Moonlight Over Mayfair

ANTON DU BEKE, household name and all-round entertainer, brings the charm and style he's famous for to this, his second novel, the follow up to his *Sunday Times* bestseller, *One Enchanted Evening*.

Anton is one of the most instantly recognisable TV personalities today, best known for his role on the BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing*, which he has featured on since its inception in 2004. His debut album reached the Top 20, and his annual sell-out tours have been thrilling dance fans in theatres nationwide for over a decade.

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ANTON DU BEKE

Moonlight Over Mayfair

ZAFFRE

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List of Characters

At the Buckingham:

Raymond de Guise AKA Ray Cohen – lead male demonstration dancer

Nancy Nettleton – a chambermaid

Hélène Marchmont – lead female demonstration dancer

Frank Nettleton – Nancy's brother

Vivienne Edgerton – a permanent guest, Lord Edgerton's stepdaughter

Lord Bartholomew Edgerton – director of the board of the Buckingham, Vivienne's stepfather

Maynard Charles – the hotel director

Billy Brogan – a hotel concierge

Louis Kildare – a saxophone player in the Archie Adams Orchestra

Archie Adams – the leader of the Buckingham's orchestra

Aubrey Higgins – Maynard Charles's partner

Abner Grant – a hotel detective

Emmeline Moffatt – the head of housekeeping

Rosa – a chambermaid

Ruth – a chambermaid

Edie – a chambermaid

Sofía LaPegna – a demonstration dancer
Gene Sheldon – a demonstration dancer
Diego – the head cocktail waiter
Mr Bosanquet – the head concierge

Beyond the Buckingham:
Georges de la Motte – Raymond's former dancing mentor and friend
Arthur 'Artie' Cohen – Raymond's younger brother
Arthur Regan – an Irishman and occasional guest at the Buckingham
John Hastings Junior – an American businessman
Sidney Archer – Hélène's late husband and Sybil's father
Sybil Archer – Sidney and Hélène's daughter
Maurice Archer – Sidney's father
Noelle Archer – Sidney's mother
Mary Burdett – the matron of the Daughters of Salvation

To Hannah, George and Henrietta,
my joy, my world, my inspiration,
the loves of my life

Prologue

8 December, 1937

The Grand Ballroom, the Buckingham Hotel

FIRST THERE COMES THE CONFUSION.

Moments later: the screams.

Welcome to the Grand Ballroom of the Buckingham Hotel, a place of music and magic, of magnificence and splendour. Strung high with decorations for the Christmas festivities, today it is flanked by a dozen miniature Norwegian firs, all of them bedecked in crystals and lights – while, gathered around its chequered dance floor are the great and good of London town.

There is nowhere else, no other dazzling palace or mansion in Mayfair, that the finest members of society would rather be.

But now . . .

The guests cease their toing and froing and turn to the head of the ballroom, where arched doors lead to a place of enchantment beyond. It is from these doors that the proud musicians of the Archie Adams Orchestra make their daily march. It is from these doors that the Buckingham's feted dancers glide and twirl to take up their positions on the hotel's legendary ballroom floor.

And it is from these doors, now, that a chaos of black smoke erupts.

The doors explode outwards, disgorging frightened musicians and dancers. On a tide of roiling black smoke, they come, clinging to each other as they escape the blaze behind. Soon, the guests are flocking to the edges of the room, making for the doors. Sensing danger, they take flight, up and out of the Grand Ballroom itself.

In the middle of the dance floor, one dishevelled figure stops. Doubled over, taking great gulps of air, he gathers his composure and draws himself to his full height. His black hair is unruly, his stature imposing. His sad, dark eyes suggest a certain, tragic kind of beauty.

He looks back.

Through the dressing room doors, beyond the churning smoke, somebody is screaming.

Somebody is screaming his name.

'Raymond!'

Raymond de Guise, lead dancer at the Buckingham, barely misses a beat. His eyes pan around, taking in the guests and hotel staff who are rushing to the ballroom to lend what assistance they can, and pick out one figure among them. Nancy Nettleton tries to push through the crowd to reach Raymond – but Raymond is already resolved, his mind already made up.

He turns to face the doors that just cast him out. The flames are fiercer now, advancing angrily through the smoke.

'Raymond!' the voice calls. '*Raymond!*'

There are moments in life when you act without thinking, when you forget all thoughts of the future and act *now*, because you *must*, before it's too late.

Lives change in moments like these.

For Raymond de Guise, this is one of those moments.

So he plunges into the fire . . .

Eight Months Earlier . . .

April 1937

Chapter One

The inaugural Spring Ball at the Buckingham Hotel was about to begin, and in the Grand Ballroom, strings of yellow lights were arranged in garlands.

The saxophonists, trumpeters and trombonists of the Archie Adams Orchestra had already taken their places on the ballroom stage when the doors opened up and there, framed in their light, stood Archie Adams himself. Distinguished and grey, wearing his trademark black bow tie, with eyes the cobalt of the skies above Berkeley Square, he soaked up the applause of the guests who filled the ballroom. Then, taking up his stool behind the grand piano, he ran his fingers along the ivory keys . . . and the ballroom came alive.

For a moment, Archie seemed imperious, the king of the ballroom: a god with grey hair and a suit of tailored white silk. Under his direction, the old Duke Ellington number, 'In a Sentimental Mood', filled the cavernous interior of the Grand. Excitement stirred around its edges, where lords and ladies – and every debutante recently presented at the royal court – had been holding their breath in anticipation. Conversations were silenced. Heads turned. As one, the hotel's guests watched, rapt, as the Buckingham's dancers flocked out onto the floor.

Hidden among the debutantes stood a tall girl with immaculately sculpted auburn hair and a gown of golden satin, embroidered with rows of pearls along its every seam. Although she looked young enough to be a debutante herself, Vivienne Edgerton could scarcely tolerate the shrieks of delight which filled her ears when, down on the dance floor, the elegant Hélène Marchmont twirled around her partner. Hélène had been a star at the Buckingham ever since the Grand opened its doors, but Vivienne's eyes were fixed, instead, on Hélène's partner – the Buckingham's male principal, with his wild black hair and sad, almond eyes. A girl could get lost in those eyes, thought Vivienne. They invited you to fall in, deep and fast. And those arms . . .

'In A Sentimental Mood' was coming to an end. The orchestra exploded in a rapture of trombone. On the ballroom floor, the hotel dancers fanned apart, reaching out to partner up with the guests waiting on its fringes, while in its heart Hélène and her debonair partner came to the climax of their dance. Arms around each other, they turned and turned again. Vivienne watched the way they gazed at each other, with such exquisite longing. Then, with the final flourish from the orchestra, they came apart to soak up the applause.

In the middle of the ballroom stood Hélène Marchmont . . .

. . . and Gene Sheldon, formerly of the Imperial Hotel, newly made the principal dancer at the Buckingham itself.

Vivienne watched, with something approaching amusement, as Sheldon waltzed away to accept the hand of the first debutante who reached him. He was a serviceable dancer, she supposed. He'd made a name for himself, romancing the guests at the Imperial. But he was no Raymond de Guise.

The band was lurching into its next number when Vivienne felt a tap on her arm – and turned to discover Billy Brogan standing at her heel. Brogan was still like a faithful hound, Vivienne decided, even though this new season found him in the smart black uniform of the hotel's concierges, not the forgettable grey that the hotel pages all wore. Sixteen years old, and two years Vivienne's junior, Billy had been a page until his recent promotion. He was not a bad sort, but he had a tendency to hang about like a bad smell.

'What is it, Billy?' Vivienne asked.

'Mr Charles sent me for you. He's asked for an audience.'

Asked for an audience? Vivienne tried to stifle her smile. Ever since Brogan had accepted his appointment as a new concierge, he had been adopting strange airs and graces. *The boy thinks he'll be hotel director one day, if he plays his cards right.* But Vivienne knew that, in an establishment like the Buckingham, social climbing would only take errant Irish lads like Billy Brogan so far.

'Haven't you outgrown being Maynard Charles's errand boy, Billy?'

Billy drew himself to his full height and beamed. 'I'm always eager to be of service, Miss Edgerton.'

Admitting defeat, Vivienne strode up and out of the Grand, while behind her Gene Sheldon glided effortlessly from one side of the ballroom to another, a beautiful debutante in his arms.

The Grand Ballroom may have been launching into its spring spectacular, but that did not mean the machinations of the broader Buckingham Hotel could grind to a halt. As Vivienne crossed the glittering reception hall, a party of guests fresh in from Salzburg were being attended to by one of the day

managers, while the doors of the golden lift opened to reveal an elderly dowager, weighed down by a gown of ivory silk.

With the music fading behind her, Vivienne crossed the check-in desks and, following a familiar corridor, came to the office at its end. Many were the times she had attended this office and stood outside its doors as if she were still a despairing schoolgirl awaiting a scolding. But she'd been quiet – quiet and *clean* – for three months now. The staff and the guests at the Buckingham Hotel must have thought she was a ghost, so rarely was she seen among them. It had never been Vivienne's decision to come and live at the Buckingham Hotel. *That* had been the doing of her stepfather, Lord Edgerton himself – who had forced upon her not only his name, but a new residence, a new country, dragging her away from New York and keeping her at arm's length from her own mother. But she had resolved, after last Christmas, that she did not want any more trouble.

So what am I doing here at all?

She knocked and waited for the deep, baritone voice to summon her through. Maynard Charles, the hotel director, was sitting behind his desk – as he did every evening – filling in a variety of ledger books and memos. He bade her to sit. A portly man, nearing sixty, he was wearing his usual pinstriped shirt and braces over his not insignificant belly. A tumbler of brandy was perched on the edge of his desk.

Vivienne waited until he was done, her eyes roaming the shelves. There were row after row of ledger books, chronicling in columns of profit and loss the peculiar history of the Buckingham Hotel. The head of a stag, shot by one of the hotel's first directors, was mounted on mahogany and glared down from above Maynard's desk.

'Miss Edgerton,' he said at last, 'I'm sorry to take you from the festivities.'

Maynard Charles had a paternalistic tone, but Vivienne knew it was calculated; he had never become a father, because his life had been devoted to the smooth operation of the Buckingham Hotel. All twelve hundred of its staff were his children, from its elegant dancers to its porters and pages.

'Am I to understand that I've done something wrong?' Vivienne tried not to, but she needled him further. 'Committed another great sin, perhaps?'

Maynard raised an eyebrow, pointedly refusing to be baited. 'I received a telephone call from your father's secretary this afternoon – on a matter grave enough that she had thought to query me before involving your father.'

'My *step*father,' Vivienne interjected, with ice in her voice.

'Forgive me,' said Maynard, standing at last. 'Might I pour you a drink?'

'I don't care for brandy. I was happy with the Moët they're serving up down in the Grand. Mr Charles, if I haven't done anything wrong – and I haven't, I'm quite certain of that – might I be permitted to return? I've kept myself clean since Christmas. I'm trying my best to . . . go unnoticed. But I've been anticipating the Spring Ball and I was looking forward to dancing.'

'This is important. Lord Edgerton's secretary feels she must take it to him, unless I can tell her robustly that nothing is amiss.' He paused, composing himself as if for a grand announcement. 'It hasn't gone unnoticed, in this hotel, that since the debacle at Christmas – when, let's not beat around the bush, Vivienne, you were close to perishing from your *overindulgences* – you have withdrawn from life inside and outside the Buckingham. You

haven't been on lavish spending missions into the Regent Street arcades. You haven't frequented the Queen Mary, the Candlelight Club, nor any of our other restaurants and bars. Why, I believe your appearance at tonight's Spring Ball might be the first time you've worn a ball gown all year.'

Vivienne bristled. 'What of it?'

'Miss Edgerton, you haven't drawn on your stepfather's allowance in one hundred and eleven days. The generous stipend he permits you is simply accruing in an account – and his secretary is questioning *why*. Why would Vivienne Edgerton suddenly stop spending? Why is she ordering simple room service meals instead of sitting at the table of honour in the Queen Mary? Why isn't she dragging a hotel concierge out with her into the boutiques of Mayfair?'

Vivienne felt herself growing angry. It was just like her stepfather to have his minions watch her like this. Wasn't it enough that she was banished from his Suffolk estate so that he could have her mother all to himself?

The words were rising up her pale, swan-like throat of their own volition. She blurted them out.

'I'm eighteen years old. Nearly nineteen. I'll not be a kept woman. He's turned my mother into his pet and he tried to do the same to me. Well, I made a resolution, Mr Charles. I'm through with it. All the money in the world doesn't matter to me.'

Maynard Charles remained silent.

'Oh, I know what you think. I'd be thinking it too. Who *is* Vivienne Edgerton without a new outfit every single night? Well, I'll tell you who. I'm *me*. All of that money he throws at me – it isn't for my benefit. It's to keep me quiet and compliant. And all the while it's been . . . rotting me. Yes, that's the word. *Rot!*

You spend and it fills a hole inside you. But the next time you spend, the hole's a little deeper, so you need to spend more. Soon enough, you're destroying yourself – just like I did last Christmas. So I don't want his money, Mr Charles!'

'Vivienne,' Maynard began calmly, 'money doesn't have to corrode. Money makes the world go round.'

'I'm a leech, Mr Charles. Oh, he makes sure I pay my way in this hotel, and of course you benefit from it too. A permanent guest in the finest suite! But I do not want to remain a leech any longer. I want to *contribute*. I'm worth more than dresses and pearls, aren't I? I can . . . help.'

'Help?' To Maynard, the idea was patently absurd.

'Not the hotel,' Vivienne went on, 'but there has to be *something* for me. Some way of *mattering*. Not like my stepfather and his parties and his hunts.'

Maynard rounded the desk and perched on its edge, close to where Vivienne sat. She shuffled backwards; it was just like Maynard Charles to come and patronise her. The old man meant well, and she knew he'd covered for her indiscretions on more than one occasion in the past, but how could he ever understand what it felt like to be trapped like this, trapped in her own skin?

'Let me tell you something, Miss Edgerton. Your stepfather and those like him, men of great means – they do contribute. Without men of great wealth, establishments like the Buckingham would evaporate. Thousands of livelihoods would vanish, just like that. Thousands of families would be back on the breadline. And, without the money they earn, thousands more would feel the effect – all the bakeries they go to, all the haberdashers they frequent. Great wealth doesn't sit still. It ripples out, like a stone

dropped in a pond. It *provides*. That's why—' He paused. 'That's why what we do here at the Buckingham is so important. That's why it has to survive.'

Was Vivienne mistaken, or was there something faintly anxious in the way Maynard Charles had started to speak? Whatever the case, she had not come here for a lesson in economics. 'My stepfather doesn't care for the people this hotel supports. He cares for the way the manager at Lloyds fawns all over him each time he makes an appearance. No, profit isn't good enough for me, Mr Charles. I want to *help*.'

Nodding, Maynard returned to his desk and picked up his fountain pen once again.

'Find a way to satisfy your needs – but, if you would, do it without provoking the attention of your stepfather. There are choppy waters ahead for the Buckingham Hotel. I would rather navigate them without my eye being drawn to another one of your "problems". Are we agreed?'

Vivienne stood, smarting as she smoothed down her gown. Only when she was back at the door, listening to the sounds of a Viennese waltz drifting up from the ballroom, did she look back.

'Is everything all right at the Buckingham, Mr Charles?'

Maynard barely looked up as he constructed his reply. 'We must achieve some sense of balance, Miss Edgerton. Some new normality. Since King Edward abdicated, we are without our principal benefactor. Reputation matters in an establishment like ours. Hence, efforts like our inaugural Spring Ball. Hence—' He laid down his fountain pen and looked up. 'You must already know, from rumours in this hotel if not from your stepfather himself, that we are seeking new investment. Our eyes have turned to America, Miss Edgerton – because if I am right, and war is to

come to the Continent, we will not be able to count on our German dignitaries for very much longer.'

His tone was grave, and now Vivienne understood why. All the time she had once spent dallying in the Candlelight Club and hotel restaurants had to be filled, and for the first time in her life she had lately deigned to look at the broadsheets. She had read all about Mr Hitler. *But all-out war?* She was too young to recall the Great War itself, but surely men could not be so foolish as to risk it again?

'Our Spanish business is already at a standstill. Imagine what happens next. The Buckingham needs more ballast if we're to weather whatever's to come. But there's hope. There is a man called John Hastings – Junior, you understand. Perhaps you're familiar with the type. He's a New Yorker like yourself. He's to come to London this summer, sizing up new investments, and . . .' Maynard petered into silence. 'We need the Buckingham strong, when he arrives. We need equilibrium. So the very best way that you might help the good people of this hotel – the good people, Vivienne, who have themselves helped you when you've been at your lowest ebb – is to play your part. Act your role. Am I understood?'

Vivienne would have spoken, then, but a lump had formed in her throat. She remained frozen in the doorway, until finally she uttered the single word, 'Understood,' and slammed the door behind her.

In the reception hall, the check-in desks were clear. Billy Brogan was waiting patiently with the other concierges as one of the night managers arrived for his shift.

Vivienne passed them all by, holding herself rigidly as Maynard's words played over in her mind. *Play your part. Act your role.* Be a

good little girl and keep out of the way, would you, Vivienne? The grown-ups are working . . .

The music of the Archie Adams Orchestra was still floating up from the ballroom, but Vivienne stopped before crossing its threshold – then turned away and walked into the golden cage of the guest lift.

Suddenly, she didn't feel like dancing at all.

Chapter Two

The train had been sitting on the platform for ten minutes by the time Nancy Nettleton flailed across the concourse at Euston station, late from her morning changing sheets in the Buckingham's uppermost suites. By the time she reached the platform – her bad leg slowing her down, as always it did – the passengers had already disembarked and were tramping their way through Euston Arch, catching omnibuses to take them further afield. Only one person remained on the platform: diminutive and slight, with his haversack on the floor and his cap placed in his lap like some sort of penitent.

'Frank!' Nancy gasped, and – ignoring the complaint of her leg – gambolled over to take him in her arms.

Frank Nettleton had been on the 6 a.m. out of Lancaster, which was itself an hour's ride in the back of a farmer's wagon from the little mining village where Nancy and her brother had grown up. Consequently, he was bleary-eyed as he found himself smothered in his elder sister's arms.

'Gerroff me, would you?' he said, wriggling free.

He stood back. Nancy could see he was trying to stifle a smile, so she took him in her arms again. Then, choking back tears, she whispered into his ear, 'I've missed you, Frankie.'

She took him by the hand and, together, they joined the throng leaving the station.

The London Underground was alien to Frank, and Nancy could tell that he was frightened. She remembered only too well the way his face had screwed up every time a storm shook open the skies above their village when he was small, and he wore the same expression now. Creases appeared around his left eye every time he was trying to be brave, and he played with one of the hazel curls that hung down around his ears, a nervous tic he'd had ever since Nancy used to bathe him in the tin bath by the fire. Those curls, Nancy knew, would have to go. She'd find a barber to take care of it, or else take the kitchen scissors to it herself. If her little brother Frank was going to join the ranks of the Buckingham, he was going to have to look the part.

It had been nine months since Nancy last saw Frank, but it seemed another lifetime ago. Last summer, Nancy herself had stepped off that same train and made this same pilgrimage across London, all to take up her post as a chambermaid under Mrs Emmeline Moffatt at the Buckingham Hotel. And now – thanks to a kind word Billy Brogan had put in with management – Frank was to do the same, enlisting as a hotel page. It was honest work, and it was a way of rescuing Frank from the miners' hostel he'd been living in since their father passed away and Nancy set off for London. The guilt that she'd felt at leaving him behind had always been assuaged by her ambition to bring him to join her – and now here he was, little Frank Nettleton, his school bag carrying all the possessions he had in the world. Somewhere in there, no doubt, would be the teddy bear their mother had made for him before she passed away, when Frank was barely a babe in arms.

'Are you tired, Frankie?'

Frank slumped against her shoulder. It was the most natural thing in the world. He smelled of engine grease and sweat, but Nancy didn't care. 'I didn't sleep last night. The boys in the hostel wanted to give me a send-off, but I knew what that'd mean – they'd 'ave me drinking ale they'd dipped all sorts in – so instead I slept in the hedge back outside Farmer Garrison's. It was him who drove me to the station before dawn. I gave him the last of my wages, so I haven't eaten either.'

'Mrs Gable didn't pack you sandwiches?'

Mrs Gable was the old widow who kept the lodgings that Frank had been calling home.

'She did, but the other lads got to 'em first.'

Nancy pondered it as the train rattled through another station. 'Might be you could catch twenty winks in my quarters, Frankie.' Was Nancy mistaken, or was she sinking back into her Lancashire accent, just because her baby brother was beside her? 'We could probably smuggle you something up out of the kitchens too. Rosa and Ruth – they're the girls I share with – they've got friends in the kitchens. They save us scraps. But, Frank, what's *scraps* to guests at the Buckingham, it's complete *luxury* to us. So we'll see you right.' She hesitated. 'You might have to wait until tonight to have a proper fill. Billy's got to get you sorted with a uniform and he'll be the one showing you the ropes, making some introductions. It's Billy's family you'll be bunking with. They're down in Lambeth. You can walk it from the Buckingham – it's scarcely a couple of miles, nothing to us, is it, Frank? But you'll see – it's a different *world*.'

'You've been on an adventure, haven't you, Nance?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, you talk like all this is *normal*!'

'You'll get that way too, Frankie.'

'All these men in . . . bowler hats. They're carrying *umbrellas*.'

Nancy couldn't help it; her body shook in a fit of uncontrolled laughter.

'Look at that one,' Frank said, indicating a man sitting further down the carriage. 'He has a *pocket watch*.' He hesitated. 'You haven't really seen the King of Great Britain, have you, Nance?'

'I've seen the King of Norway.' Nancy shrugged, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. 'The thing you've got to learn about the Buckingham, Frankie, is it's all the world, wrapped up in one. There might be kings and queens, but there's chambermaids and hotel pages, just like us, as well. There's ministers for the Crown, but there's folk scratching a living scrubbing stains out of carpets. And in the middle of it all . . .'

'Your friend, Raymond de Guise?'

Nancy stalled. There was only one more station to go. The truth was, she'd been about to talk about Maynard Charles, and how, somehow, he kept the whole of the Buckingham afloat – like the captain of a vast ocean-going liner. But the image of Raymond popped into her mind, and Frank's expectant face beseeched her to say more. She'd written to Frank and told him about Raymond – how they'd first met, how they used to dance together in the little studio behind the Grand Ballroom, how the feeling of love had crept upon her without her truly recognising it for what it was. But putting it down in writing was easier than saying it face to face. For the first time, she flushed red.

'You won't meet Raymond. Not yet. He's been gone from the Buckingham for two months, Frankie. He's . . .' This was the unimaginable part. 'He's in Hollywood, Frankie. Hollywood,

California! His old mentor in the ballrooms, Georges de la Motte, wrote to him with an opportunity. Georges, he's to star in a movie with his new partner . . . and, well, where Georges goes, Raymond follows. Georges wanted to make introductions. He thought that, perhaps—'

'Raymond de Guise – star of the silver screen?'

Nancy shrugged. 'Perhaps.'

She was still uncertain what she thought of the idea. Georges de la Motte, the exiled French baron who had, once upon a time, introduced Raymond to the delights of the ballroom, had found himself a new paramour, Laurana St Clair. The studios believed they might soon be known across the world, more famous than Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers themselves. Georges had travelled to the Hollywood Hills to take a role in a new film, *A Ballroom on Broadway* – and, as keen as ever to help Raymond in his own path towards stardom, he had invited his old protégé across the Atlantic to effect introductions.

'And maybe even take auditions,' Nancy added. 'Well, as you can imagine, Maynard Charles – that's the Buckingham's director – wasn't easy to convince. Losing your ballroom star for months on end – even for the night of our very first Spring Ball – was difficult to accept. Only then—' She paused. 'You should know, there are wheels within wheels at the Buckingham. Keep your ear to the ground and you'll hear so much. And the hotel board, they're courting a new investor. An American, by the name of John Hastings. It won't mean anything to you, Frank – it doesn't to me – but he's a financier in New York City, and the word is he's looking for an establishment like ours to invest in. Something outside the United States. A place he might bring business associates. Well, that's what financiers do, isn't it?

They think themselves kings and queens of their own moneyed worlds. And when Mr Charles realised that John Hastings was due to make a visit to London to size up potential investments, he realised he had a secret weapon. He could send Raymond to meet him, in New York City. Raymond's the sort of man who can *impress*.'

It was what had swayed Maynard Charles in the end. On his way back from his Californian sojourn, Raymond would visit New York City, and there meet the financier John Hastings. Together, they would get the steamer to Liverpool, where a chauffeur would bring them to the hotel itself. If Maynard's ploy worked, by the time they reached English shores, Hastings would be so enamoured by Raymond de Guise – the debonair dancer, the master of the ballroom, purveyor of charm – that the other hotels he planned to visit on his trip would already be forgotten.

'It's the sort of plan only a mind like Maynard Charles's could dream up. The whole of life is an endless game of chess to a man like that. But Raymond can charm anyone.' Nancy paused, dwelling on the idea for a moment. 'He's extraordinary. If anyone can work his magic and get John Hastings to invest in the Buckingham instead of the Imperial Hotel, it will be Raymond.'

The train rattled onwards.

'I miss him, Frank,' Nancy softly said. 'It's like a *need*. I didn't know it until he was gone.' Her words petered out. Embarrassment caught up with her. Perhaps she'd said too much. Frank was scarcely seventeen; there was still so much he had to learn about love.

'Hey, Frankie.' She grinned. 'You might find love yourself in the Buckingham.'

'Nancy!' Frank protested.

'If it can happen to me, it can happen to anyone.' At last, the train pulled into a station. 'Look alive, Frank, this is us!'

Then the doors opened and Nancy hauled her little brother onwards, up and into the sunlit Mayfair spring.

Chapter Three

Frank's first impression of the Buckingham Hotel was of some great fortress, reaching skyward above the green expanse of Mayfair's Berkeley Square. Its gleaming white façade put him in mind of the fairy tales Nancy used to tell him when he was small (the same stories, he was afraid to admit, that he still told himself when he closed his eyes at night), and the colonnade in front, where the taxicabs lined up, made him think of some palace out of Greek myth.

Frank was striding towards the sweeping marble steps that led to the hotel's famous revolving bronze doors, but Nancy caught him by the arm.

'First lesson,' she said. 'We use the tradesman's entrance.' She led him across the green of Berkeley Square, to a narrow mews he hadn't noticed until this very moment. 'I've been stung before, Frank! There's so much you'll have to learn.'

The staff entrance was halfway along Michaelmas Mews, and opened into a small receiving hall where boxes and trunks were piled up. From here, Nancy led Frank into the warren of corridors behind the hotel reception. This was the beating heart of the Buckingham Hotel. Here was the housekeeping lounge, the auditors' office, the concierge station, and the basement stairs.

Nancy pointed out the old laundries beneath the hotel, where the pages often congregated.

They came, at last, to the head concierge's office. Inside, the newly appointed head concierge, Mr Bosanquet – descended, or so he proclaimed, from a line of Flemish lords – was working on the season's rotas. But outside stood the cheery, dimpled face Nancy was longing to see: Billy Brogan himself.

'This him, is it, Nance? You brought me another one for the slaughterhouse?'

Nancy flushed scarlet. 'Billy Brogan, you *promised*!' Stepping aside, she revealed Frank, looking sheepishly at the floor. 'Frank, he's teasing. That's all he does. Taunt and tease.' She paused. 'Billy, this is my brother Frank. Frank, this is Billy Brogan. Until a month ago, he was doing exactly the job you're going to be doing – so trust in what he says, but don't let him think he can boss you about.'

Billy looked Frank up and down. 'You stick with me, Frank, and you'll be all right. I'll see to it. Trust in us Brogans. You got me at the hotel, and my ma to cook and clean for you at home. There, how's that for a new life?'

Billy was grinning inanely – it was just his way – and something in it inspired Frank to reach out his hand. Billy shook it vigorously.

'I'll show him around, shall I, Nance?'

Nancy edged her way between Billy and Frank and smothered her brother in her arms again.

'I'll find you later,' she whispered. 'I made Eccles cakes, especially for your coming.'

It must have touched a nerve deep inside Frank, some memory of childhood, because for a second his eyes shimmered with

tears. Then, remembering himself, he nodded and drew away. In a second, Billy's arm was around Frank's shoulders, as if to shepherd him away.

Yet something stopped him.

'Here, Nance, I almost forgot!' he announced – and, reaching into his smart black concierge's jacket, he produced an envelope. 'I nabbed it from the hotel post room. It's from your Ray—'

'Yes,' Nancy interjected, not meaning to sound as prim as she did, 'I know who it's from.'

'He getting on good out there, is he?'

Nancy glared. 'Be off with you, Billy Brogan! And you make sure my brother stays out of mischief. Frank, remember what I told you about this one, you hear?'

Nancy watched as Billy led Frank away. Part of her wanted to follow them, but she reined herself in. She would see Frank again soon. She'd see him every day. He was here now, right where she wanted him to be, and she could get on with the business of being a big sister again. But he had to learn to go his own way too. They weren't in a small town in Lancashire anymore.

She watched as they disappeared from view, and it was only then that she turned to the letter in her hands.

My dearest Nancy,

Since my last note, I've received the most exciting news: I am to audition for the producers of A Ballroom on Broadway. For the past three days I have been working on set, standing in for Georges between takes so that cameras and lighting and various other technical disciplines (of which I am a keen student!) can be concluded. To think that my foxtrot has caught the eye of the upper echelons! This matters,

Nancy, for this world in Los Angeles is every bit as dictated by one's station in life as the Buckingham Hotel – and, if you are to climb, you must have the right patrons . . .

Nancy was lost, imagining Raymond's honeyed voice as he told her about his new life under Californian skies – but then she felt a tapping on her shoulder. She turned, expecting to see Mrs Moffatt about to admonish her, or else pass her one of her inexhaustible supply of barley sugars – and there stood Vivienne Edgerton.

She was dressed down this morning – but, then, she always seemed to dress down these days, as if going unnoticed was now as important to her as standing out used to be. She was wearing a simple tan house dress, with scarcely any rouge upon her cheeks or kohl around her eyes. She was beautiful like this, Nancy thought. *If only Vivienne could see it herself. For Vivienne, it's all a kind of punishment: as if she needs to atone for who she used to be.*

'Miss Edgerton, is everything all right?'

Vivienne coughed, nervously. Yes, thought Nancy, that's it – *nerves*. It was an aspect she'd never seen in Miss Edgerton before. She'd seen her high and she'd seen her low, but she'd never seen her nervous.

'Nancy,' Vivienne began, 'I'm in need of some help. And I believe you're the only one in the whole of the Buckingham to whom I might turn.'

Chapter Four

Midnight in the Buckingham Hotel: somewhere, a clock began to toll out the hour.

One . . .

Behind the reception hall, Maynard Charles made his last tour of the offices, bidding goodnight to the porters and concierges whose duties went on into the small hours. At the reception desk, the night manager took a register and skimmed through it, searching for potential problems he would face during the night.

Two . . .

In the Grand Ballroom, where the last waltz had been danced an hour ago, the waiting staff were still shutting down for the night. In the morning, the sprung ballroom floor would be treated with wax, and before that happened there was much to do: tables and chairs to be packed away, scratches on the floor to be marked out for special treatment.

Three . . .

Outside the revolving bronze doors, the doorman awaited the arrival of his replacement for the night. The Buckingham did not sleep. It was ever-present and ever-watchful, a bastion for the great and the good.

Four . . .

From kitchen to Candlelight Club, from Queen Mary dining room to French brasserie, the hotel was turning towards its slumber. But not everyone slept, not in an enterprise as vast as this. It would not be long before the ranges in the kitchens must be fired up in anticipation of breakfast.

And, on the hotel's seventh storey, a figure flitted, unseen, from corridor to corridor. At each door they passed, they rested a gloved hand upon the handle, as if to test whether it was locked. The first one held fast. So did the second and the third. Onwards they went: past the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Crown Royal suites. When voices could be heard coming from behind, the figure pretended to fumble with keys, and waited as two lovers – an elder statesman and his much younger paramour – passed by. They paid the stranger no mind, so rapt were they in each other. It was just as well – because the door the intruder had reached was unlocked. Its handle clicked and turned under the gentlest pressure – and then the stranger was through, into the chamber's opulent surrounds.

Past the bathroom with its porcelain bath, its taps and pipework plated in gold, through the lounge area, where thick Persian blankets had been thrown upon the chaise longue. There lay the four-poster bed. From the darkness, where the intruder lingered, the sleeping guest could be seen. The intruder remembered the hotel manifest – this was the dowager princess of the former Bohemia. Yes, it was to be a fortunate night. This nocturnal foray would present a great reward.

The intruder stole nearer, close enough to hear the princess's breath. Only once they were certain she would not wake, did they reach out to the armoire at the bedside.

And opened the drawer.

Maynard Charles, his face purple with a rage he could barely conceal, slammed down the telephone receiver in his office and opened his mouth wide, as if he might scream up at the heavens.

He got to his feet, poured himself a glass of brandy, and drank it in one smooth, fiery gulp. There was a time, he thought, when nothing had affected him like this. Running a luxury hotel had more in common with being a general in His Majesty's army than it did anything else, and Maynard had learned to cope with almost any calamity the hotel threw his way. Good God, he'd kept the Buckingham alive through the Great Depression, when all twelve hundred of its staff depended on him! He'd barely broken stride in those devastating years. In fact, he thought now, he'd *relished* the challenge. *Cometh the hour, cometh the man*.

Why, then, did he feel like he was on the verge of breaking down?

It wasn't the second swallow of brandy that settled his nerves. It wasn't even the third. Only when he was feeling the warmth of the fourth did he feel like he'd come back to solid ground.

In the corner of the room, the wireless was buzzing with news from the BBC: the Condor Legion, the Nazi Luftwaffe's elite squadron, were in play over the skies of Spain. He marched over and turned it off. *That* was it. That was why he was so on edge: the creeping sense that another war was coming had been growing in intensity with each passing day. He had gone to bed the previous night and, on closing his eyes, all he could see were the banks of barbed wire that had characterised his own time at war. Twenty years had passed since those hellish days, but it took so little to bring back the sight, the sounds, the *smells*.

The Buckingham Hotel had endured the Great Depression. But if it came to war . . . Maynard shuddered at the idea. Every time he tried to confront it, it was like he was back in Flanders, being dragged

down into the thick, suffocating mud. The thought of another generation being devastated was almost too much to bear. And all day, every day, he was plagued by the thought of what would become of the hotel when the first shots were fired. The borders would go up on the Continent. The English Channel, would, once again, become a battle scene, isolating the little island of which Maynard was so proud. Travel would grind to a halt. What that meant for the Buckingham was surely calamitous: empty suites and empty halls; restaurants scarcely half-filled; a ballroom unattended.

Get a hold of yourself, man! It hasn't happened yet. There's still hope. There's a long game to play in this hotel, and you're playing it to win. You've got to keep focus.

He dialled the number again, and this time a voice crackled on the other end of the line.

'Imperial Hotel.'

Maynard floundered. 'I'd like to speak to Mr Abner Grant.'

'Room, please?'

Maynard despaired. 'He isn't a guest. He's one of your members of staff.'

There was the briefest pause. 'May I ask who's calling?'

No, you may not*!* Maynard wanted to roar.

Despairing again, he put down the phone.

It had started at dawn. No sooner had he been up than Mr Bosanquet, the new head concierge, had appeared with the most frightful news. At some point during the night, a stranger had crept into the King Edward Suite where Beatrice, dowager princess of what had once been Bohemia, was staying, and taken a string of pearls from her bedside dresser. Maynard Charles was a deft hand at controlling occurrences like this. Thefts were simply a cost of business, and had to be dealt with swiftly and sharply.

The problem was that it wasn't the first robbery reported this year; it was the fifth. And reputational damage like that was hard to contain.

Making a quick decision, Maynard Charles picked up the telephone and dialled for reception. Moments later, Billy Brogan stepped into the office with an inscrutable look on his face.

'You called for me, Mr Charles?'

By now, Maynard had plucked his fountain pen from the pot on his desk and begun scribbling a note, which he slipped inside an envelope. This he sealed with a drop of wax from a flickering candle, and pressed into Billy's hand.

'It's to go to Mr Abner Grant at the Imperial Hotel. Abner Grant, and no other, do you understand? Deliver it to him forthwith, wait while he reads it, and then ask to take the letter back. Mr Grant may give you something in return; he may not. That's of no consequence – not at this juncture. But it's imperative that you bring this letter back to me, or else destroy it on the way. A gutter would do, Billy, but make sure it's destroyed. Do you understand?'

Billy hesitated. 'I do, sir, but isn't this work better fitted to a page?'

Maynard rolled his eyes. 'I should never have signed off on this little change of career of yours, Master Brogan. You were more use where I had you.' He paused. 'This job, it's of critical importance.'

As Maynard's words petered out, Billy's eyes flashed with a bright new idea.

'There's a new page, sir.'

Maynard remained silent.

'He can be trusted, Mr Charles. I'd vouch for that myself.'

Billy fancied he could see a big blue vein, as fat as a caterpillar, throbbing on Mr Charles's temple. Then, finally, the old man acquiesced.

'It's on your head, Brogan. This letter is to reach Abner Grant and no other. It isn't to be left with a proxy. It isn't to disappear into the Imperial post room. It's to go directly to Grant's hands. Anything less, and you're to answer for it. Do you understand?'

Billy Brogan puffed out his chest and accepted his commission with inordinate pride. Then, leaving a distinctly harassed Maynard Charles behind, he headed out into the hotel.

Frank Nettleton was where Billy had last seen him, in the old hotel laundries – long since decommissioned – that doubled as a pages' lounge. Less than a week into his service, he already looked like a native. He had Billy to thank for that. He was wearing the simple grey uniform that all hotel pages wore, and the heaviness of his eyes was less to do with the intensity of work at the Buckingham than it was the cacophony that Billy's vast brood of brothers and sisters made at night, robbing Frank of any sleep. The Brogans were grateful of the contribution Frank was making to household expenses – and Billy himself didn't mind making a bed for Frank in his own room, since he was so rarely there. Billy had been taking great pride in introducing Frank – just like Nancy had told him – to the secrets and mysteries of London town. Give him another few weeks, and Frank would know all the alleys between Lambeth and Mayfair, have met every hospitable shopkeeper and flower seller, and even know the intimate histories of every last one of the Buckingham's regular clientele. By the end of the summer, he'd be another Billy Brogan in the making – and then, no matter what the future held, the Buckingham wouldn't be able to live without him. He'd be indispensable, his future secured.

Frank looked up wearily when Billy dropped the letter into his hands.

'Wh-what is it?'

'It's an education!' Billy declared.

Frank turned the letter over. The name on the front was written in cursive script, and barely legible to Frank's eyes.

'I don't know, Billy. I'm not g-good with my letters. Didn't Nance say?'

'You don't got to be. That name on the front there is Abner Grant. Now, listen, this is a special directive, courtesy of Mr Maynard Charles himself. He's entrusting it to you – for the future prosperity of the Buckingham Hotel itself!'

Frank blanched. Billy thought he had never seen a boy look so pale and white.

'You're to get up and out, and down to the Imperial – it's not far, and I'll point you the way. It sits up on Lancaster Gate.' He paused. 'Look, come with me, Frank, I'll set you straight.'

Up the stairs, out of the old laundries, and at last Billy and Frank came to the staff entrance. There were wild flowers on the banks of Berkeley Square. Soon, the whole place would be a riot of colour. Berkeley Square in the summertime was – or so Billy insisted – the most beautiful of all London's parks. Hyde Park itself had nothing on Berkeley Square.

'When you get there,' Billy repeated, 'look for Abner. You won't miss him. He's as round as he is tall. A big white beard, and mutton chops to boot. Put him in a sleigh with some reindeer and you'd mistake him for Father Christmas. Only, he isn't nearly as friendly.' He paused. 'Now, you understand what you got to do?'

'The letter to Abner Grant.'

'Indeed. But here's the important bit, Billy. You got to destroy it. Don't let anybody see it. Don't even let Abner Grant keep that piece of paper – on honour of your life! Get it off him after he's read it, and tear it up so that nobody could ever read it again.'

Frank had taken only two steps along Michaelmas Mews before he stopped and looked back. He had the inalienable feeling that, no matter who had commissioned this, he was doing something *wrong*. Frank had always had a strong moral compass – he got that from his sister.

'What's in the letter, Billy?'

Billy gave him a knowing look. 'Page's honour, isn't it, Frank? Don't ask, don't tell.'

Frank nodded. London suddenly seemed so incalculably vast. If he wasn't careful, he'd lose himself among its towers and spires. He had to keep his head screwed on. He had to *think*.

Two steps later, Frank looked back again.

'*Why*, Billy? *Why* would Mr Charles want to write to Mr Grant this way?'

Billy preened. 'I couldn't possibly guess—'

'But who is he, Billy?'

'Well, that's where the mystery thickens, young Master Nettleton.' Billy strode up Michaelmas Mews, putting an arm around Frank. 'Mr Abner Grant is the Imperial's detective. They say he's the best in London. That he can catch any crook in a hotel, root out any wrongdoing. But the thing about old Abner is . . . he and Mr Charles, they've hated each other a long, long time. The way I heard it, they fought together in the Great War and, well, there's been bad blood ever since.' He paused. 'So what does Mr Charles want with Mr Grant now, twenty years after the fact? *That*, Frank, I couldn't tell you.' Billy's face opened in the most glorious, preposterous grin. 'But it's going to be fun finding out . . .'