

**READ IT FIRST**



*The*  
**FAERIE RING**

**KIKI HAMILTON**

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THE FAERIE RING

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## Chapter One



LONDON, DECEMBER 1871

YOU wouldn't be here pickin' pockets, would you?" Tiki jumped as the dark figure loomed over the corner where she sat, pretending to be half-asleep. Thick, black hair hung low over the figure's forehead, shadowing his eyes. The glittery light of the pub illuminated his face as he leaned toward her, and the fear that bubbled in her stomach dissipated as she recognized him.

"Rieker." Tiki spoke in a low voice. "What are you doing here?" His timing couldn't be worse. "Are you following me again?" She'd identified her mark and was just waiting for the right moment to make her move.

"Me follow you?" Rieker gave an arrogant snort. "Now why would I do that?" He jingled the coins in his pocket as if to taunt her. "I've been workin' the World's End for a few months now." He leaned an elbow on the plank table, a mug of ale clutched in his hand. "Maybe *you're* followin' *me*." He looked her up and down with a mocking gaze. "Because I'd swear I've never seen your pretty face in here before."

Tiki forced an insincere smile. "Maybe you weren't looking hard enough." She tugged the bill of her cap down to hide her features. Dressed in breeches and a man's over-size jacket, Tiki was perfectly disguised—no one but Rieker

would have known she was a sixteen-year-old girl. And even he hadn't known until two months ago.

She'd spotted him coming out of a clockmaker's shop in King's Cross with both hands shoved into the pockets of his tattered black coat. The cautious way he'd glanced around had made her wonder what he'd nicked. Curious, she'd followed him.

Rieker was a thief who had made a name for himself throughout the slums of London. Stories about him stretched from Bishopsgate in the East End, to Charing Cross in the heart of the City, all the way to King's Cross here in the North End.

As if the weight of her stare had tapped him on the shoulder, Rieker had glanced back at her. Before she could react, his gaze had skipped from her face to something behind her. Without a word, he'd turned and run. Instinct had made Tiki run, too. That's when the bobby had shouted at them to stop.

Fear had fueled her feet, for she didn't know the nooks and crannies of King's Cross well enough to be confident of escape. She'd followed Rieker until he'd dashed through an archway, rounded a corner, and simply disappeared. Tiki had slowed in surprise. The bobby had just latched on to the back of her loose jacket when she'd spotted Rieker motioning to her from a narrow corridor.

With a jerk, she'd slipped her arms from the sleeves—revealing long braided hair and a shape that couldn't belong to a boy—and raced into the shadows of the brick hallway. She'd never forget the look on Rieker's face that day.

“What are you doing up north here in Camden Town?” Rieker's voice brought her back to the present. “Bit far from Charing Cross, aren't you?”

“Maybe.” Tiki kept her tone even. “But the biggest pub in all of London is worth the trip.”

Rieker pulled one of the chairs away from the table, the wooden legs scraping against the floor. “Are you here alone?”

Tiki put out a hand to block him. “Don’t sit down—you’re not staying. And it’s none of your business who I’m with or where I go.” Irritated, she turned back toward the crowd. Where was her mark?

A smoky cloud hung in the room above the motley crew of sailors, chandlers, coal porters, and dustmen who filled the pub. She recognized Bilby the rat catcher, and Mr. Bonfield the costermonger from up round Covent Garden Market, but where was MacGregor?

For weeks she’d been watching the big, ruddy Scotsman, following him in the evenings from pub to pub. He owned clothing shops in Seven Dials and Petticoat Lane and loved to drink his profits, especially on a Friday night. When he drank he got careless. Tiki’s fingers itched in anticipation. It was hardly a challenge for someone of her skills, but she had grown to dislike his swaggering and the way he bullied the barmaids. It would be a pleasure to lighten his pockets. Had she missed her chance?

“Last call!” The bartender’s voice cut across the noise of the room. “Drink up, fellers, pub’s closin’.” The World’s End had a packed house tonight. The wooden plank floor of the pub was slick with spilled ale, and the rich, yeasty smell of beer hung thick in the air.

A row of sailors sat shoulder to shoulder along the wooden bar, hunched over their drinks. Big mirrors lined the walls, etched with the names of ales or whiskeys, reflecting the bright lights in the room as well as the cloud

of tobacco smoke. Barmaids and prostitutes, their skirts partially tucked up in their waistbands, worked their way through the crowd smiling and joking with the customers. The tinkling notes of a piano were a backdrop to the cacophony of accents that clashed above it all.

Tiki's eyes stopped on the silhouette of a tall man with a large, bulbous nose.

There he was.

A meaty-looking fellow with shoulders like a bull underneath his worn brown jacket, MacGregor looked in fine form tonight. Red-faced, he was belting out a raunchy tune as he waved his mug of ale in time to the song.

Rieker followed Tiki's gaze. "No. Not MacGregor."

Tiki let out an impatient breath. "Why in bloody hell not? I've been watching him half the night." She started to slide out of her chair, but Rieker's hand clamped down on her wrist, pinning her to the table.

"He's too drunk," he warned. "If he catches you, there'll be no mercy."

"Take your hand off me," she gritted through clenched teeth. Tiki yanked away and shot out of her chair. Fiona might chatter on about how handsome Rieker was with his tall, rugged build and elusive air, but Tiki found him insufferable.

The corners of Rieker's mouth quirked, his smoky eyes dancing.

"Just like a kitten pretending to be a lion," he said. "Except I don't think your claws are sharp enough to hurt anyone, little kitten."

Tiki reacted without thinking. She jabbed her finger into his chest.

"Listen to me, Rieker. I'm not your 'kitten' or anybody

else's. I'll do what I please, and I'll thank you to leave me the hell alone."

Fast as a cat, he grabbed her arm. A look Tiki couldn't decipher crossed his face. "What's this?" he asked, holding up her wrist.

Rieker's grip was so tight that her fingers began to tingle. Tiki winced, swallowing a gasp.

"Rieker, stop it. You're hurting me."

His grip loosened, but he didn't let go. "Tiki, where did you get this mark?"

Rieker's strange reaction made Tiki glance down at her arm where her birthmark was exposed. Delicate lines twisted and turned like a tangle of vines, dark against her pale skin.

Rieker's gaze was incredulous, searching, as if trying to see into her very thoughts. She couldn't help but notice how long his dark lashes were, framing his smoky eyes. A strange nervousness started to flutter in the pit of her stomach when MacGregor's drunken bellow for more ale cut through the noise in the pub and broke the spell.

"I. Said. Let go!" With a great surge, Tiki jerked her arm back, sending Rieker's mug of ale directly into the face of a nearby sailor. The stunned man shook his head, his bleary eyes searching the crowd for the culprit.

Tiki turned just in time to see the sailor drop his head and plow his shoulders into an innocent chimney sweep. Still covered in coal dust, the chimney sweep went flying backward into the crowd. Mayhem broke loose as sailors and tradesmen shoved back with fists and feet.

Tiki stepped away from the table and slid sideways through the crowd, head down so the bill of her cap shadowed her face. Usually she wouldn't take such a risk on her

last pick of the night, but she wanted to prove Rieker wrong.

“Tiki, wait,” Rieker called after her.

Tiki glanced back, but Rieker was stuck in the crowd, unable to stop her. She smiled to herself in satisfaction. She could handle MacGregor. Plus, a few more coins to line her pockets would certainly warm the long, cold ride home to the abandoned clockmaker’s shop adjoining Charing Cross.

Tiki took a deep breath as she neared her mark, dodging the arms and legs swinging wildly around her. MacGregor was engrossed in the brawl, red-faced and hollering encouragement in a hoarse roar. His face shone with excitement, a large bead of sweat hanging from the tip of a nose that had seen more than a few fights.

She slithered close and slipped her hand into his pocket. Just as she’d hoped, MacGregor was carrying a load of money. She pinched several of the coins together and started to pull her hand free.

The big man jerked around and squinted his red-rimmed eyes in her direction.

“Wot you be about, boy?” he growled.

“N-nuthin’, guv’nor,” Tiki stammered. She tried to back away but was hemmed in by the mass of bodies.

“Wot you got in your hand?” He snatched for her with a big, meaty paw. “Show me.”

Tiki slapped her hands together to mask the sound of the coins dropping and held her palms up, wiggling her fingers to distract him as the coins slid down her sleeve. “Nuthin’, sir, I swear.”

There was another surge in the crowd, and a large man, dressed like a coal porter, collided with MacGregor. The

man's black hat flew off as MacGregor's glass of ale hit the wooden floor with a resounding crash.

This was trouble.

MacGregor roared with rage. Tiki swung her right elbow back as hard as she could, hitting a soft belly.

"Umphf," a voice gasped as her elbow made contact. "What the bloody hell?" The man behind her stepped back, opening a small space in the crowd. In a blink, Tiki darted through the gap.

"Come back 'ere, you little thief," MacGregor yelled.

Tiki cut her way through the crowd. She reached the heavy plank entry door and yanked it open just enough to slip out into the chill winter air. Her breath came in short gasps, her chest heaving with exertion. Where could she hide? She only had a moment before MacGregor would catch her.

In the distance, the brisk clip-clop of a lone carriage working its way up the cobblestone lane echoed in the cool night air. *Blast*. It was so late that there were few cabs about, and this coach was headed in the wrong direction.

She took a step toward the street, peering right and left, looking for any other means of escape. Behind her, the pub door creaked open.

"Where is he?" a thick voice cried.

Tiki's breath caught in her throat. It was MacGregor. She pushed away from the building and ran. The carriage was just turning the corner onto the lane.

"You there," MacGregor cried. "Stop!"

Tiki darted out of the shadows and raced toward the back of the carriage. With a burst of speed, she placed a hand on one of the rear struts and jumped lightly onto the boot where the luggage was usually stored. Wedging

herself into the corner of the little shelf situated behind the wheel box, she watched as MacGregor lumbered down the cobblestone lane, his head swiveling back and forth in confusion.

“Where’d he go?” he bellowed.

Behind him, just exiting the pub, Tiki recognized Rieker’s tall silhouette before the carriage creaked around a corner, and the pub disappeared from view. “And that’s how you pick MacGregor’s pocket,” she whispered.

Tiki repositioned herself on the small shelf with a tired sigh, settling in for the ride back to Charing Cross. She fingered the solid weight of the coins she had stashed in her pocket and pressed her lips together in a small, satisfied smile. There would be enough to pay the muffin man and to buy a chunk of cheddar big enough for all of them.

Tiki thought of how excited the others would be. Food had been scarce lately. Shamus and Fiona had been giving part of their portions to the younger ones, Toots and Clara, and even with that, four-year-old Clara was painfully thin. Tiki tried not to think of the persistent cough that had been racking the child lately. Maybe she could find some milk for Clara to soak her bread in as well.

Wrapping her arms tight around her knees to ward off the chill, Tiki eyed the black swirls on her wrist and wondered again about Rieker’s strange reaction to her mark. She usually made an effort to keep her wrist covered, not wanting to draw attention to the odd birthmark. When she was younger, her mum had teased her and told her she’d been marked by faeries. Her mother’s whispered words came back to her now: *They’re around us. Pay attention and you’ll see them.*

A pang of longing twisted inside at the memory of her

mum. She pushed the painful thoughts away. She had more important things to think about now, like finding enough food to fill their stomachs each day. Tiki leaned her head back and closed her eyes, listening to the staccato rhythm of the horse's hooves echoing in the night.



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