem called “stupid” (Clem was more accustomed to climbing up drainpipes than prancing around a dance floor). Their excitement had peaked a month ago when they read that the Wade Sisters were coming to London for an exclusive run at the London Palladium. Clem and Gilbert had tickets to the first performance that Saturday night.

“It’s going to be the best show I’ve ever seen,” said Gilbert dreamily. “Actually, it’s going to be the *only* show I’ve ever seen! Unless my old tutor Mr Switch’s sock-puppet history plays count as real shows.”

“If they don’t do ‘Moonlight Lemonade’ I’ll start a riot,” said Clem, one eye on the car, which was moving stealthily alongside them, ignoring the honks from the traffic behind it.

She decided not to mention the car to Gilbert. He had a tendency to get a little hysterical, and if he got hysterical there was a strong chance he’d drop his ice creams, one of which was for their friend Winnie, whose taxi was parked a few streets away. Furthermore, this Wednesday afternoon was the first proper time they’d had together in weeks.

After their adventures in the spring, Gilbert’s father, Lord Weatherdale, wanted Gilbert “out of his hair” (despite not having very much of it). So he had sent his son to a private boarding school in Kensington, where he was “out of sight and out of mind” (and out of hair).

Far from being a punishment, the change had been good for Gilbert – he had swapped his lonely indoor life in Weatherdale Manor for a riotous timetable of geography books and rice pudding. Some of the boys were inclined to laugh at Gilbert’s blissful ignorance

of the world of school; one boy in particular, Richard Rumble, had stolen Gilbert's photography magazines when Gilbert had inadvertently put a slice of custard tart on Rumble's chair. The gesture was meant to be friendly, but Rumble had sat on it, ruining his best pinstriped trousers.

St Loquacious Institute for Little Lords wasn't a nasty place where they made naughty kids sleep in the toilet, it was pretty decent and they got Wednesday afternoons off lessons. Clem was happy for Gilbert – at least, that's what she kept telling herself – but she secretly hoped he had more fun with her. The show at the London Palladium was bound to be heaps better than being at any lousy school.

“This vanilla ice cream really is jolly good,” Gilbert was saying. “Are you sure you won't have a taste?”

“Vanilla is the worst!” replied Clem, licking her own chocolate and raspberry cone. “Vanilla is the vegetable of ice creams.”

“Oh, I rather like vegetables,” said Gilbert cheerfully. They turned off on to Kensington Church Street, leaving the shoppers behind them. Clem heard a *vroom* as the green car continued down the high street and away. Perhaps she'd been wrong about it tailing them after all.

It was quiet on the street. They were alone, apart from a man walking slowly ahead of them.

“Here’s the plan,” said Clem. “When we get to my dad’s, I’ll get the record player and—”

“I say, that man’s dropped his glove,” said Gilbert. He picked it up, juggling the ice creams in one hand, and jogged after the retreating figure. “I say! Cooeee! You’ve dropped—”

The man spun round and in an instant Clem knew they were in trouble. The man was wearing a handkerchief over his mouth and nose, obscuring his features. He seized Gilbert by the arm.

“Oi!” Clem yelled, breaking into a sprint. “Get your hands off—”

Gilbert cried out, his arms flailing, and one of his ice creams met the man’s face with a soft splat.

“Argh! Not vanilla!” he howled, releasing Gilbert to wipe his eyes.

“Gilbert! Run!” Clem shouted.

But there was a squeal of brakes behind her, and she whizzed around to see the green car careering up the street towards them, bouncing on to the pavement. The driver sprang out, his face also covered by a handkerchief, and bore down upon them. Clem’s blood was pumping – adrenaline surged through her.



The men might be bigger than she was, but Clem was the daughter of Jimmy Fatale, boss of the Spider Gang and the smartest jewel thief from Walthamstow to Wimbledon. Her dad had taught her a trick or two.

“Go for the toes!” she yelled at Gilbert.

Clem ducked the driver’s outstretched arms and brought her heel firmly down on his left foot.

“Yowww!” The man hopped around in pain.

But the other man had recovered from the ice-cream attack and was dragging Gilbert towards the rumbling car. Clem leapt after them and grabbed Gilbert’s arm just as the rest of him disappeared into the back seat.

“Let him go!” Clem yelled.

But the man was too strong and Clem was losing her grip. Gilbert’s face was pink with fear (but it could have been because his arm was being stretched like a string cheese) – she was going to lose him! So Clem did the only thing she could think of and dived into the car after her friend.

“Clem? What are you doing?” cried Gilbert.

“I ain’t leaving you! That’s what,” she growled.

The driver staggered into the front seat and the car took off with a screech. It squeezed down a side street, dodged a black taxi, then burst back on to the high street and sped off into the depths of the city.