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## CHAPTER ONE

**June 1942**

‘Would you like to go on the waltzers or the Ferris wheel?’ Pearl Scott offered her little sister the choice.

Eight-year-old Elsie made a beeline for the teacup-shaped waltzers. She scampered ahead in her bright-yellow summer dress and white ankle socks, ignoring screeches from riders on Blackpool’s Big Dipper and weaving through the long queue for the ghost train, dashing up the wide wooden steps to her favourite ride.

‘The waltzers it is.’ Pearl smiled to herself. Today was Elsie’s birthday and with present money burning a hole in her pocket, the world was her oyster.

Pearl joined her at the entrance to the ride. Music blared through the loudspeakers, along with the familiar cry: ‘Scream if you want to go faster!’

Bernie Greene worked the ride as girls screamed blue murder. He grabbed the backs of each waltzer in turn and spun them mightily. More screams, more glee, as dizziness descended.

Bernie winked at Pearl and Elsie waiting on the platform as the carriages whizzed by. ‘What’s up?’ he yelled over the racket.

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‘Today is her birthday!’ Pearl mouthed. She and Bernie had grown up together. They’d played in the back streets of the town – the narrow ones that backed on to the Tower, squeezed in between the famous seafront attraction and a bustling open-air market – where Pearl had been regarded as one of the lads: a tomboy who could hit a cricket ball for six with the best of them. Bernie was like a brother to her – a quick-witted charmer who could talk himself out of any hole he found himself in.

‘When is it our turn?’ Elsie fidgeted at the edge of the ride, tilting her freckled face up at Pearl and clutching the three-penny bit that would pay for her treat.

‘Faster?’ blared the tinny voice over the Tannoy.

‘Yes!’ Strangled cries hovered on the cusp between delight and terror.

Bernie spun the teacups and grinned at Pearl as he sped by again. Round and round, with heads and shoulders pushed back against the seats by centrifugal force, riders gripped the safety bar until their knuckles turned white.

‘When?’ Elsie demanded.

‘Soon,’ Pearl promised.

And lo; the Tannoy fell silent and the roundabout slowed. The music faded. Bernie helped windswept, groggy customers back on to terra firma then extended his hand to Elsie. ‘Happy Birthday, littl’un,’ he told her as he settled her and Pearl into their waltzer and they strapped themselves in. ‘Hold on to your hats,’ he warned.

‘We’re not wearing hats,’ literal-minded Elsie protested. **Copyrighted Material**

Pearl grinned. She was glad she'd squeezed in this trip to the Pleasure Beach after finishing her afternoon stint at her mother's fish and chip stall and before joining a gaggle of girlfriends for a jolly night of ballroom dancing at the Tower. True, it meant she wouldn't have many minutes to get dolled up back home in Empire Street – a quick change from casual slacks into skirt and frilly blouse before running a comb through her dark hair (mercifully short and easy to manage); then a slick of lipstick and a pat of rouge. Tonight, Pearl and her gang would enjoy the lavish surroundings of the Tower Ballroom; no common-or-garden, back-street palais for them, ta very much.

'Ready?' Pearl asked the birthday girl. 'Sit back and hold tight.'

Elsie's eyes gleamed with excitement. A hurdy-gurdy tune struck up and the ride eased into action.

Bernie wove between the teacups, setting them spinning, flirting with the girls, bending over to tell a quick joke to one of his fairground pals. He looked relaxed in his open-necked white shirt and dark-blue trousers. As the ride gathered speed, he approached Elsie and Pearl's waltzer. 'Now then, birthday girl.'

'Will you spin us really, really fast?' Elsie pleaded.

'Fast as you like,' he agreed with an exaggerated wink.

'You want to watch out,' Pearl warned him. 'Your face will get stuck in that position.'

'Yeah, yeah.' Bernie set them off spinning. 'What are you doing later?' He threw a casual question at Pearl.

'I'm going dancing at the Tower. What about you?'  
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Do you fancy jitterbugging me around the floor for an hour or two?’ Pearl knew it would be useful to have a partner on hand for the evening, what with the current shortage of local men. *Blame conscription for that*, she thought. Almost three years into the war against Germany, and with no end in sight, life for everyone had changed utterly.

‘Count me out,’ Bernie shot back. ‘No offence, but I’ve got better things to do on a Saturday night than trip the light fantastic with you.’

‘Suit yourself. They’re holding a competition – there’s money to be won.’

Bernie spun them faster. Coloured lights above their heads began to blur. The music reached a crescendo. ‘Is there now? How much?’

‘Ten bob for the best couple. I’ll see you there?’

Bernie underwent a sudden change of heart. ‘You’re on,’ he agreed.

Round and round under a whirl of electric lights. ‘Scream if you want to go faster!’

‘If Bernie and you dance together, will he be your boyfriend?’ Elsie piped above the din, her face alive with excitement.

‘Give over!’ Pearl laughed. ‘The only thing Bernie is interested in is going home with that ten-bob note in his pocket.’

Elsie kept at it like a dog at a bone. ‘So no kissing?’

‘Definitely not – no kissing!’ Pearl swore, hand on heart. The very thought of her and Bernie walking out together as a couple was absurd. *Single and fancy-free, that’s me.*

‘Faster?’ **Copyrighted Material**

Pressed back, spinning like tops, stomachs churning, deafened, screeching and laughing, Pearl and Elsie revelled in the fun of the fair.

Sylvia Ellis stared intently into her dressing-table mirror. It had taken her the usual age to get ready; there mustn't be a blonde hair out of place and her eyebrows must be perfectly, symmetrically pencilled in. Was it her imagination, or were her cheeks a little bit plumper? Oh God, was she putting on weight? Jumping to her feet, Sylvia pinched at the flesh on her waistline then turned sideways to study her reflection, tightening her stomach muscles as she did so. Not too bad after all.

Relieved, she sat down again to remove her curlers then style her hair. This was what took the longest: smoothing and arranging each lock so that they cascaded around her shoulders in an apparently effortless golden waterfall. The frock she'd chosen to wear for an evening at the Tower Ballroom hung from a hook on the door – a three-quarter-length, sky-blue affair that was nipped in at the waist, with off-the-shoulder straps and a bodice that was carefully sculpted to show off her slim torso. She would wear it with a light, wrap-around stole made of silvery tulle.

But first, the make-up. Blue eyeshadow to match the colour of her eyes, a flick of dark mascara, with a touch of coral-pink lipstick; nothing too brash. When Sylvia was satisfied with the overall effect, she removed her gauzy negligee and stepped into the dress then made her way into the lounge for help with the zip.

At first Sylvia's mother, Lorna, didn't look up from her copy of the *Daily Times*. She sat on a green sofa

with her feet resting on a plump leather pouffe and with the wireless playing softly in the background in a room lined with silver-framed photographs signed by stars of the professional dance world. Victor Silvester beamed down at Lorna from pride of place on the chimney breast, with Phyllis Haylor and Joanne Bradley to either side. Lorna was a big Silvester fan – she ranked him above Frank and Peggy Spencer and she listened avidly to his BBC *Dancing Club* programme on the wireless. The half-hour broadcasts provided her with a template for the lessons that she taught in the studio beneath their stylish living quarters. She and Sylvia were both proud of the fact that the Lorna Ellis Dance Academy was situated in the best part of Blackpool – on broad and fashionable King Alfred Road, alongside smart shops and offices, with the Majestic Hotel at the end of the street and on a main tramline route down to the promenade.

‘Mother,’ Sylvia prompted.

‘Yes, dear?’ Lorna glanced up with a weary sigh. Three beginners dance classes on the trot had left her feeling thoroughly wrung out. ‘You’re going out, I see?’

‘Yes, I told you so earlier.’ Preparing herself for her mother’s version of the Spanish Inquisition, Sylvia hovered by the door.

‘Did you? I don’t remember. I thought you might stay in and keep me company for a change.’

‘No; I did tell you.’

‘And where are you gadding off to?’

‘To the Tower.’

‘Who with?’

‘With Eddie.’

‘Edward. I do wish you’d call him Edward.’

‘He prefers Eddie.’ Sylvia regretted her choice of dress. She should have stuck to one that she was able to fasten herself. ‘Can you do this zip for me, please?’

‘How will you get there?’ Lorna pushed herself up from the sofa then turned her daughter round to face the door before easing up the zip.

‘Eddie will call here for me.’

‘Good. And how will you get back?’

‘Eddie will bring me.’

‘Because I won’t permit you to walk the streets alone late at night – you know that perfectly well.’

‘That’s why I’ve asked him to walk me home,’ Sylvia said petulantly. ‘Honestly, Mother, I’m twenty-one years old; you mustn’t fret over me as if I were still a schoolgirl.’

‘If I don’t, who will?’ Lorna smoothed the satin fabric and adjusted Sylvia’s sequinned waistband. Gone were the days when Lorna herself graced the professional dance floor as a Ginger Rogers lookalike. People had insisted that the resemblance was remarkable – the same dainty features and swan-like neck, the grace of movement as if she floated on air. Lorna had sparkled in the world of sequins and gauzy net petticoats until an unlooked-for pregnancy had put paid to her hopes of international fame.

Now, at the age of forty-two (whisper it under your breath), all of Lorna’s hopes were pinned on Sylvia making the grade in the world of dance while she, Lorna, gave lessons and served on the committee of the ISTD – the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing. Her method was exclusively English: a standardized style that avoided the wild excesses of



the Charleston and swing. No 'freak dancing' for the Lorna Ellis Dance Academy, she proclaimed.

Sadly for Lorna, on the personal front, Sylvia had become a handful of late – moody in the extreme, dismissive of her mother's opinions and all too willing to play on her exceptional looks to get what she wanted. Beauty was skin deep, Lorna often made a point of reminding her. Above all, a young woman needed to develop a skill and the ability to earn her own money to secure a decent, long-term future. 'Look at me,' was Lorna's mantra; 'when I was expecting you and your father wanted nothing to do with us, I was able to set up my academy to support us.'

With the zip securely fastened, Sylvia broke free from her mother's fussing and exited the room, grabbing the stole and a silver clutch bag from her bedroom before rushing down to answer the door to Eddie Winter's knock.

'Be back by eleven,' Lorna called from the head of the stairs. 'Don't be late.'

Eddie stepped into the narrow hallway. 'Don't worry, Mrs Ellis; I'll make sure Sylvia's home on time.'

Handsome Edward in his linen jacket and crimson bow tie; clean cut and clean shaven, with those startling pale-grey eyes staring up at her. Such a nice young man, Lorna thought, and he clearly adored Sylvia, if only her increasingly self-centred daughter would realize it. 'Thank you, dear,' she told him.

Eddie offered Sylvia his arm and they were gone, out into the evening sunlight and sea air. A strikingly handsome couple, they drew admiring glances from the holidaymakers with buckets and spades and striped canvas windbreaks streaming up King Alfred

Road on their way to their cramped boarding houses set back from the seafront. Desultory drinkers drifted into the Queen's Arms and dozens of RAF men in their smart uniforms disembarked from the buses that had ferried them into town from their base at Squires Gate, bound for the Tower Ballroom to see what off-duty fun was to be had.

'Boo!' Tommy Rossi, one of the whiteface clowns at the Tower Circus, made Joy Hebden jump. He popped out from his dressing room in full regalia – a spangled, Pierrot-style costume with padded shoulders and pantaloons, topped with a white dunce's hat.

Joy gasped before defending herself against Tommy's advances with her mop. 'Menace – stop doing that, or else!' she protested.

'Give over, Cinders – you love me really,' Tommy taunted as he snatched Joy's mop then ran down the steps and danced away with it across the empty circus ring.

'Don't call me Cinders.' Honestly, Tommy Rossi was the limit; the way he would seek Joy out and torment her at the end of each cleaning shift. 'It's not funny. Give me my mop . . . Tommy, I'm warning you!' She chased after him, around the ring then back up the steps into a Moroccan-style, tiled corridor lined with posters advertising past animal acts at the Tower Circus. '12 Devils of the Forest', '20 Wonder Horses', '15 Maltese Dogs'.

'Catch me if you can!' he challenged. 'See; you can't – I'm too quick for you.' He whirled on the spot, sequins glittering, his white face creased into a broad grin.

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‘Tommy, for heaven’s sake; you’ll get me the sack – the audience will start arriving any minute now.’ Joy lunged and snatched back her mop. ‘Thanks for nothing!’ She marched along the curving corridor towards the broom cupboard at the far end. The sooner she made herself scarce the better.

Tommy trotted after her. ‘Why not stop and watch the show?’ he cajoled as he watched Joy lift her coat from the hook. Less boisterous now, he grew more thoughtful. ‘You know what they say about all work and no play.’

‘I can’t stay. I’m paid to clean, not to be part of the audience.’ Once Joy was finished here, she would head straight home, where with luck she would evade Mrs Grigg, her dragon of a landlady, and get herself an early night.

‘It’s Saturday. Stop and watch the performance, then afterwards I’ll take you dancing.’ How come someone as pretty as Joy had ended up in this dead-end job? Tommy wondered. The question hung unspoken between them but it lay behind the bout of energetic teasing and flirting that he’d embarked on over the past week or two. More than pretty – Joy was one of those rare, delicate creatures whose brown eyes flashed at him from beneath dark lashes and whose manner reminded him of a shy forest fawn glimpsed in dappled sunlight in the heart of the woods. Beneath the thick layer of greasepaint, Tommy’s Italian background gave him a romantic bent that allowed him to compare attractive women to characters from Walt Disney cartoons.

‘I don’t dance,’ Joy stated flatly. ‘Sorry, Tommy – I have to go.’ **Copyrighted Material**

She swept out without a backwards glance as the audience began to filter in; away from the spectacle of elephants standing on their hind legs and waving their trunks at the crowd, away from snarling lions and tigers in cages with their leotard-clad tamer cracking his whip, far away from the noise and razzle-dazzle of clowns, acrobats and jugglers.

‘Goodnight, Gerald,’ she said to the man on duty at the entrance to the subterranean aquarium. ‘Goodnight, Irena,’ to the Polish acrobat rushing along the corridor to change into her costume.

Faint strains of music from the famous Wurlitzer organ drifted from the ballroom on to the broad street below as Joy made her hasty exit. Goodbye to that fun-filled world and hello to her poky attic room on Silver Street. Not that Joy was complaining; at least she’d avoided the bombing raid on Manchester that had killed her parents and older sister at the start of the war. The disaster had happened just five short weeks after Joy had been evacuated to Blackpool as a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl. She was seventeen now and making her own quiet way in life.

A heedless Pearl Scott in glamorous dancing gear brushed past Joy outside the main entrance to the ballroom. ‘Get a move on, you lot!’ she cried to her three girlfriends, Ida, Doris and Thora. It was still daylight and the nearby Central Pier, as well as similar piers to the north and south, thronged with holiday-makers enjoying the balmy evening air. A green-and-cream tram rattled to a halt outside the ballroom then disgorged its passengers. ‘At this rate you’ll miss

your chance of grabbing a decent partner. I'm all right, Jack – I collared Bernie Greene for the night.'

A queue snaked across the vast, carpeted entrance hall. At its head were Sylvia Ellis and Eddie Winter.

'Two tickets, please.' No question about it – Eddie would pay for Sylvia's as well as his own. Sylvia patted her curls and smiled graciously.

Pearl and her gang craned their necks to catch sight of Blackpool's premier pair of ballroom dancers. 'Crikey, look at that dress!' Pearl whispered under her breath. *Blue as the sky on a bright summer's day.* 'How does Sylvia do it on clothing coupons?'

'I bet it belonged to her mother once upon a time,' Ida whispered back. 'From twenty years ago, when Lorna Ellis was big in the dance world. Sylvia has probably brought it up to date by adding a bow or two.'

Pearl watched Eddie lead Sylvia up the wide stairs to the ballroom. Eventually she reached the desk and slid her money under the glass barrier. 'One ticket, please.' She'd paid and was halfway up the stairs when she turned to her chums with an impatient cry. 'Come on, girls; chop-chop!'

Outside on the promenade, Joy kept her head down as she passed stalls selling Blackpool rock, candy floss and fish and chips. 'Palmistry – Past, Present and Future.' She glanced at the familiar sign outside Madam Rosie's small booth. A large poster in the window showed the Line of the Heart, Line of the Head, Line of Life, and Line of Marriage.

Joy walked on, a solitary figure, as far as Silver Street, where she turned. Behind her lay the seafront

and a mile of golden sand. Water, earth, fire and air; one of these days she would gather the courage to pay her sixpence and enter the fortune teller's booth to discover which category she belonged to. She fancied being air or water. Taking her door key from her pocket, Joy paused to study her palm – her Line of Life was clear and unbroken, but the Line of Marriage was hard to make out. *No surprise there*, she said to herself as she turned her key in the lock.

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## CHAPTER TWO

There was no peace for the wicked. After dancing her feet off at the Tower on Saturday night, Pearl found herself at the kitchen sink next morning, looking out into the scruffy backyard where her father, Henry Scott, was putting the finishing touches to a new sign for his amusement arcade. He was convinced that a recently acquired set of one-armed bandits was his latest sure-fire way to make a fortune. His arcade had a prime location close to the Central Pier; all it needed was a bright new sign above the entrance.

‘Fill ’Em Up, Little Mickey, Playball, Lucky Star and What’s My Line – that’s the name of the game these days,’ he’d declared over the breakfast table that morning. ‘Top-of-the-range Allwin machines, the lot of them; all with automatic payout mechanisms.’

Pearl’s mother, Maria, had been unimpressed. ‘How much did they set you back? More to the point, which lorry did they fall off the back of?’

This had led to a heated argument – money down the drain, mind your own business, and so on – during which the younger Scotts, Ernie, Wilf and Elsie, had wisely made themselves scarce. Pearl had simply cleared the table and started the washing-up.

‘Call yourself Mr Blackpool!’ Maria had scoffed at her husband. ‘Swaggering around town, reckoning to have a finger in every pie. But where’s the profits from those pies? That’s what I’d like to know.’

‘Shut your mouth, woman.’ Henry hadn’t bothered to raise his voice – why waste the energy? ‘I know what I’m doing. Slot machines are the business these days. I’ll stick young Ernie on the door and charge sixpence to get in – and Bob’s your uncle.’

Pearl’s mother, who had worked for years to make ends meet, took this with a large pinch of salt. At the tender age of nineteen she’d married handsome Henry and they’d had Pearl soon afterwards, then there’d been a long gap before Ernie, Wilf and Elsie had been born in reasonably quick succession. Maria was forty-four now – still eye-catching and vivacious; a popular figure along the seafront, where she served behind the counter of her fish and chip stall in floral dresses and heeled shoes, her glossy dark hair pinned high on her head and finished off with a bright silk scarf.

‘What’s the betting we don’t see a penny of those profits if there ever are any?’ she’d grumbled as, paintbrush in hand, Henry had retreated to a yard cluttered with dustbins, rusty signs from previous failed business ventures, old bikes and odd bits of fairground machinery. ‘The bookies will see most of it and what’s left will disappear down your father’s gullet at the Black Horse.’

Now Pearl smiled to herself at the sight of him dabbing away with his paintbrush. She imagined the satisfying thud of the trigger against a metal ball that would fly round its circular track with a tinny rattle before plopping into a small steel cup: winner or



loser? Yes, she could see the appeal of slot machines and the arcade was definitely located at the very heart of the Golden Mile – so maybe her mother would be proved wrong for once. There again, it was true that her father's boastfulness rarely paid off in terms of pounds, shillings and pence.

Pearl watched him put the lid on his small pot of red enamel paint then carefully swill his brush in a jar of methylated spirits. These days there was a touch of grey in her father's thick dark hair and his waistline had expanded, but he was still a broad-shouldered, good-looking man with the gift of the gab. Maybe this time . . . ?

Finishing the dishes, Pearl dried her hands then slipped out on to the street for a breath of air. Here she found Bernie lolling against a lamp-post, arms crossed and staring glumly at a group of boys, including her ten-year-old brother Wilf, who were squatting on their haunches and playing marbles outside the weed-choked entrance to Mason's disused stable yard.

Bernie glanced in her direction and scowled. 'So much for your bloody dance competition,' he mumbled. 'We never stood a chance against Sylvia flippin' Ellis and Eddie What's-'is-name.'

'Eddie Winter,' Pearl reminded him. 'If we'd been allowed to jitterbug like I was expecting, it would've been different; but no, it turned out to be the Viennese waltz.'

'Too right – and it turns out I don't know my reverse turn from my turkey trot, so we were snookered from the off.'

'Now, if it had been anything more modern,' Pearl

continued her train of thought, 'we'd have high-kicked and shaken our hips with the best of them.'

'Dance madness' it was called by snooty old-school observers – but all that wild swinging out and coming back together in gay abandon was definitely more her and Bernie's style.

Suddenly launching himself from the lamp-post, Bernie seized Pearl by the waist and swung her into the middle of the road. 'Like this, you mean?' He pulled her close then rocked her from side to side, attracting the attention of the grubby marble players.

'Woo!' they called, as Pearl's skirt swung out to reveal her petticoat.

'Watch out, our Pearl; we can see your knickers!' Wilf cackled.

Pearl broke free and tugged at her skirt. 'Fibber!' she challenged.

Bernie laughed and went on shaking his hips and shoulders. 'Look; I've got rhythm!'

'Yes, but none of the right moves, you idiot!'

Stopping as suddenly as he'd begun, Bernie pulled a half-smoked cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it. 'It's not right, though: Sylvia and Eddie have been taking dance lessons since they were tiddlers. What chance did the rest of us have of walking away with the prize money? It's not even as if they need it. Eddie Winter must earn a tidy packet working for the Inland Revenue and Sylvia brings in a few bob on her own account, helping her ma with the youngsters at their academy.'

'I hear Eddie's moved to the Vickers Armstrong factory out at Squires Gate.' Pearl put Bernie right on the facts. 'He works in the office, ordering parts for Wellington bombers.'

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‘Same difference. Anyway, why isn’t he out in Egypt, doing his bit for king and country?’

Pearl shrugged. ‘No idea. Why aren’t you?’

‘Because I help build hangars for the RAF, as if you didn’t know.’ Bernie puffed away at his cigarette. ‘Essential war work, they call it. And in my spare time I help out at the Pleasure Beach, providing a fun time to our war-weary masses.’

‘Excuses, excuses.’ A glance at her watch told Pearl that it was eleven o’clock. ‘Shouldn’t you be there now?’ she reminded him.

‘Oh Lord, yes – I’ll get skinned alive!’ Bernie flung down his cigarette and shot to the end of the street, leaving the boys to grub about in the gutter for the butt.

‘Wilf!’ Pearl bellowed a warning as Bernie disappeared from view. ‘If you pick up that fag end I’ll make sure you get a good hiding off Mam.’

*A pity Bernie has his hands full with work*, she thought. For he definitely did have rhythm and a dance lesson or two at the Lorna Ellis Dance Academy – or maybe even at Cliff Seymour’s new place on North View Parade – wouldn’t go amiss. ‘One of these days I might save up for a few lessons myself,’ she muttered, glancing up at the iron tower – a massive landmark construction of criss-crossing girders stretching skywards that dominated their street and all those nearby – as she collared her youngest brother and dragged him inside the house.

At the crack of dawn next day, Joy prepared to leave for work. Cleaning had to be done when workplace buildings were empty, before the day got properly

underway. This suited early bird Joy, especially during the summer months when the sun rose soon after five and suffused the sky with a soft pink glow. However, today, Monday, proved to be a disappointment, as Joy found when she opened the front door to heavy grey clouds and light drizzle. She was buttoning up her sensible, navy-blue coat when Iris Grigg emerged from the kitchen.

‘You’re late with your rent.’ The landlady barked the accusation at Joy, who whirled round to see her advancing in full sail, dressed in faded candlewick dressing-gown, hair curlers and woollen slippers – the type of seaside gorgon who appeared on Donald McGill postcards up and down the land. ‘I expect my money to be paid on the dot, five o’clock Sunday teatime.’

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Grigg; I had to work late yesterday. Your light was already off when I got back.’ A flustered Joy dipped into her purse to find the money that she owed.

Iris took the coins with a disgruntled frown and counted them. ‘Don’t let it happen again,’ she warned.

‘I won’t, I promise.’ Joy escaped into the fresh air. *If only I could afford better lodgings*, she mused as she hurried towards South Shore Terrace. Her attic room was cramped, lit only by a skylight stained with bird droppings. It had an uncomfortable bed tucked under the eaves and scarcely room for a washstand and small chest of drawers, let alone a proper wardrobe. Joy’s dresses hung on a hook behind the door and her few possessions – including a brush and comb, a small make-up purse and a precious

black-and-white snapshot of her family taken in the summer of 1935 – were arranged along the narrow mantelpiece above a fireplace that was never lit.

‘Chimney’s blocked,’ Iris had informed her as they’d agreed rental terms the previous September. ‘Damned crows build their nests in it. Can’t get rid of ’em.’

Nicer lodgings would cost too much, Joy knew. Even with the extra cleaning work she’d recently secured at the circus plus a string of jobs she did for private individuals – the Ward family near the North Pier (a fifteen-minute tram ride away), Mr Dawson at the gift shop on King Alfred Road and Mrs Ellis at the dance academy further up the street, which was where she was headed now – Joy’s earnings wouldn’t meet the expense of a bigger room with a more pleasant outlook. No, she must make do with things as they were.

Her spirits rose as she turned on to the deserted promenade. At this time in the morning seagulls ruled the silent world. They soared over the newly built concrete air raid shelters spaced out at regular intervals along the prom, curving effortlessly overhead, their wings flashing white, their orange legs tucked under sleek grey bellies. Oh, for the freedom of the sky – the ability to sail on an air current over golden sands fringed with lapping waves. Joy paused in the shadow of the Tower to survey Blackpool’s three piers striding out into steel-grey water, with a conglomeration of buildings at the end housing yet more funfair attractions and a theatre for end-of-the-pier shows. She was one of those people who was afraid to walk on piers because of the gaps between

the wooden planks through which you caught a glimpse of the restless sea below. One half-hearted attempt shortly after Joy had arrived in Blackpool as an evacuee had made her tremble violently and retreat, overcome with dizziness.

Giving herself a quick shake, she hurried on: a lone figure on the wide prom. When she reached the imposing Majestic Hotel, whose seafront entrance was currently barricaded by sandbags, she turned into King Alfred Road and walked past several smaller hotels that had been requisitioned by the government and converted into offices for civil servants – one for the Inland Revenue and one for the Department of Health. They had a gloomy look, with more sandbags piled near their entrances and blackout blinds pulled down. A street sweeper pushing a handcart was the only other early riser and he and Joy exchanged brief nods as their paths crossed.

Soon she came to the dance academy where she must start her day. Letting herself into the building with the key Mrs Ellis had given her, she used a second key to enter the ground-floor dance studio. It was a big room, some thirty feet long and twenty wide, with a dance barre along one side and floor-to-ceiling mirrors lining another. The sprung mahogany floor was polished to perfection. At the far end stood an upright piano and a table with an expensive, up-to-date gramophone.

Joy's first task was to collect her brushes, dustpans and dusters from a small side room next to the cloak-rooms close to the main entrance. This she did, catching sight of herself in the huge mirror as she set about sweeping. It seemed to her a nondescript

image: a slight figure with thick, dark-brown hair tied back, wearing a short-sleeved white blouse and grey slacks. A wave of self-consciousness passed over her as she turned away and began her work until a faint tap-tap at the plate-glass window distracted her. Cocking her head to one side, she listened. Yes; there was another tap and the outline of a man's figure through the blind, so she decided to put down her broom and go to the front door to investigate.

'I'm sorry to bother you.' Rightly assuming that neither Lorna nor Sylvia would be up, Eddie had supposed that the cleaner would be the only person whose attention he could attract. 'You must be Joy.'

'That's me.' She peered cautiously through the half-open door.

'My name's Eddie Winter. Mrs Ellis mentioned that you arrive early to start your cleaning work.'

'Yes?' A visitor at this time in the morning was the last thing Joy had expected – however, the man looked respectable in his light raincoat, collar and tie, carrying a brown leather briefcase.

'Sylvia is my dancing partner,' he continued. 'She lost an earring at the Tower Ballroom on Saturday night. I went back yesterday to check in Lost Property and luckily it had been handed in.' Eddie raced through the explanation, aware that his visit had interrupted Joy's cleaning routine.

'I see.' Joy relaxed, opening the door wide and allowing Eddie to step inside.

'I'm on my way to work – I have to catch the next tram out to Squires Gate.' Delving into his coat pocket, he pulled out a small brown envelope containing the lost earring and handed it over to Joy. 'I

was pretty sure Sylvia wouldn't be up yet. Could you please give it to her for me?' The cleaner struck him as a shy girl, very young and keen to avoid notice. A pity; she could make much more of her looks if she tried.

'Of course,' Joy said stiffly.

'And could you give her a message, please? Tell her the Halle Orchestra is on at the Winter Gardens tonight. I can get tickets if she would like.'

'She certainly would!' As if by magic, Sylvia appeared at the top of the stairs. No tousled hair and crumpled dressing-gown for her; oh no – though she'd only just got out of bed at the sound of voices below, she was fresh as a daisy in a pristine pale-blue housecoat with curls artfully piled on top of her head.

'Good. I'll go ahead and buy the tickets,' Eddie confirmed.

Sylvia skipped down the stairs and stood with her back to Joy, who had stepped aside to give her some space. 'What brings you here?' she asked Eddie.

'I brought your earring. You said you needed it as a matter of urgency.'

'I do.' She thrust her hand under his nose. 'Those pearl earrings go with the outfit I plan to wear today.'

'Very urgent.' Eddie's lips twitched into a faint smile that he hid by raising his hand to his mouth and clearing his throat. 'Are you going somewhere nice?'

'Never you mind. Come on, Eddie, I haven't got all day – where's the earring?'

'It's here.' Joy stepped forward with the envelope.

A small frown creased Sylvia's smooth brow as she snatched it from Joy's palm. 'For goodness' sake, why didn't you say?' **Copyrighted Material**



Joy retreated into the studio. Her face felt hot; Sylvia's sharp tone had stung.

'What time does the concert start?' Sylvia went on in her light, tinkling voice.

'At seven.'

'Seven, you say?' Sylvia was busy checking the contents of the envelope. 'I ought to be back from Lytham by then.'

'Right you are.' Eddie knew better than to expect a thank-you. 'I'll wait for you outside the Opera House at half past six.'

Through the open studio door Joy heard the click of the front door followed by light footsteps back up the stairs. She swept briskly, trying to make up for lost time, and didn't notice Mrs Ellis enter the room some minutes later.

'How soon will you be finished here?' Lorna carried a book of sheet music to the piano. She glided across the polished floor with the upright posture of a trained dancer, shoulders back and chin tilted slightly upwards. 'My first pupil arrives at eight.'

'I'll be done by half seven,' Joy promised.

'Make sure you're thorough.' Lorna ran a finger along the top of the piano, looking for dust but failing to find any. Then she dipped into her pocket and drew out a few coins. 'Here; I may as well pay you now.'

Joy took the money and thanked her.

'I shan't need you tomorrow or the day after,' Lorna informed her as she sorted through her record collection before placing one on the turntable. With a precise, delicate movement she swung the needle arm over the disc and lowered it. Silvester's 'You're

Dancing On My Heart' filled the room. 'Come back on Thursday, the usual time.'

'Yes, Mrs Ellis.' Joy took out a yellow duster and ran it along the dance barre. When she looked up again, Lorna was gone. The record played on – a smooth, violin-led quickstep that Joy recognized from listening to the wireless. Unable to resist, she swayed and hummed softly as she dusted. A quickstep went in 4/4 time; a combination of foxtrot and Charleston invented in the 1920s. It involved walks, runs, chassés and turns, and sometimes a hop, skip and a jump – hard to visualize from merely listening to Mr Silvester's description. Nevertheless, Joy couldn't help giving it a secret go – still clutching her duster and raising her arms into ballroom hold with an invisible partner, she ran and skipped a few steps in time to the music, pirouetted on one foot then danced on towards the mirror.

The trip to Lytham was a lie that Sylvia had invented to throw her mother off the scent. In fact, she had no intention of taking the bus to the refined neighbouring resort and having tea there with friends.

On this occasion, as on many others, Sylvia found it easier to keep her mother in the dark. Cliff Seymour, the man she'd arranged to meet, had something of a bad reputation in Blackpool. From time to time Lorna would make critical remarks about him – he was the wrong 'type', having worked in a Berlin cabaret during the build-up to the war, and he had returned home under a cloud. Sylvia would dismiss these comments, putting them down to simple, straightforward jealousy. Cliff's new dance studio on

North View Parade was up and coming, meaning that some of Lorna's pupils had drifted in his direction. 'Cliff Seymour spouts a lot of nonsense,' Sylvia's mother would grumble each time this happened. 'All that rubbish about running Hammersmith Palais when he was scarcely out of nappies – I don't believe a word.'

'He teaches the jitterbug,' Sylvia had remarked on one occasion. 'Not to mention the American smooth. Perhaps that's what young people want these days.'

Her mother had treated her to a large dose of scorn. "'Classes for the masses",' she'd quoted. 'May I remind you that Cliff Seymour isn't even Imperial School trained. He doesn't have a single qualification to his name.'

So when Sylvia had run into Cliff before Saturday's waltz competition at the Tower, she'd been cagey with him.

'Hello, hello, how's the best-dressed girl in town doing?' Cliff had caught her during the interval, when Eddie had been chatting to some recently arrived RAF officers from Squires Gate. 'Remember me?'

'Hello, Cliff.' Sylvia had played it cool. Of course she knew him from their schooldays, when Cliff had stuck out as an unpopular loner with an inflated sense of his own importance.

'Long time, no see. I take it you and Eddie have entered for the Lonsdale Cup in London this year? I've been watching you – you two would do well there, mark my words.'

Sylvia's ears had pricked up. 'Do they stick to the English style?' she'd enquired.

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Cliff had spoken knowledgeably. ‘Yes, with a dash of individual interpretation thrown into the mix; small side steps and other original touches.’ He’d smiled and flattered. ‘You especially, Sylvia – you’ve got all the poise in the world and your frame and posture are excellent. I’d be aiming for bronze at the very least if I were you.’

Eddie had interrupted them as the second part of the evening was getting underway. ‘Ready?’ he’d asked Sylvia with unusual terseness. ‘The judges have taken their positions – the competition is about to begin.’

‘First place – congratulations.’ Cliff had sought her out again at the end of a successful evening while Eddie joined the queue for coats. ‘Not that it was ever in any doubt. We should meet and I can tell you about the Allied North of England Championship. That’s in Liverpool, so not far to travel.’

When? Where? Sylvia had seen no harm in meeting and chatting to Cliff. They’d settled on Monday afternoon at North View Parade. He would show her his brand-new dance studio and they could go from there to take tea in the north part of town – anywhere she fancied.

Now that the assignation was almost upon her, Sylvia began to experience cold feet. Had she been a fool in agreeing to meet Cliff? Had she been swayed more by his smooth good looks than by his knowledge of dance competitions?

Cliff based his style on matinee idols who currently graced the silver screen. The double-breasted jacket he’d worn on Saturday had been tailor-made (Sylvia recognized an expensive item of clothing when she

saw one) and his starched white shirt, dark-blue silk tie and black patent dancing shoes had been immaculate. He wore his light-brown hair slicked back and with a side parting that emphasized his high cheekbones, straight, narrow nose and jawline (not too square but just right).

Maybe she had fallen for his charms, but so what? She knew how to look after herself if Cliff tried anything untoward, and in any case the meeting was happening in broad daylight.

With one last check in her dressing-table mirror, Sylvia paused to clip on her cultured pearl earrings and to pat a stray lock into place. As she'd said to Eddie earlier, the earrings went beautifully with her outfit – a pale-green, tight-fitting dress with short sleeves, a straight skirt and a narrow cream leather belt; shoes and handbag to match the belt, naturally. A quick turn to the side, pull in those tummy muscles, head up, and Sylvia was ready to go.

'Give my regards to Betty and Myra,' Lorna called from the studio as Sylvia made her way out.

'Will do,' Sylvia replied cheerily. A tram bound for North Pier was due any minute – she would have to hurry.

Cliff's studio was smaller than Sylvia had expected and the entrance was somewhat poky. It lay at the end of North View Parade furthest from the beach, between a tobacconist's shop and a greengrocer's. The sign above the door read 'Learn to Dance with Cliff' and underneath, in smaller letters, 'Live in Your Dreams'. The proprietor himself was waiting for her at the door, casually dressed in shirt sleeves and Fair

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Isle knitted waistcoat, enjoying the last few puffs of a cigarette.

He greeted her with a broad smile and a mock cockney accent. 'Hello, princess – welcome to my humble abode.'

'Hello, Cliff. I'm sorry I'm late.' She'd missed the tram after all and had had to wait ten minutes for another. A strong breeze had played havoc with her hair.

'All fashionable girls are late, don't you know?' He swept Sylvia through the door, straight into the studio, which, to her surprise, was smarter than the exterior of the building had suggested. It was softly lit by rows of overhead lights with pearlescent glass shades and by matching wall lights, with a sprung floor that gave a little as she followed Cliff across the room. Photos of him in white tie and tails with various partners and against fancy backdrops lined one wall. More risqué images of him dressed as an MC during his Berlin cabaret phase, surrounded by long-legged girls in sequins, fishnet tights and ostrich feathers, were tucked away in an alcove behind the gramophone.

'What do you think?' He asked as if her opinion mattered.

'Very nice,' she commented.

'*Nice!*' he echoed. 'Do you know how much money I've spent on redecorations?'

'It's modern.' There was an art deco touch to the lighting and clean lines throughout. The walls were jade green. 'But where's your piano?'

Cliff waved away the question. 'Who needs a piano when you have the latest gramophone and dozens of

dance records on tap? Bunny hug to lindy hop – you name it.’

‘It saves the expense of hiring a pianist, I suppose. How much do you charge per lesson?’ Sylvia sifted through the pile of records that Cliff had pointed to.

‘That depends. I usually teach small groups of no more than six pupils and I also offer private lessons. Two shillings and sixpence is my top rate.’ He eyed her carefully, trying to read her expression. ‘Here’s a leaflet with my prices in it; put it in your bag.’

Sylvia gave a light laugh. ‘Why? I’m not planning to take lessons here, you know.’ She scanned the front page of the brochure – ‘We teach you quickly, well and cheaply’ – before handing it back. ‘Who’s “we”, by the way? Do you have an assistant?’

‘No, it’s just me at the moment, but “we” sounds better. Why – are you looking for a teaching job?’

She laughed again. ‘You’ve got a nerve!’

‘You can’t blame me for trying.’ Sylvia Ellis had always been the ice maiden, even at school, but she was slowly warming up. ‘What do you say we go and find that cup of tea and a scone?’

‘No scone for me, ta.’ She followed him out of the door. ‘I’m watching my figure.’ Drat; here came that breeze again, ruffling her hair.

‘You don’t need to,’ Cliff assured her, strolling along, hands in pockets and steering her towards a café that he knew would impress. *Hang the expense*, he thought; *this one is most definitely worth it.*

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## CHAPTER THREE

The Tower Ballroom took Joy's breath away. How could architects have dreamed up such a magical, fairy-tale palace – what, almost fifty years earlier? She wondered how much the whole thing had cost. An upper and lower balcony overlooked the dance floor, festooned with gilded plasterwork (so much gold leaf!) and the curved ceiling was painted with bright frescoes depicting chubby cherubs sitting on clouds and alluring maidens playing lutes and all manner of musical instruments. There was even a sliding roof that opened up on fine summer evenings to allow 'dancing under the stars'. At one end there was a stage with steps leading up to it and the whole floor was illuminated by two rows of magnificent, sparkling chandeliers.

Joy stood open-mouthed. Never in her life had she seen anything so grand.

'Here; take this.' Ruby Donovan, Joy's new, no-nonsense supervisor, handed her a broom and a dustpan and brush. 'Your first job is to smarten up the bar area – and mind you don't break anything.'

Coming down to earth with a bump, Joy set about the task. It was her first day as a member of the



cleaning team employed to keep the ballroom looking its best; a job she'd acquired thanks to Tommy Rossi, who was a pal of Ruby's and had passed on news of the vacancy.

'Give it a go,' he'd told Joy. 'It'd be handy for you. After you've finished there at three, you can come straight across to the circus and carry on as usual.'

'I could do with the money,' Joy had admitted. The hours she worked for Mrs Ward and Mr Dawson were being cut back; she wasn't sure why. Perhaps everyone was feeling the pinch because of the war. At any rate, the chance to take a second steady wage from the Tower proved tempting.

'I've sung your praises to Ruby,' Tommy had assured her. 'I warned her not to judge by appearances.'

'What do you mean by that?' Joy had run into him on Monday, at the start of her circus shift. It had been the first time she'd seen him out of his clown costume and she'd been taken aback by how normal and pleasant he looked, with the dark, wavy hair she associated with Italians and with regular features and a more muscular build than she'd expected.

'Come off it; you don't exactly look as if you're cut out for hard graft.' Eyes twinkling and grinning broadly, he'd laid it on thick.

Joy had kept up her defences. 'Says who?'

'Says me. And don't take it the wrong way – I'm only saying you're far easier on the eye than your average char lady.'

Batting away the compliment, Joy had written down Ruby's details. The following day she'd applied for the job and got it.

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‘Starting this coming Friday,’ Ruby had informed her. ‘Twelve o’clock to three o’clock, five days a week.’

‘I hope you’re right about Joy Hebden,’ she’d mentioned to Tommy when she next saw him. ‘That girl is in need of a few extra helpings of porridge, if you ask me.’

And now Joy was busy with dustpan and brush behind the bar that ran the length of the ballroom, only glancing up when she heard organ notes issuing from enormous sets of pipes to either side of the stage. And, wonder of wonders, the Wurlitzer rose smoothly through a trapdoor in the centre of the stage and there was a man at the keyboard playing a familiar tune. He filled the vast ballroom with sumptuous music.

‘Falling in love again.’ One of Joy’s fellow cleaners crooned the words in a strong German accent – ‘Fall-ink in loff again’. She clutched her sweeping brush to her chest and twirled out into the centre of the ballroom. Two of the other girls joined in, giggling.

‘You lot, stop messing about.’ Ruby’s half-hearted reprimand went unheeded and she herself hovered at the edge of the floor, as if tempted by the song from *The Blue Angel* – Marlene Dietrich at her husky, pre-war best. Ruby’s expression was dreamy, a smile curling the corners of her lips upwards as if the tune had transported her into a world of plunging necklines, ivory cigarette holders and satin skirts slit up to slim, shapely thighs.

The organist stopped abruptly then marked his sheet music with a pencil.

Joy emerged hesitantly from behind the bar. ‘Is that Mr Dixon?’ She asked her supervisor.