

Prologue

31 December, 1936



The Grand Masquerade Ball



FOR THE LORDS AND LADIES of London town, the dukes and duchesses of every English shire, the counts and countesses of the continent – and even beyond – there is only *one* place to be seen on this New Year's night. The doors of the Buckingham Hotel are open, for this is a night to be remembered.

It is an age of splendour. It is an age of magnificence. For some, it is an age of elegance and grace – and here in the Buckingham's Grand Ballroom, crown princesses and sirens of the silver screen have come to toast the New Year, government ministers and landed gentry have come to forget, if only for a moment, this year of wars abroad and the increasing threat at home. The band is playing. The dancers are swaying. The hall is filled with the great and the good. Others watch discreetly from the sidelines . . .

In the heart of the ballroom, the principal dancer, hidden behind his Venetian mask, twirls away from his partner and seems to glide as he crosses the dance floor. The orchestra prepares to strike up another serenade but not a soul in the ballroom notices the silence in between songs. They are transfixed, every eye trained upon the mysterious dancer who approaches

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the mahogany stairs and, lifting his hand to the Crown Princess of Norway, beseeches her to join him on the dance floor.

‘Your Highness,’ he ventures, in a rich, dulcet tone, ‘shall we?’

Some of the faces around him flicker. There is surprise, even consternation, in their eyes.

On the other side of the ballroom, the band strikes up their new number. It is time for the waltz to begin.

The dancer takes off his mask . . .

Five Months Earlier . . .

August 1936



Chapter One



THE GRAND BALLROOM SEEMED TO lie under an enchantment on this balmy summer night. The ballroom's wooden floorboards shimmered, as if beneath a haze; the guests bedecked in their pristine dinner jackets and lavish gowns of satin, rayon and ivory silk were open-mouthed in anticipation, and the silence was broken only by the scurrying of footsteps outside the doors – for, though the ballroom seemed frozen in time, life still went on inside the Buckingham Hotel. Guests still came and went, lovers still fought and made love in the hotel's magnificent suites, the generators still turned, the kitchens still buzzed, old Maynard Charles – the hotel director himself – still paced the Buckingham's opulent halls, waiting for the moment when he might be needed. Yet, once the ballroom doors were closed, the Grand was a world apart from the rest. The spell of silence held – until, finally, the Archie Adams Band began to play. Only then was the spell broken, and a completely different kind of magic woven in its place. The magic of music. The magic of dance.

Listen . . .

Raymond de Guise, lead demonstration dancer of the Buckingham Hotel, had been patiently watching the bandleader, waiting for the first note to strike. Archie Adams, a distinguished-looking

man in his late fifties, with his bow tie and immaculate hair, had been playing in orchestras for all of his life and had picked up a thing or two about dramatic entrances. His orchestra was making one now. The first notes of 'A Californian Serenade' echoed across the ballroom, the trombones stabbing out the melody and bringing the guests to attention. Archie Adams himself led them on the ballroom's grand piano, his twenty-strong orchestra made up of trumpets, trombones, saxophones, violins and even a double bass, with a single percussionist keeping the beat. Behind the double doors that led to their dressing rooms, the hotel dancers waited. Then, on Raymond's cue, the doors flew open and they whirled, together, out onto the floor.

Raymond, a man of imposing stature that belied his elegance on the dance floor, was the first through. His dinner jacket was midnight blue, his collar high and starched so that his black curls, which were rebellious and refused to be tamed by even the strongest pomade, came close to touching the fabric. Hand in hand with his partner Hélène – resplendent in her sea-green gown, hand-stitched with a million tiny pearls like scattered stars – he reached the centre of the dance floor and together they turned to welcome the rest of the company.

'Shall we?' he whispered, as he did before every routine.

Hélène, who was always ready, smiled in return. 'We shall, Raymond. Let's show them how it's done . . .'

As 'A Californian Serenade' reached its climactic finale, they fanned out among the guests, nodding heads and clasping hands. Out of the corner of his eye, Raymond saw Hélène taking the hand of a regular guest at the Buckingham – a gentleman with slick black hair; Hélène said he came to London from his native California to make movies, and every time he

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graced the Buckingham he requested her hand on the dance floor. He was not, Raymond knew, the only one. Hélène oozed elegance; she was a beauty so classical that, in a different age, sculptors would have lined up to recreate her in marble and bronze. As her partner took her in hold, Hélène flashed a smile at Raymond; this man would be no match for her on the dance floor, few were, but she would dance with him all the same.

The dance floor was already filling up, but Raymond had not yet met his own partner for the evening. As the Archie Adams Band struck up a Viennese waltz, he stood with his hands folded at the edge of the dance floor, awaiting his turn. Moments later, a finger tapped him on the shoulder. He glided around to see a familiar face peering back up.

‘Looks like you may have been let down, Mr de Guise.’

The girl in front of him – because, at scarcely eighteen years of age, a girl she was – had rich auburn hair, cut short as a boy’s to spite her father, and spoke with the unmistakable accent of her native New York. Her green eyes had something almost feline about them, and she had evidently spent the afternoon in the hotel cocktail lounge, for her breath smelt sweet, of exotic pineapple and rum. Her ball gown set her apart from even the wealthiest patrons of the Grand Ballroom tonight. Wherever Raymond looked there were the most magnificent gowns, but this girl’s simply screamed ostentation. The golden satin silk was textured, the capelet around her shoulders trimmed with feathers, the brooch on her belt a mountain of pearls that glittered as if set with diamonds; perhaps it was . . .

‘I’m taken, Miss Edgerton. If you’re looking for a partner, you’ll find suitors aplenty everywhere you care to look.’

‘You made me a promise. Don’t you think you should keep it?’

‘I will. One day, my dear, I’ll show you the quickstep, or the foxtrot. I’ll have you waltzing around the Grand . . . but tonight I’m at the beck and call of our guests.’

‘Your guests, Mr de Guise,’ she corrected him. ‘The way I see it, if your partner is not here, then . . .’

Raymond was about to resist further when another finger tapped him on the shoulder and, stepping back, he saw his partner for the evening. At seventy years old she was more than twice Raymond’s age, diminutive but elegant in a Madeleine Vionnet gown that flared gracefully to the floor.

Raymond heard Miss Vivienne Edgerton saying his name, heard her repeat it – and after that heard nothing as, disgruntled, she retreated to her table and, with a click of her fingers, summoned a waiter in white and gold brocade.

‘Mr . . . *de Guise*?’ the lady ventured. ‘Raymond?’

‘Yes,’ he replied, smoothly, finding his voice at last. ‘Mrs . . . Adelman, I presume. Lovely to make your acquaintance.’

Mrs Adelman held out a hand, as wrinkled as a glove but adorned with an emerald ring that glittered in the light of the Grand’s chandeliers.

Raymond delivered her one of his most practised smiles. ‘Shall we?’

As he swept her into hold, Mrs Adelman looked back and saw the eyes of the auburn-haired girl piercing her from the side of the ballroom. ‘That girl, is she . . .?’

‘Oh,’ said Raymond, trying not to be distracted as he brought Mrs Adelman close and began turning into the waltz, ‘nothing of the sort, Mrs Adelman. The young lady has been staying in the hotel for the summer. Vivienne *Edgerton*. You know the name?’

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'The Edgertons?'

'The same,' said Raymond. 'She has requested that I teach her to dance and . . . well, I wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of her father, our benefactor and lord . . .'

'Can anyone dance, Mr de Guise?'

'Anyone who desires it.'

Soon, Raymond had given himself to the dance – and Mrs Adelman, more reluctantly, perhaps fearful that she might make a fool of herself in this most elegant of ballrooms, had done the same. Mrs Adelman must have danced before, because soon her feet were remembering the steps and Raymond loosened the way he was holding her, no longer directing her every movement. The music swayed, the chandeliers above shimmered so that, in moments, the ballroom seemed to be the surface of the ocean itself, ripples of light spreading all around. When the music stopped, the dancers seemed to carry on, filling the brief interludes between music with movements of their own. More than once, Raymond caught Hélène's eye across the floor as her gentleman clasped her too tightly and awkwardly. With a single arched eyebrow, Hélène could tell Raymond everything: the man's hand was too high and too tight, he held her like a mannequin in some expensive Knightsbridge boutique – afraid to drop her, determined to direct her every move, as if it was not Hélène Marchmont who had been crowned Queen of the Ballroom at the Royal Albert Hall two seasons past. But Hélène didn't mind. As they twirled past each other, Raymond even saw the hint of a smile in the corner of her lips. A certain sort of man, she seemed to be saying, just needed . . . indulging. They needed to feel as if they were masters of the dancing arts. Hélène, Raymond knew, loved the evenings with the guests – giving them a glimpse of her

and Raymond's world. *She didn't mind if they couldn't dance; just that they loved to dance.* Yet, Hélène lived for the demonstrations they put on each day, when, together with Raymond, they could show the world their talent.

Raymond danced on. At least Mrs Adelman was not trying to prove anything to him. She had no need to. She was here for the thrill of the ballroom itself.

As the hours ticked by, the Grand Ballroom became more crowded still. A little champagne always brought more guests to the dance floor, but so too did the music itself. Somehow, it seemed to infect everyone who heard it with a desire to move . . .

Mrs Adelman rose up on her tiptoes and put her lips to Raymond's ear.

'She's still watching you, you know.'

Raymond furrowed his brows.

'That girl. Your Edgerton girl. Have yourself an admirer, do you, Raymond de Guise?'

Raymond chuckled softly. 'With these looks?' he joked. 'More than one, I shouldn't wonder . . . It is, after all, part of the job . . .'

'Part of your job to let them fall in love with you?'

The music reached a climax, an explosion of trombone and tenor horn.

'Perhaps we might find somewhere a little more private? To . . . talk,' Mrs Adelman said carefully.

Talk, thought Raymond. Mrs Adelman's hand was on his arm. Yes, it would not be the first time one of the ballroom's patrons had asked him to . . . talk. The hotel director almost demanded it: 'Whatever our patrons require, Mr de Guise, you are here to provide.' Perhaps it was the way he held them as they danced, or perhaps it was the way he worked to make them feel that, no

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matter what else was going on in their lives, in the Grand they could be themselves, just follow the rhythms of their bodies, but people felt . . . safe with Raymond de Guise. He had to admit that he liked that feeling.

‘I’m staying in the Trafalgar Suite. It would be a little more private. Shall we?’

The music had died away. Archie Adams was up on his feet, ushering his orchestra off for their well-earned refreshments. In the quiet that followed, Raymond risked a glance over his shoulder. The unblinking eyes of Vivienne Edgerton were still on him. He was not sure whether they were accusing or pleading or worse, but perhaps it would not be a bad thing to escape the ballroom, if only for a time.

He reached out and took Mrs Adelman’s hand.

Raymond tried not to catch the eye of Mr Simenon, the slippery head concierge, as he and Mrs Adelman strode, arm in arm, through the doors of the ballroom, past the grill room and cocktail lounge and up into the hotel’s lobby – where its celebrated bronze doors stood open to the balmy scents of Mayfair after dark. He did not answer when one of the hotel pages called out his name, nor break his stride when Maynard Charles himself appeared at the reception desk, his spectacles perched haphazardly on his nose as he scrutinised the day reports in preparation for the night manager’s arrival. Perhaps they thought less of him, thinking him little better than those ‘table dancers’ who haunted the booths of the hotel’s Candlelight Club, seeking a wealthy patron with whom they might spend the night for a fee. *Let them think what they want*, he thought. *My business is my own*. Not a word was spoken, even as he accompanied Mrs Adel-

man to the ornate gold cage of the guest lift and she instructed the attendant to take them to the third floor, where her suite awaited.

‘Are you staying here long, Mrs Adelman?’ he ventured, as they walked together along the burgundy hall.

‘Oh,’ Mrs Adelman replied, ‘it’s a one-night thing, Raymond. I’ll be gone in the morning.’

A one-night thing, thought Raymond. Yes, he had heard this story before as well: a wealthy dowager, just flitting through, looking for somebody to . . . talk with, for the night.

The Trafalgar Suite. It had been some time since Raymond last ventured in here. Inside, Mrs Adelman took a perch at the end of the great four-poster bed. She had spared no expenses tonight. The room was one of the Buckingham’s finest, with a rolling view over Berkeley Square and the great gothic spires of the Church of the Immaculate Conception. Beside an ornate French armoire sat a glass-topped table, upon which a single orchid was presented – and, beside that orchid, a perfect statue of a turtle, cast in ivory and mother-of-pearl. Room service had obviously already been summoned, for a silver bucket was filled with ice and, rising from it, was a bottle of the Buckingham’s finest champagne. Mrs Adelman gestured for Raymond and, with his heart beating fast, Raymond popped the cork and poured two glasses. A Moët et Chandon, 1921 vintage.

‘Mrs Adelman,’ he began, ‘I see you are a lady of means.’

‘Oh, *means*,’ she said, with a wry grin. ‘Yes, you’re a gentleman dancer, all right. You have the airs and expressions. I suppose you’ve danced with royalty. There are enough kings and queens and continentals said to stay in the Buckingham Hotel. I can quite imagine you hobnobbing with the gentry, Mr *de*

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Guise. But, no, consider this an old lady's way of spending her late husband's inheritance. I can't take it with me, so I'm enjoying myself while I can.' She hesitated. 'You seem a little nervous, Raymond?'

It had been many years since Raymond de Guise was last nervous, even when taking to the dance floor in front of the world's finest ballroom dancers at the Hammersmith Palais the previous season, but yes, he had to admit, he was nervous tonight. There had been patrons like Mrs Adelman before, ladies of an older generation, who came to dance in the ballroom and wanted a little *more* of Raymond's time. Perhaps they were widowed. Perhaps they had been cast off by their philandering husbands, and given an allowance which they sought to fritter away in the ballrooms and drawing-room dances of Mayfair and beyond. Mostly what they wanted was a good-looking younger man from whose arm they could hang, and perhaps speak a little about the gilded Mayfair world. But sometimes – well, sometimes they wanted more.

Raymond caught a fleeting glance of himself in the mirror hanging over the dresser. Thirty years old, but there were still those who would mistake him for twenty. It was only when he laughed that the creases showed about his eyes, revealing his true age. He had curly black hair that was a constant battle to sculpt in time for the afternoon demonstration dances, and eyes that sloped ever so slightly downwards, giving him what an former lover had once called an 'elegantly sad air'. The prominent cheekbones had been inherited from his father, God rest his soul, and his nose had been broken and reset so many times, thanks to the attentions of an unruly brother and events in his previous life, that it made his face appear somewhat crooked. He could see Mrs Adelman appraising him from beyond his reflection.

‘Mrs Adelman, I really must . . .’ Something stuck in his throat. ‘I really must . . . ask . . . why am I here?’

The question hung in the air between them, threatening, as if it shouldn’t have been said. He hoped, above all else, that she had not brought him here to proposition him. She would not have been the first – and, if she did, she would not be the first to be told, in the kindest possible terms, that Raymond de Guise was a gentleman, not a gigolo; that, though they might joke about it in the kitchens and the housekeeping lounge, the dancers in the Buckingham Hotel were not the kind to slip out of the ballroom with a beautiful guest and wake beside her the following morning. Mrs Adelman patted the bed beside her and Raymond felt compelled to sit.

Then she looked into his eyes.

‘Your mother sent me.’

Of all the things she might have said, this was the least expected and it startled him.

‘My . . . mother?’

Raymond’s mouth felt suddenly dry. Every other thought that had been in his head was obliterated. An image of his mother hovered into view, and suddenly he felt a thousand miles away from the sights and sounds of the Buckingham Hotel.

‘How long has it been, Raymond? Two years?’

A little stab of guilt caught Raymond de Guise in the breast. ‘Three,’ he whispered, almost contritely.

‘Three years, and you her firstborn son.’ She said it not with admonishment, but with regret. ‘I met her, of course, in the years since you went away. Well, they were hard times for your mother . . . and I know what it’s like to lose a son. Mine died

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at Passchendaele, but how bittersweet to lose your son and yet know he's still out there, and never comes home . . .'

Raymond was not ordinarily unsure of himself, but now he stuttered, 'Mrs Adelman, let me change my question. Why . . . why are *you* here?'

Mrs Adelman lifted a hand and cupped Raymond's own. Though he was anxious, he did not flinch or resist. 'She didn't think you'd listen if she came herself. So, when we got to talking about this runaway son of hers, we hit upon a novel solution: we thought we could kill two birds with one stone. I could take a final turn around the Buckingham Hotel – my husband used to adore this place – and, while I was here, I could ferry a message to her absent son . . .'

'A message?' whispered Raymond.

'It's your brother,' Mrs Adelman said. 'Raymond, he's coming home.'

Chapter Two



THIS IS IT, YOUNG LADY. Euston station. You'd better get yourself ready. Unless, that is, you *want* to go back the way you came?'

Nancy Nettleton stirred at the rough touch of the train guard shepherding everybody off the train. She had not realised that she'd fallen asleep. She'd had her nose in her *Reader's Digest* magazine and, the last thing she remembered, they were still somewhere in the Derbyshire hills and it was four hours until London. Now she looked through the window and saw the station concourse bustling as travellers stepped out into the hubbub.

'Got someone to meet you, have you, love?'

Nancy's reflection was staring back at her from the fogged window glass. She had thought she looked so smart in her checked overcoat and knitted cap, forest green and embroidered with a single silver star in honour of her mother. Perhaps it was only the hours she'd been asleep, but what London elegance she'd imagined had simply disappeared. The pin in her hair had fallen out, her curls fell, unruly, around her face, and she could even see the indentations the fabric of the seat had made upon her cheek as she slept.

'Not me,' she said. 'I'm here alone.'

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The train conductor gave her a look that said: *you'll be eaten alive.*

'Perhaps you can point me to the powder room? I have an appointment to keep. I'd like to look . . .' She fumbled for the right word. 'Presentable.'

'You're asking the wrong man there. You'll have to look out on the concourse. Can I help you with that?'

Nancy had begun wrestling with her suitcase. Along with the clutch bag at her side, it contained everything she owned in the world. 'I'm quite all right,' she replied primly, and the train guard was still staring as, three attempts later, she forced it through the doors. He was still staring when, at the end of the concourse, Nancy looked over her shoulder. Her leg was aching, as it had done ever since she was small, but suddenly the awkward way that she limped – so imperceptible, really, such a *tiny thing* – seemed the most obvious thing in the world. But Nancy Nettleton held her head high and heaved her case after her all the same.

She had a Chinese Red lipstick just like Claudette Colbert was said to have worn in *It Happened One Night*, and she'd been saving it for an occasion just like this. First impressions, she had been told, counted for *everything*. She'd put it on, and then she'd be ready.

London. She had been preparing herself for seven months, and now the city – noisy and smoky, full of more movement and life than she had ever known – seemed to dwarf her as she fought her way to the Underground station. If only her father could see her now! Of course, he had had little love for people from the big city. People didn't, when they had lived their entire lives in the same Lancashire town where she was born, surrounded by the same hills and forests and mountain tarns. But London was another world.

Nancy had spent her life imagining its palaces, wondering what it might be like to catch a glimpse of King Edward riding in procession along the Mall, or to witness the excited crowds pouring out of a royal wedding at Westminster Abbey. Yet her first impressions of the city were noise and the fug of sweat and coal dust.

She held the letter carefully. *Nancy Nettleton*, it began. *We are pleased to confirm your appointment to the role of chambermaid at the Buckingham Hotel, Berkeley Square, London, to commence on the first day of August. Immediately upon your arrival . . .*

She had read the letter a hundred times. It was the product of seven months' diligent work – all of those letters of enquiry sent from her cottage home, the dismissive ones she'd received in reply, the correspondence she'd entered into with potential employers that then came to naught, the hours she'd spent canvassing for referees, somebody, *anybody*, who might give her a chance. And all of that done while also putting her late father's affairs in order, making sure her younger brother could finally stand on his own two feet, confronting the solicitor from Morecambe Bay who'd decided, without instruction, that the taxes due on what little her father had left behind demanded further commissions – and all because, as a woman, Nancy supposedly needed extra help in calculating the figures, in managing the accounts. As if she hadn't been looking after the household finances since she was a girl. As if a man could do better, just because he insisted on people calling him *sir*.

She looked up. All of these people crammed around her on the Underground carriage had lives of their own. Some were bankers and some were clerks. Some were, no doubt, chambermaids-in-waiting just like her. Some might be runaway princes, or gentlemen playing at being paupers . . .



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A man was staring at her from across the carriage. His face was the colour of pond water, his beard as entangled as briars, and in his bloodshot eyes was a look of quiet desperation. Yes, London was a city for kings and queens, but it was a city for beggars as well, she thought sadly. She pictured the Buckingham Hotel and, kneading some life back into her tired leg, wondered what she might find.

The Buckingham was every bit as opulent as she'd imagined. Where Nancy came from, the local hotel was two rooms above the village inn, or lodgings with old Mrs Gable – who took in miners from out of town, kept them six to a room and fed them on porridge oats at dawn and mutton stew after dark. By contrast, the Buckingham Hotel rose, seven storeys and more, above the resplendent green of Berkeley Square. Its gleaming white facade and the miniature colonnade where hansom carriages and taxicabs awaited each night made it stand out, even on a square where every townhouse was worth as much as every building in Nancy's entire village combined. Marble steps led to the hotel's striking bronze doors, a gold-plated rail sweeping up towards them. The man who attended the door wore a coat of long black velvet, despite the summer warmth, and a top hat that stood out like a shadow against the hotel's bleached brick. Up above, an enormous copper crown stood between the hotel's pavilion roofs, proclaiming it royal by association.

As Nancy watched, a taxicab wheeled around, stopped in front of the hotel and deposited a gentleman with his entourage onto the steps. Moments later, the hotel disgorged concierges and pages to ferry the gentleman's cases inside, while a short, round man that Nancy took for the hotel director came out to welcome the guest with a slight, yet noticeable, bow.



She had been staring too long. It was already creeping towards midday. She was due to meet with Mrs Moffatt, the head of housekeeping, at twelve on the dot. Punctuality mattered.

She steadied herself and set off across the square. This was what she had come here for. Why, then, did she feel such a sudden plunging sensation as she approached the doors?

Pull yourself together, Nancy Nettleton. You're made of sterner stuff than this!

She had not yet reached the bottom of the steps when the doorman barked out in an accent that seemed so unfamiliar, 'Can I help you, miss?'

She stopped dead, aware of how *insignificant* she seemed. The suitcase she was carrying was battered and worn around the edges. It had belonged to her grandfather, who'd bought it at auction when one of his neighbouring villagers died. Even her overcoat, which she'd thought so splendid, seemed, suddenly, to have sprouted holes, the areas where it had been stitched up standing out starkly. Why had she used mismatched thread?

'I'm to . . . start work,' she began. *What's got into you, Nancy? You've never stuttered before!* 'Here, I have my letter . . .'

The doorman's face darkened, so that she thought he was about to let loose a foul tirade – but then he marched down the steps to meet her and whispered, 'You'll have to find the staff entrance, down on Michaelmas Mews. Follow it round, you'll find it easily enough. Want to make a good first impression, don't you? Then don't let Mr Simenon or Mr Charles see you coming through the front doors – least of all, not dressed like that. Lord, they're running around in there like the world's about to end. And all because of some German dignitaries they've got coming in. You'd think the King himself was here

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for afternoon tea – but no, he’s off with that Mrs Simpson of his. Time was he crossed this threshold almost every month. But now . . .’

Nancy stared at him, dumbstruck.

‘Well, off with you, then! And make sure you look ’em in the eye when you meet ’em. First impressions count.’

As Nancy took off towards the mews entrance, she glanced again at her wristwatch. Two minutes to midday and counting.

Nancy Nettleton was not usually of a nervous disposition. You did not grow up, the only girl your age in a mining village, without learning to overcome nerves. Even when she was a girl Nancy had given short shrift to the boys who harangued her. She could skim stones and climb trees like the best of them. But running rings around a few miners’ sons was one thing. Waiting here in a back corridor of the Buckingham Hotel, moments away from meeting the woman who would be her mentor and supervisor for the next twelve months, was quite another.

One of the hotel pages had brought her here. Along the way, he hadn’t stopped nattering on in his lilting Irish brogue – and Nancy had barely been able to make out one word in ten. Now she waited in a hall lined with wainscot panelling, outside a door that read *HOUSEKEEPING*. Occasionally, she could hear footsteps echoing along the halls around her. One of the concierges strode past the apex of the corridor, peered down towards her, and then strode on, his heels clicking as he went.

Time seemed to have slowed to a halt. Her stomach grumbled and, with relief, she remembered the sandwich and Eccles cake she had wrapped in paper at the bottom of her clutch bag. She had been keeping them for the train – but perhaps it

would settle her nerves, if only a little, to take a nibble from them now . . .

She was taking her first bite, her body grateful for the but-tery, sugary goodness, when she heard footsteps again. A tall, thin reed of a man was marching purposefully towards her, his grey plaid suit rustling. He had a grave of a face: dark eyes set deep in their sockets, high, pronounced cheekbones and an angular jaw. His eyes, mean and serpentine, narrowed as he approached.

‘Young lady, have you no decorum?’

‘I’m . . . sorry,’ Nancy stuttered. A particularly truculent currant had worked its way into her teeth, gluing them together.

‘You might not see guests around you now, madam, but this is not a prohibited area. What if one of our patrons was to see you, flakes of pastry around your face and . . . Really, this is most unsatisfactory – unsatisfactory in the *extreme*! You’re—’

A voice echoed along the hallway, cutting him off. ‘I’ll take it from here, Mr Simenon.’

The man in grey spun on his heel, revealing a lady of not insignificant size bustling along the hall. As she approached, Nancy saw a doughy face framed in white curls. The lady approaching was wearing a house dress of navy blue, with its sleeves rolled up to reveal brawny forearms.

‘Mr Simenon,’ the newcomer called out, ‘to what do we owe the pleasure?’

‘This young lady is in breach of staff regulations—’

Barely breaking her stride as she bustled past to reach the office door, Mrs Moffatt remarked, ‘Then not a rule has been broken, Mr Simenon. This young lady may be about to join the ranks of this fine establishment, but she isn’t a member of staff until I have

her signature on my papers. And since those papers are through *that* door –’ She lifted a finger to point – ‘she can eat as many – what are they, Eccles cakes? – as she wants. Miss Nettleton, do you want to come through? We’ll have you sorted in a trice.’

Nancy had no time to reply before Mrs Moffatt took a ring of keys from her house dress, unlocked the HOUSEKEEPING door and stepped through. Mr Simenon’s serpentine eyes were still on Nancy as she followed.

Here was a compact room with a desk, a small mahogany cabinet and two velveteen armchairs arranged around a coffee table, on which stood a vase of freshly cut peonies. There was no natural light in here, so Mrs Moffatt turned a dial and the electric lamp dangling from the ceiling hummed into being. To Nancy, whose family home had been lit by paraffin lamps, the light was simply dazzling.

‘I’ve begun on the wrong foot, haven’t I, Mrs Moffatt?’

‘Think nothing of it. I’m afraid one of the things you’ll discover, Miss Nettleton, is that the concierges believe the Buckingham would be little but a crater in the ground if it weren’t for them. Mr Simenon’s the head of them and, unluckily for you, the worst. If he thought a guest was offended by the blue of his eyes, he’d pluck them out and send them out to be coloured.’ Mrs Moffatt must have seen the way Nancy’s jaw dropped open, because she threw her head back and laughed. Finding her breath, Nancy dared to smile too.

‘Here,’ Mrs Moffat said, indicating a clipboard of papers, ‘you’ll find everything precisely as it says in your letter. Six pounds and two crowns a month, board included. You’ll begin on mornings and cycle through until late. I’m afraid you’re for Saturdays as well. We’ve been in need of a Saturday girl for some time. We have eight

housekeepers here at the Buckingham. I'm head of those housekeepers, and you'll be with me for your first month. Stay by my side, do exactly as requested, and we'll be the firmest of friends. And at least that way, I can keep Mr Simenon at bay . . .'

Nancy took an inkpot and pen and, mindful that she did not blot the paper, spelled out her name as neatly as she could.

'There.' Mrs Moffatt beamed. 'Now you're *mine* . . . Let's show you to your room, shall we?'

Moments later Mrs Moffatt was leading Nancy onward, pointing out the halls that led to the cocktail lounge, the grill room and the Queen Mary, the first of the Buckingham's six exquisite dining rooms.

As they walked, Nancy saw Mrs Moffatt's eyes dart down to her leg. It was aching more than usual, but that was not unexpected; she had been cramped up on the train for what seemed a lifetime. 'It's a . . . childhood thing, Mrs Moffatt. It won't stop me performing my duties. It hasn't slowed me down yet.'

To Mrs Moffatt, this seemed explanation enough. 'We demand perfection for our guests, Nancy, but Lord knows, none of us are perfect.'

Onward they walked in silence. After a time, Nancy found enough courage to ask, 'Mrs Moffatt, is it true . . . you have royalty to stay? The doorman said that the King himself . . .'

'The good King Edward is a friend of the Buckingham Hotel,' Mrs Moffatt said darkly. 'Something in the Buckingham appealed to the young prince and his associates. But don't go thinking you'll bump into him, young miss. He has matters of state to attend to and, well, that's the business of kings and queens, isn't it, and not for the likes of us.' Mrs Moffatt paused. 'It's true that we'll have royalty here, Nancy. If you're still with us by New Year

ONE ENCHANTED EVENING

– and, Lord willing, I hope you will be – you’ll find His Majesty himself here to celebrate with us in our ballroom. Mr Charles is organising a Masquerade Ball – this, of course, being the King’s personal request.’

A Masquerade Ball, thought Nancy in awe. The very thought of it filled her with magic. *New Years back home are all about the bonfire . . .*

Mrs Moffatt was still talking. ‘Always remember that all of our guests should be treated as if they were royalty . . . don’t go thinking you’ll be changing the sheets of the high and mighty. We have the King’s cousins from Norway staying with us for New Year, but the suites reserved for royalty are attended to by our gentlewoman housekeepers.’ She paused. ‘That’s the way of things here. Some of our more highly prized guests are used to being catered to by ladies of a certain . . . breeding, shall we say. I don’t hold with it myself, but there’s one thing I want you to understand: when you step through the Buckingham door, Miss Nettleton, you are not from the country any more. You’re not from London and you’re not from Lancashire. You’re not a Scot or a Celt, an Irish woman or a Cornish woman. You’re not city or country. You are of the Buckingham. One of us. And that, as far as we who work in the hotel are concerned, is where it ends.’

They had reached the hotel lobby and, for the first time, Nancy saw its opulence first hand. The floor was a chequerboard of black and red squares. The walls were panelled in dark wood with swirling grain and, on a plinth in the heart of the hall, an obelisk of blue and red glass, the donation of some continental artist, was being ogled by a lady guest dressed in fine brown fur. Doors and hallways led in many directions. The golden lift cages were manned by attendants in tall peaked caps, and a porter in

blue and gold wheeled past, dragging behind him a trailer full of tortoiseshell cases and black leather bags.

At the back of the reception hall, between two staircases which crossed each other as they rose to the garlanded balconies above, a corridor sloped down, through columns and arches, to two great wooden doors. Above the doors, the legendary 'Grand Ballroom' was spelled out in italicised copper letters. Perhaps she was mistaken, but as Mrs Moffatt led her towards the service lifts Nancy fancied she could hear the sound of a saxophone. It occurred to her how strange it was to hear the instrument without the crackle of the old gramophone her father used to play.

'What's . . . what's down there, Mrs Moffatt?'

The doors at the corridor's end opened up and two guests trotted through. For a fleeting moment, she caught sight of a great cavernous ballroom, lit by sparkling chandeliers. The sound of trumpets and trombones flurried up and, as the doors swung shut, Nancy saw – for the barest moment – two figures turning across the dance floor in long, flowing steps. From where she stood, they seemed to be floating on air.

'That, Miss Nettleton, is the Grand Ballroom. *Pride* of the Buckingham. The demonstration dances are in full flow this afternoon, and every afternoon, for our guests. Don't worry,' she went on, with a wry smile, 'you'll get to experience its glory soon enough. Those chandeliers are due for a thorough clean. It takes a week to haul them down, spruce them up, and have them rehung.'

All through the rest of the day, and long into the night that followed, Nancy heard the music of the saxophone, and saw those two dancers floating across the ballroom, as if nothing else mattered in the world.