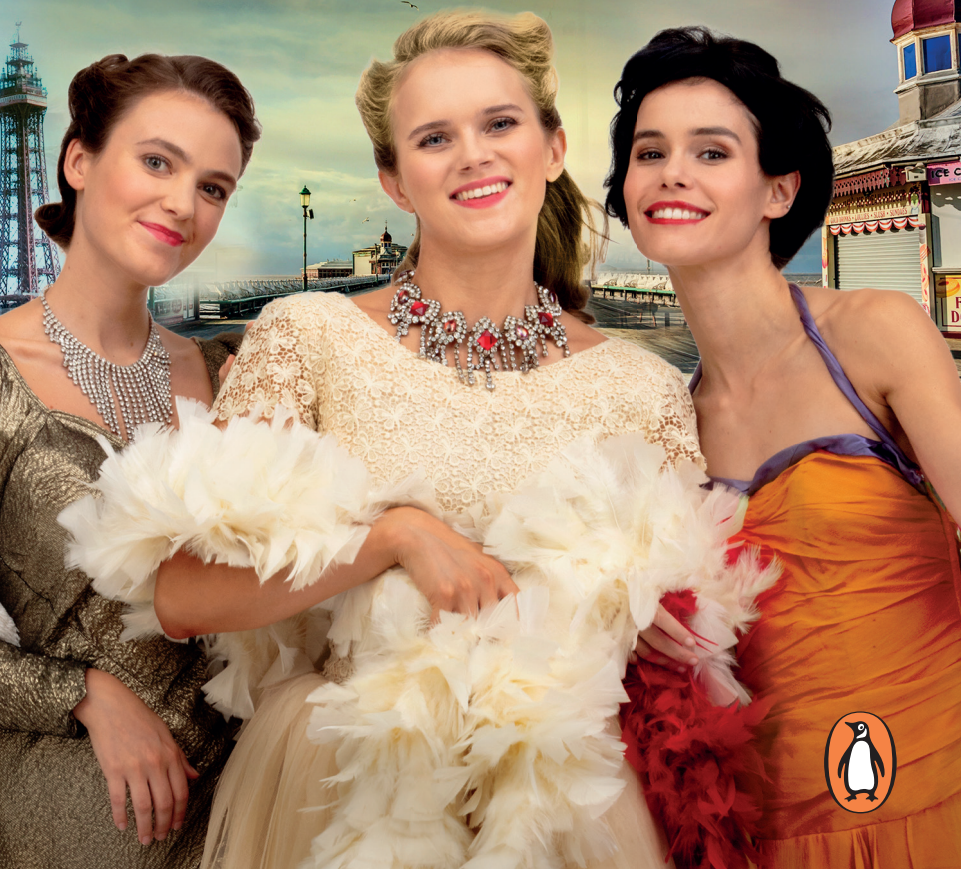


JENNY HOLMES

THE  
*Ballroom*  
GIRLS  
HIT THE BIG TIME



**Jenny Holmes** lives in Ilkley, the gateway to the beautiful Yorkshire Dales, and sets her sagas in her beloved home county and in neighbouring Lancashire. She enjoys playing tennis, being around horses and walking her dog by the river. She also writes children's books as Jenny Oldfield.

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GIRLS  
HIT THE BIG TIME

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Lyrics on p. 112 from 'The Jumpin' Jive' written by Cab  
Calloway, Frank Froeba and Jack Palmer.

Lyrics on p. 174 and 175 from 'I Do Like To Be Beside  
the Seaside' written by John Glover-Kind.

Lyrics on p. 296 from 'Wham' written by Glen Miller.

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For all ballroom dancers everywhere

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## CHAPTER ONE

**May 1943**

The band at Blackpool Tower Ballroom played on as two burly doormen ordered a badly behaved couple off the crowded dance floor. Overhead, chandeliers glittered and gilded plasterwork glowed.

‘Quite right,’ Pearl Greene murmured to her friend Joy Rossi as they observed the incident from the sidelines. ‘There was too much funny business and not enough fox-trotting for my liking.’

‘His hands were all over her,’ Joy agreed with evident distaste.

Sylvia Ellis joined Pearl and Joy at their table. ‘Did you recognize the culprits?’ she asked above the swell of saxophones and clarinets.

Pearl was all ears. ‘No; who was it?’

‘Only Fred Salter and an ARP ambulance driver from the White Swan first-aid post.’ Careful not to crease her royal blue satin skirt, Sylvia perched prettily on the chair next to Joy’s. ‘She ought to know better.’

Over by the exit Salter continued to kick up a fuss, while on the stage a singer in a purple dress came to the microphone to croon the words of ‘Paper Doll’: a lachrymose song about a boy who has lost his sweetheart.

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‘I don’t know this one.’ Preferring to ignore the fracas, Joy tapped out the rhythm with her fingertips and concentrated on the colourful swirl of dresses and the graceful moves of the dancers closest to her.

‘It’s a new Mills Brothers number.’ Pearl’s attention was still fixed on the entertaining antics at the exit. ‘The silly idiot will get himself banned if he’s not careful. Yep; the doorman isn’t standing any nonsense – he’s got Fred by the scruff of the neck. A hefty shove and down the stairs he goes.’

‘And good riddance.’ Sylvia was all for having fun on the dance floor but there was a limit. Besides, Salter, who worked on the assembly line at the Vickers-Armstrong aircraft factory, was notorious for regularly pawing his way through the waltz and quickstep. As for his conduct during energetic swing dances, the less said the better. ‘Ugh!’ She shook her head in disgust.

“‘I just quarrelled with Sue, that’s why I’m blue.’” The singer’s sweet voice was loaded with regret as she delivered the chorus line and the couples on the floor continued to sway and turn.

‘Let’s hope the next one is more cheerful.’ Once the excitement had passed, Pearl’s gaze wandered to the five members of the band, dressed to impress in white dinner jackets, black trousers, red cummerbunds and bow ties, and the svelte singer in the strapless, amethyst dress. Sure enough, the musicians segued into a lively jive number and before Pearl knew it, she was swept on to the floor by none other than Errol Jackson.

‘Howdy, Miss Pearl, how you doin’?’ The GI sergeant seized her right hand then swung her into a space close to the stage.

‘Errol, where did you spring from?’ Pearl was pleased

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to see her regular dance partner. This man knew how to jitterbug and jive like there was no tomorrow. Here he was, swinging her out and pulling her back in again, leading her into an underarm turn, smooth as you like.

‘I been here a while,’ he informed her in his attractive Southern drawl. ‘I was drinkin’ with the guys over by the bar.’

The room was chock-full of American soldiers in their smart uniforms, pockets full of chocolate treats and pairs of nylon stockings if a girl was lucky, and all bussed in from their Warton base. ‘I never spotted you,’ Pearl confessed mid-twirl.

‘Yeah, but I spotted you.’

‘Did you now?’ She threw in a few low kicks and a shoulder shimmy. ‘Phew, it’s warm tonight.’

‘Sure is,’ he agreed, with moves to mirror hers.

‘They should open the roof.’ Pearl’s voice was lost in the wah-wah-wah of trumpets and trombones.

‘Come again?’

‘Nothing. It doesn’t matter.’ Time to shake her hips and swivel her feet.

Errol cottoned on. ‘You mean, this roof opens – for real?’

He looked up at the frescoes high above their heads, depicting medieval maidens playing lutes and floating on clouds. ‘The whole thing?’

‘Yep.’ She grinned at his look of disbelief. ‘Later in the summer they’ll slide the roof back. It’s magic – you can look up as you dance and see the stars.’

‘Gee whiz.’ Here he was, jiving like crazy with the girl of his dreams. But she only happened to be married, god-dammit, with a soldier husband last heard of scrapping it out in North Africa. Pearl Greene – small, petite and

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cute as hell, with cropped dark hair and big green eyes – yeah, those eyes! Off limits, though; that’s what they’d agreed.

‘How’s business in Blackpool’s premier penny arcade?’ Errol enquired as the tempo quickened.

‘I’m rushed off my feet now that the weather’s warmer.’ Pearl told him how much she relished the sound of coins dropping into the Little Miceys and Lucky Stars, less so the ker-ching of the occasional payout. Still, summer was just around the corner and business at her North Pier amusement arcade was booming. She bounced to the syncopated rhythm of ‘Jingle Jangle Jingle’, glad that she’d opted for a sleeveless white blouse and her floral-patterned cotton skirt for coolness. ‘Aren’t you boiling in that uniform?’ she asked as Errol drew her in for a lightning-quick turn.

‘Sure am,’ he confessed with a grin and casual clicks of his fingers in time to the beat. Six foot tall, broad shouldered, slim-waisted; a fine figure of a man.

‘Good evening, Errol.’ Sylvia swung by with Terry Liddle, who provided stiff competition for Pearl’s Yank in the looks department – though Terry was fair, not dark. She and Terry had dazzled on the dance floor ever since their success in the Latin section of the North of England Allied Championship in January. There was no romance, however – their relationship was strictly professional. ‘You’re in your element, I see,’ she remarked to Errol.

‘Yes, ma’am. Jive, lindy hop, jitterbug – you name it, I’m your guy.’

Terry slid his arm around Sylvia’s waist then side-stepped her into a gap between the jiving couples.

‘Don’t have too much fun!’ Sylvia called to Pearl with a meaningful look.

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‘Really?’ Terry frowned as he snaked his hips, toe to toe with Sylvia.

‘Yes, really. If Pearl’s not careful, tongues will wag.’

‘Ah, wagging tongues.’ Terry knew all about those due to his ‘friendship’ with dance teacher Cliff Seymour. He and Cliff had weathered the gossip storm, but only just.

Sylvia’s blonde ponytail bobbed and swung as she jived, and her blue skirt flared to reveal long, slim legs. ‘Pearl’s one of my closest friends,’ she insisted. ‘I’m keeping a weather eye out for her, that’s all.’

On Terry and Sylvia went, swinging out, drawing together, spinning faster and faster until the music ended and the MC announced an intermission: a signal for Pearl and Sylvia to separate from their respective partners and rejoin Joy at their table.

‘Phew, it’s sweltering!’ Pearl sighed as she flopped on to her chair.

Sylvia ignored her. ‘Wedding pictures!’ she demanded of Joy. ‘You promised to show us.’

So Joy dipped into her handbag and proudly produced a yellow Kodak envelope containing photos from the event that had taken place a few weeks earlier. ‘Here’s me and Tommy outside the church. And here’s one of all of us – me, Tommy and you two as my maids of honour. And one of Tommy and me with his mother.’ Colouring up self-consciously, she spread the prints across the table.

‘My, Mrs Rossi, you look a million dollars in that dress and with your hair up. And look at that teeny-weeny waist of yours!’ Sylvia’s praise only deepened Joy’s blushes.

*Mrs Rossi* – the words still sounded strange to her, and the wedding itself was a blur of white silk, spring blossom and confetti. The one image that stayed fixed in Joy’s memory was of her beloved Tommy at the altar, turning

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with a bemused expression to watch her walk down the aisle; was it really happening or was it a dream?

‘Tommy looks like the cat that got the cream,’ Pearl added. ‘And who can blame him? Anyway, how does it feel to be a married woman at last?’

Joy’s cheeks burned at the clear innuendo behind these words.

‘Pearl!’ Sylvia remonstrated primly.

‘What? I’m only asking.’ Pearl had never been slow to express her views on the wait-until-you’re-married issue. During the three girls’ cosy heart-to-hearts in Sylvia’s flat, she’d been astonished that Joy and Tommy had managed to keep their hands off each other even though Joy had lived under the same roof as Tommy and his mother, Lucia. ‘Well?’ She pressed for an answer.

‘It feels marvellous,’ Joy answered in the softest of voices. ‘Better than I ever could have hoped.’

‘Satisfied?’ Sylvia gave Pearl a small jab with her elbow.

‘No, but I can see that’s all I’m going to get.’ Noticing that the band had returned to the stage, Pearl scanned the room for likely partners. She didn’t have far to look: Errol was already on his way over from the bar so she just had time to slip in one last quick question for Joy. ‘How’s Tommy’s ankle, by the way? Is he still laid up?’

‘Yes, worse luck.’ An accident in the circus ring, when a routine involving Tommy, two other clowns and a see-saw had ended in disaster, had kept her new husband off work for a week or more. *Husband!* There was another word that Joy would have to get used to. ‘It’s a bad sprain. The doctor says he has to rest it for another few days.’

‘Then you two will be back on the dance floor, showing the rest of us how it’s done.’ Sylvia commiserated while noting Pearl’s eagerness to accept Errol’s invitation to join

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him in the waltz. 'I only hope she knows what she's doing,' she muttered.

Joy frowned. 'She does – Pearl's made it plain that it's a dancing partnership and nothing more. Besides, Errol is a perfect gentleman.'

'If you say so.' Seeing that Terry was deep in conversation with Cliff by the bar, Sylvia made a snap decision. 'You and me?' She surprised Joy by springing to her feet and extending her hand.

The familiar introductory notes to 'We'll Meet Again' filled the ballroom, inviting hundreds of couples on to the highly polished, parquet floor. The tempo was slow and sedate, the mood decorous. 'Why not?' Joy decided. She'd spruced herself up and chosen her favourite lilac dress with broad shoulder pads and ruched, nipped-in bodice, ready to dance the night away in Tommy's absence. 'After all, you only live once.'

'I'm in a rush,' Joy told Tommy on what promised to be a drab, grey Monday in mid May. 'Honestly, I have a train to catch.'

'I know you do.' He sat in bed with his right ankle bandaged, unshaven and bleary eyed. 'Surely you have time for one little kiss?'

'Just one.' Joy checked her reflection in the dressing-table mirror – shoulder-length dark hair brushed until it shone, pale cheeks powdered, pearly-pink lipstick neatly applied – before she skipped across the room to give Tommy a peck on the cheek.

'Sorry, I must look a sight.' He made a vain attempt to smooth his tousled hair.

'You do,' she declared as she reached for her jacket. 'An absolute sight!'

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‘*Assolutamente,*’ he echoed in his mother’s native Italian. *Giù di morale* – that’s how he felt. Down in the dumps, out of sorts, fed up.

Handbag, hat and gloves; Joy gathered her belongings then paused at the door to take one last look at the disgruntled invalid. ‘Cheer up; it’s not the end of the world.’

‘If you say so,’ he grunted, followed by a gruff, ‘Go on; off you go.’

The notion that men made poor patients had turned out to be true in Tommy’s case – he’d been like a bear with a sore head since his accident in the circus ring, so unlike the happy-go-lucky joker who’d made the first moves when she’d worked as a cleaner at the Tower. Joy blew him a final kiss then flew down the stairs, calling a quick goodbye to Lucia as she ran through the café to exit by the front door, past the ‘Rossi’s Genuine Italian Ices’ sign and out on to the promenade.

‘*Ciao!*’ Tommy’s mother’s faint voice issued from the small kitchen at the back of the house.

Luckily a tram approached as Joy reached the stop. Yes; it was a chilly day with choppy waves breaking on the shore and hardly anyone on the beach as yet. The town’s three Victorian piers strode far out to sea, each with a cluster of cafés and amusement arcades at the far end; on the grey horizon a flotilla of Royal Navy frigates rested at anchor.

Joy flagged down the tram and exchanged hellos with the cheerful clippie. She took her ticket then sat down, hardly noticing the temporary water tank that had recently been installed next to the lifeboat station by Central Pier or the piles of sandbags stacked outside entrances to the hotels that lined the seafront. Blackpool North was Joy’s stop. As she alighted, she happened to spot Pearl in the

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distance. The two girls waved to each other then hurried on – long gone were the high spirits of Saturday night at the Tower, now replaced by the grey monotony of weekly routine. With a sigh, Joy entered the train station then threaded between porters, piles of mail bags and hordes of glum passengers to step from the grimy platform on to the Manchester express.

Clickety-click, clickety-click; the soothing rhythm of wheels on steel tracks helped her to get her thoughts in order for the day ahead. Firstly, there was a backlog of orders on women's lambswool jumpers to sort out then a difficult telephone call about overdue invoices to be made. Her cousin George had indicated that he would travel down from Glasgow either today or tomorrow to discuss future plans. Joy must be ready to pitch in with ideas on where next to take the knitwear company that they now jointly owned thanks to George's determination to right the wrongs committed by his dishonest father.

It was hard for her to get to grips with the dizzying changes that had taken place in such a short space of time. A mere twelve months ago she, Joy Hebden as she then was, had been a single girl living in a shabby boarding house on Silver Street, with no family and a lowly job as a cleaner to make ends meet. Then she'd fallen in love with ballroom dancing, which was how she'd met rising circus star Tommy and fallen in love with him as well. Now they were married and she was a bona fide business-woman running the distribution branch of an up-market knitwear company.

The squeal of brakes pulled Joy back into the present and she stepped from the carriage – a trim figure emerging from billowing clouds of steam in her crisp cream jacket, royal blue dress and straw hat, white handbag hitched into

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the crook of her arm – onwards and upwards along the platform at Manchester Piccadilly with a fiercely determined air.

*Dearest Pearl, Do you want to hear the good news first or the bad?*

Pearl sat behind the till in Great Scott's North Shore Amusement Arcade reading the latest missive from her husband Bernie for the fourth time that day. The letter had landed on the mat at the family home on Empire Street and had been scooped up by Pearl's little sister, nine-year-old Elsie, who had recognized the handwriting and announced its arrival in a high-pitched screech while holding it aloft and prancing around the breakfast table.

'Pearl has got a letter! Pearl has got a letter!' she'd crowed.

'Give it here!' Pearl had snatched the envelope then run upstairs to scan its contents in private.

*Dearest Pearl . . . the good news first or the bad? All right, I'll start with the bad . . . am writing this in the middle of a sandstorm that's lasted all through the night . . . a bloody awful wind is howling so loud it gets inside your head . . . sand everywhere – in your eyes and ears, up your nose, between your toes, up your jacksie; you name it . . .*

With a faint smile she turned over the letter to see again how Bernie had signed off – how much love, how many kisses – before clutching the letter to her chest, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath.

Her soldier husband was alive and kicking in North

Africa, thank God, mithering on about the blasted sand, the scorching desert heat and the sheer boredom of sitting on his backside, awaiting the next set of orders from the bigwigs. Pearl supposed that he meant Churchill and Roosevelt, who had got their heads together at the start of the year to work out how to drive Rommel out of Tripoli. For many months the German troops had hung on by their fingertips until just last week, when they'd finally surrendered. The Allied victory had been trumpeted on Pathé News and in every British newspaper; Hitler could rage and rant all he liked but his army of *Übermensch* had been given a severe drubbing.

Now Pearl could heave a sigh of relief that Bernie had survived the worst the Nazis and the Sahara could throw at him, despite being blown up by a booby trap and being reported missing presumed killed. Oh, the agony of thinking she'd lost him so soon after they'd married; the days of disbelief and denial that she'd suffered, holed up in her bedroom, not sleeping, not eating. A widow at the age of twenty-one; how was that possible?

Then the Christmas miracle had happened: Bernie had been reported missing after the landmine had exploded but he had not been killed after all. Alone in the sand dunes, hallucinating and severely dehydrated, he'd been close to death when an American reconnaissance party had rescued him and returned him to the land of the living and afterwards to his grieving widow. Pearl had been presented with the greatest gift of all: Christmas with her husband at home in Blackpool, back in the arms of family and friends.

Then, come January, the lousy war had claimed Bernie once more. Now there were only increasingly rare letters written on flimsy airmail paper, his spidery handwriting

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that strayed from the lines and rarely followed a train of thought to its conclusion.

‘How’s he doing?’ Pearl’s mother Maria had poked her head around the bedroom door after Pearl had taken in all of the letter’s contents.

‘Good news,’ Pearl had reported. ‘He’s getting out of the desert at last. His regiment is being moved on; he’s not allowed to say where.’

‘Most likely to the Med, to deal with Mussolini,’ Maria had predicted and Pearl had agreed.

‘You’re right – they’re going at it hammer and tongs in Sicily. Anyway, Bernie’s glad to be on the move. I’ll write back and warn him not even to think about eyeing up any of those Italian *signorinas*!’

And now, in the calm of the empty arcade, before Pearl opened the doors to the day’s paying customers, she revelled in every word of Bernie’s rambling, chatty letter. Sitting by the doorway, surrounded by shiny Playballs, Wizards and Fill ‘Em Ups, she read that he had holes in all his socks, worse luck, and that he was doing his best to give up smoking as she’d suggested but it was well-nigh impossible when you were bored out of your skull and the only way of killing time rather than Jerry was by playing endless games of dominoes and gin rummy.

He’d signed off with twelve kisses (more than his usual number) and all his love. His name was smudged where he’d folded the paper before the ink was dry.

Pearl counted the crosses again and was happy. *My Bernie, my darling, my love.*

Faces peered through the arcade window and she heard a crotchety cry of, ‘Open up!’ – a coach load of wrinkly pensioners with money to burn were champing at the bit. Slipping Bernie’s precious letter back into its envelope and

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placing it carefully in her skirt pocket, Pearl unlocked the door to welcome them in.

Sylvia was all too well aware that there was nothing glamorous about teaching the tango to a bunch of beginners with two left feet. Her afternoon session with a group of office workers and RAF recruits had proved it yet again.

‘What’s up?’ Cliff asked as her students gathered their belongings before heading for an evening on the beach, where they would roll up their trousers or hitch up their skirts to paddle, flirt and eat chips. He’d come into the studio at the end of the lesson to find a disgruntled Sylvia sporting a deep frown. ‘Your face will stick like that if you’re not careful and then you and Terry won’t win any more Viennese waltz competitions.’

‘Ha ha – very funny,’ she retorted. Waltz demanded grace and serene smiles whereas tango was all about the drama of clipped, staccato moves building to exciting crescendos. It involved stealth on the male dancer’s part and a series of sinuous, inviting hip swivels from the female. ‘Think of the way a cat moves,’ Sylvia had instructed as she’d lowered the needle on to a recording of Edmundo Ros’s *Los Hijos de Buda* then demonstrated a series of progressive side steps as she faced the floor-to-ceiling mirror that lined one wall of the North View Parade studio.

‘Feet together, weight on the right foot. Step forward with the left foot to finish forward and across the body.’

For the most part it had been like talking to a brick wall, except for a couple of earnest typists from the Inland Revenue office who had mastered the basics but were a million miles away from achieving the predatory stealth required.

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‘Anyway, how come you’re looking so cheerful?’ she asked Cliff with a huffy edge to her voice.

He informed her that he was fresh from a meeting with his bank manager, a Mr Cecil Perkins, who had perused the dance school’s latest figures and promised to give serious consideration to Cliff’s request for a loan of two hundred pounds.

‘Most satisfactory.’ Perkins had finished studying income versus expenditure columns over a six-month period. ‘And what would the two hundred pounds be spent on, Mr Seymour, should the bank choose to advance you the money?’

‘Mostly on advertising our classes, Mr Perkins. My partner, Miss Sylvia Ellis, and I wish to print more posters and leaflets to spread around town, together with improving our sign above the entrance to the studio.’

‘Improving in what way?’

‘In an ideal world we’d like to replace the current board with a striking neon-pink version: “Live Your Dream!” with “Learn to Dance with Cliff and Sylvia” in smaller script underneath.’

‘But?’ Perkins had peered inquisitively above the rim of his spectacles.

‘But that’s not possible during the present blackout,’ Cliff had conceded. ‘So instead Sylvia and I propose to design a new painted version, only twice the size of the present one and in brighter colours.’

The two men had shaken hands and Perkins had promised an answer within the week, so Cliff was eager to bring Sylvia up to date. ‘I talked nicely to the bank manager and the loan is practically in the bag,’ he informed her as he set her Edmundo Ros record playing again. ‘Aren’t you pleased?’

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‘Yes, of course I am.’ Backing from the bank meant a lot. ‘It seems our hard work is paying off.’ Spreading her arms wide, Sylvia took in the sleek, modern styling of the refurbished studio. It had a touch of the ocean liner about it, with jade-green walls and streamlined, pearlescent wall lights. The sprung floor was highly polished and the gramophone in the alcove behind her was new and top of the range. ‘If only,’ she sighed.

‘If only what?’

‘If only we could attract a higher calibre of students.’ There; dyed-in-the-wool dancing snob that she was, Sylvia had come out with what she really thought. ‘Honestly, Cliff – sometimes I’m ready to give up.’

‘Oh no you don’t.’ Cliff scooped her into a close hold then swept her across the floor. ‘Hip to hip, progressive link into closed promenade,’ he instructed. ‘On the count of four: one, two, three and . . . prow!’

Together they tangoed around the empty room; Sylvia in white capri pants and a short-sleeved pink blouse, Cliff in his best pinstriped suit and collar and tie for the bank manager’s benefit, his hair slicked back and immaculately parted. Suddenly the door was flung open and Terry breezed in wearing an open-necked shirt, fawn slacks and sandals.

‘Not interrupting, am I?’ He set down a bag of shopping then stood with hands on hips.

‘There you are, love of my life!’ With a delighted laugh Cliff abandoned Sylvia mid-turn and dragged Terry on to the floor, assuming the same close hold and resuming where he’d left off. ‘Quick, quick, slow, quick,’ he reminded him. ‘I’ve just been telling Sylvia the good news: our bank loan is likely to come through later this week, in time for the summer rush.’

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Despite the clumsy crêpe soles of his open-toed sandals, Terry prowled like a professional: feet parallel, slow and smooth. ‘Then the world is your oyster. Sylvia, why aren’t you over the moon?’ he called across the room.

‘I am – look.’ Repressing a shudder at the thought of yet more clodhoppers queuing up for an hour’s tuition, she forced a grin. ‘I’m ecstatic; can’t you see?’

‘The problem is, I’m bored with my little life,’ Sylvia confessed to Joy and Pearl as they strolled along the beach to enjoy the setting sun. The grey clouds of earlier in the day had lifted and the smooth sands of the Golden Mile stretched endlessly before them while gentle waves lapped the shore and gulls wheeled overhead. ‘It’s all right for you two – Joy, you have Tommy; and Pearl, you have letters from Bernie to keep you going. I have nothing and no one except teaching dance.’

‘And whose fault is that?’ As usual Pearl rushed in where angels feared to tread. ‘One snap of your fingers and you could’ve had Eddie Winter down on bended knee; but no, he wasn’t good enough apparently. And now he’s firmly paired up with Mavis Thorne – and not just as a dance partner either.’

*Not good enough.* Sylvia mulled over Pearl’s verdict. It was true that she’d been the one to end the on-off relationship with Eddie. He was kind and endlessly considerate, but he no longer made her heart go pitter-patter in the way that girls dreamed of.

‘Steady on, Pearl – no need to rub it in.’ Feeling the breeze lift the hem of her pleated skirt, Joy lowered it with both hands. ‘Eddie wasn’t right for her so there’s an end to it. And anyway, Sylvia, you still have a lot going for you.’

‘Such as?’

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‘Think about it – you’re not just a common-or-garden dance teacher – why, you and Terry have won prizes in competitions across the North of England, which makes you shining stars of the amateur dance world.’

‘Ah.’ Sylvia stopped short, lowered her gaze and dug her toes into the soft, dry sand. ‘Not for much longer, sadly.’

‘Why ever not?’ Pearl demanded. ‘Cliff and Terry haven’t had another bust-up, have they?’ The volatile pair rowed on a regular basis; Terry would threaten to pack his bags and leave town before agreeing to kiss and make up, then they would carry on living together in rooms above the studio as before.

Sylvia pulled her cardigan across her chest for warmth. ‘No – I just left them dancing the tango to Edmundo Ros; very sweet. But the fact is, Terry’s past has caught up with him.’

‘Uh-oh.’ Joy shot her a look of serious concern. Terry’s previous existence, before arriving in Blackpool, had involved going by a different name and had included an ex-wife who had divorced him when his true nature had come to light.

‘No, I mean that the ISTD are on to him for earning money as a professional dancer,’ Sylvia explained. The Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing had a rule that entrants into their competitions must be strictly amateur. ‘Once they learned that Terry was part of the chorus line for *Sleeping Beauty* at the Grand last Christmas they banned him for good.’

‘Who snitched?’ an outraged Pearl demanded.

‘I have no idea.’ Sylvia shook her head disconsolately. ‘Most likely one of our rivals, but we’ll never know for sure.’

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‘But the *Sleeping Beauty* stint was theatre dance,’ Joy pointed out. ‘It’s a world away from ballroom.’

‘It makes no difference – he was still earning money from dancing,’ Sylvia knew that there was no chance the ISTD would change their decision. ‘And all this leaves me high and dry – no Eddie to enter competitions with and now no Terry either.’

‘Boohoo; you poor thing.’ Pearl resolved to count her blessings and also to remind Bernie how much she loved him when she wrote her next letter. ‘But someone will soon step into Terry’s shoes, surely?’

‘Yes, men will queue up to take his place.’ Joy too was convinced that the setback was temporary. She pointed to the horizon, where a setting sun had turned the sea to liquid gold. ‘Don’t let it get you down,’ she advised. ‘Take it on the chin and remember: you’ll succeed in whatever plan you make – you always do.’

## CHAPTER TWO

Joy waited for Tommy beneath a colourful poster advertising twice-daily shows at the Tower Circus. Tommy's clown act, the Trio Rossi, didn't appear high on the bill – they came below the Devils of the Forest and Twenty Wonder Horses – but she was proud that his name appeared at all and relieved that his ankle had healed and he was back at work. Waiting for him in the elaborately tiled, curved corridor that overlooked the circus ring, she watched the high-wire act with bated breath: one slip and Polish acrobats Irena and Alina would plunge . . .

'Hello, Joy – did you catch our new act?' Ted Mackie emerged from the clowns' dressing room with streaks of greasepaint still on his face. Small and thin as a whippet, he was the fall guy of the comic trio, dressed in baggy trousers, false moustache and bowler hat à la Charlie Chaplin. Now in civvies, comprising checked sports shirt and dark blue flannels, he looked surprisingly dapper.

'I did,' she confirmed with a bright smile.

'It's good to have your hubby back in action.' Ted returned the smile then went on his jaunty way, hands in pockets and whistling under his breath.

Tommy had returned with a bang – cavorting around the ring, clowning away in his fabulously sequined

pantaloons, white make-up and dunce's hat, playing his trumpet and orchestrating a sequence of pratfalls performed by Ted and Leo Court, the third member of their group. Tommy the whited-face clown was a jack of all trades – musician, juggler and acrobat combined – popular with the crowds and rapidly working his way up the billing.

Joy breathed in the smell of sawdust, relieved when the high-wire act concluded without incident. My, but those two girls were brave! They swung fearlessly between trapezes in scarlet leotards and fishnet tights, twisting in mid-air, catching hold of the hands of their male counterparts to loud gasps from the audience. Such perfect timing, such athleticism! Joy was so absorbed in their performance that she wasn't aware of the dressing-room door opening once more.

'Boo!' Tommy whispered in her ear.

'Oh!' She started then quickly recovered to kiss him on both cheeks, demonstrating how glad she was to have her old cheerful Tommy back.

'Sorry to keep you waiting.' He gave her a hug and a longer kiss on the lips. Meanwhile, the audience broke into loud applause as the acrobats dropped one by one into the safety net at the end of their act. 'I don't know about you, but I'm peckish.'

'Likewise.' Slipping her hand into his, they headed for the exit.

'What do you say to a bag of chips and a stroll along the beach before we head home and get ready for a night on the town?'

'Perfect,' she replied.

They bought their chips from Maria Scott's stall close to Central Pier. Pearl's mother, glamorous and vivacious

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as ever with a red bandanna tied around her curly dark hair, topped up their portions with a comment about Tommy being in need of building up after his accident. 'You too, Joy,' she added with a knowing stare. 'Our Pearl tells me that you're running yourself ragged.'

'Pearl's right,' Tommy agreed as he tucked into his chips. 'Joy catches the early train to Manchester every weekday. Sometimes she doesn't get back until eight in the evening.'

'But I enjoy my job,' Joy countered. 'Most of the time.'

There'd been one day last week when this hadn't been the case – Wednesday, to be precise, when her cousin had caught the overnight sleeper from Glasgow and they'd spent the entire day with their manager, Alan Henderson, examining stock lists and working out how to cut down on expenses. Money was tight due to wartime shortages and increased transport costs, so George Hebden had suggested staff cuts in the warehouse as a necessary next step. Joy had resisted. 'I haven't considered getting rid of anyone,' she'd protested. 'I don't mind if people leave of their own accord, but sacking them is a different matter. They have families to support.'

Luckily Alan had agreed and they'd decided to hang fire to see if sales of gentlemen's lambswool jumpers and ladies' cardigans picked up in the autumn – a reprieve at least. George had caught the late train home, leaving Alan to give Joy the benefit of his thirty years' experience. 'It's the tough side of business,' he'd explained in his kindly manner. 'Unless we make a profit, the whole company goes under, not just two or three employees.'

'I'll come up with other ways to balance the books.' Joy had been unable to countenance sacking Dora in the canteen (a war widow with three young children) or Walter

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the caretaker (over sixty years old, with poor eyesight and no prospect of other work).

‘You’re too soft hearted,’ Tommy had pointed out when they were in bed that night. ‘That’s why I love you so much.’

Snuggled under the covers in the warm darkness of their room, Joy had let go of her worries. The blackout blind cut out light from the moon and stars and they lay entwined, surrendering to soft touches and kisses – still new and exciting for them both.

‘I love you too,’ Joy had whispered.

‘For better or worse?’ He’d pulled her closer.

‘For richer or poorer,’ she’d added, entranced by the feel of his skin against hers and the way their bodies folded into each other so tenderly and perfectly.

Even on their wedding night, there’d been none of the awkwardness that she’d feared. Making love with Tommy for the first time had been pure delight – nothing rushed, no shyness in their coming together, only surprise afterwards that it had felt so natural, that she’d given way to passion and been able to lose herself in the moment after months of nerve-tingling wondering and longing.

‘Happy?’ Tommy had developed the habit of murmuring this single word in the moments that followed, lying on their backs, his arm around her shoulders, her hand resting on his chest.

‘*Assoluto*,’ she would whisper back.

It was obvious to everyone who knew them that Joy and Tommy’s was a match made in heaven; even to battle-hardened Maria as she served them their extra-large helpings of chips. After more than twenty years wedded to wheeler-dealer Henry Scott, and four children later, she still recognized true love when she saw it. ‘Eat up,’ she encouraged, leaning over the counter and sending the happy

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couple on their way. 'And keep an eye on Pearl for me if you end up at the Tower later on. Make sure she behaves.'

'We will,' Joy promised as she and Tommy descended the wide concrete steps on to the beach, past hundreds of striped deckchairs stacked against the sea wall for the night, between the rusted, seaweed-clogged legs of the pier. They walked south towards the ice-cream parlour with its bright green and white awning, and found Lucia waiting at the door to welcome her *due piccioncini* – her two lovebirds – with hearty hugs and smiles.

'Do you come here often?' The evening was well underway when Joe Taylor crossed the ballroom to approach Sylvia with a wink and a cheeky smile.

'Very funny,' she remonstrated as she accepted the invitation to dance the quickstep with the market trader whom she'd known all her life. The snappy rhythm and energetic hops, runs and skips would allow her to show off her skills to their best advantage.

'Nice dress,' Joe commented mid-turn. Sylvia was a vision in pale blue, with flounces and frills to bodice and skirt.

'Thanks. You don't look too shabby yourself.' Joe had obviously made an effort in his crisp white shirt, open at the neck, and cuffs rolled back to show off his outdoor tan. He'd smoothed down his dark hair, which he wore longer than most men, and he danced with loose-limbed confidence, shoulders back and head held high.

'I heard the latest about Terry,' he commiserated, steering her into a space in the middle of the floor, where they paused then twirled to lively music from Reginald Dixon – Mr Blackpool himself – whose fingers skipped lightly across the Wurlitzer keys.

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‘That’s right, he’s been banned from competing, worse luck.’ They attempted a lock step followed by three chasés, smooth as you like.

‘That leaves you in the lurch?’ Since hearing the news earlier in the week, Joe had pictured stepping into the breach, learning the moves and performing with Sylvia at the Blackpool Mecca or the Winter Gardens, or here at the Tower Ballroom itself. After all, he was a decent dancer with plenty of potential to improve, given the right instruction. Mind you, Sylvia was very picky about who she competed with.

‘It does.’ Sensing what was going through Joe’s mind, she briefly considered the possibility then dismissed it. True, Joe was the right height and build, with a fair amount of natural talent, but he had no formal training so it would be necessary to start from scratch. She quickly shook her head. ‘No, Joe – it wouldn’t work.’

There was a thud of disappointment in his chest which he concealed with a chirpy retort. ‘Blimey, Sylvia – are you a mind reader all of a sudden? You don’t even know what I was going to say.’

‘Yes, I do. You were about to offer to step into Terry’s shoes.’

‘Maybe.’ A quick smile and a fib glossed over the awkwardness. ‘On second thoughts, count me out. I’m far too busy with the market stall, ta very much.’

The quickstep ended and a languid, lilting waltz began. Sylvia and Joe danced on. ‘No offence?’ she checked with him as he swung her on the first beat of each bar then swayed her towards the centre of the turn.

‘None taken,’ Joe assured her. He saw now that it was ridiculous ever to have imagined that Sylvia would say yes. This was as much as he could hope for: casually

partnering her on a Saturday night, having a joke and a laugh, worshipping her from afar.

‘I feel sorry for Joe.’ Dancing the quickstep with Tommy, Joy had glimpsed him and Sylvia in between the runs and whirling turns. ‘He keeps on hoping against hope, poor bloke.’

Tommy agreed. ‘Joe’s a nice chap – salt of the earth. Can’t you ask Sylvia to give him a chance?’

Joy shook her head. ‘It’s not that she keeps him dangling. She makes it perfectly clear that she’s happy to be friends but that’s as far as it goes.’

‘Friends – huh.’ They danced on, exchanging greetings with other couples. Sylvia’s old flame, Eddie, was dancing with Mavis Thorne, who looked spectacular as usual in a slinky emerald-green dress. Then there was Doris Morris (whatever had her parents been thinking when they gave her that moniker!) dancing with circus ringmaster Gerry Martin, and young Len Fraser from Ibbotson’s tobacconists with an old school friend, Valerie Ward. They were a sweet, shy pair, new to the courtship game and obviously enjoying every minute.

‘I thought young Len was head over heels in love with Sylvia,’ Tommy commented as the quickstep segued into a waltz. ‘He was last time I heard.’

‘Oh, everyone’s head over heels in love with Sylvia.’ The modern waltz was one of Joy’s favourite dances; second only to the more complicated Viennese version with which she and Tommy had won the North of England championship. ‘Now stop yakking and let’s just enjoy the music.’ Head tilted sideways, with Tommy’s arm resting across her shoulder blades, smoothly into a reverse turn – one, two, three, and on across the floor.

For once, Pearl had decided to sit out the quickstep and

had selected a quiet corner under the balcony from which to watch others dance. She soaked up the atmosphere, tapping her feet and admiring her pals, Joy and Sylvia, as they effortlessly put other dancers to shame.

*I must ask Joy where she bought the material for that dress.* Pearl made a mental note, expecting the answer to be the name of a big department store in Manchester. Joy's style had grown more sophisticated lately; the sweetheart necklines of last summer had been replaced by strappy numbers with more flesh on show and a tighter fit over the hips. Tonight she was wearing silk flowers in her hair – a paler shade of purple than her dress – and she'd definitely lost a bit of weight. She was now almost as slim as Sylvia, which was saying something. *Must warn them both not to overdo the dieting,* Pearl resolved.

'Don't be mad at me, Miss Pearl – I bought you a drink.' Appearing out of nowhere, Errol put two glasses on the table then sat uninvited beside her.

She smiled and thanked him. 'Why would I be mad?'

'I didn't ask what you'd like.'

'Nothing to make me squiffy, I take it?'

'No, ma'am – it's orange squash, pure and simple.' Neither mentioned the horrid time just before Christmas when Pearl had drunk too much and had staggered alone out of the ballroom into the fresh air, only to be set upon by three GIs from the Warton base. If Errol hadn't stepped in the night would have ended in disaster for Pearl. Since then she'd stuck to a strictly no-alcohol rule.

'How come you're not out there showin' 'em how it's done? Are you feelin' OK?'

'I'm grand, thanks – just catching my breath. How about you?'

'Same,' he replied. Stiffed by his uniform, he leaned

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back in his chair and loosened his khaki tie. Then he delved into the top pocket of his belted jacket to draw out a pack of cigarettes and offer one to her.

‘No thanks – I’ve given up.’ She took a sip of squash. ‘Bernie’s regiment is on the move at last,’ she informed him.

‘Yeah?’ Errol lit a cigarette then slid his lighter back into his pocket.

‘I don’t know where to. Mum thinks he’ll be shipped off to Italy.’

‘Italy, huh? Anythin’ is better than the desert, I guess. Is he due home leave any time soon?’

‘Not as far as I know – unless he gets one at the last minute.’ Pearl sipped again then relaxed into the conversation. ‘Have you ever been to North Africa?’

‘No, ma’am. The only desert I’ve visited is in Arizona. To my way of thinkin’, you seen one giant cactus you seen ‘em all.’

She smiled. ‘Anyway, I’m glad Bernie’s regiment is moving on.’

‘If you’re glad I’m glad. Say, I got a letter from my sister Maisie this week.’ Errol took a swig of beer. ‘She’s expectin’ a kid in the fall.’

‘Why, that’s grand news! Tell her congratulations from me.’

‘I sure will.’ The trick with Pearl was to play it cool, talk family stuff, keep the conversation flowing. If Errol gave even a hint of how he really felt about her, he was damned sure she would run a mile. Well, that’s the way it was – for now, at least. When the music underwent a change of tempo he seized the moment, stubbing out his cigarette and standing up. ‘You wanna dance this one with me?’

‘Why not?’ She’d had her breather and this would most likely be the last dance before the interval.

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So Errol led her on to the floor. She stood out from other girls in her short dress, designed for jive and swing – all the so-called freak dances that the oldies complained about. ‘Waltz ain’t exactly my thing,’ he mentioned as they took up position close to Tommy and Joy, while Sylvia and Joe, also near by, looked to be deep in conversation.

‘Just follow me,’ Pearl said brightly as she placed his hand in the small of her back. ‘It’s easy as pie – and one, two, three, here we go.’

Early the next day Sylvia and Cliff set off for the Winter Gardens to meet Sylvia’s mother, Lorna. It was a glorious, sunny morning with a fresh breeze, and soon hordes of day trippers would pour from coaches to sample the town’s delights. For now, though, fortune tellers lit incense sticks inside their darkened booths and sorted through their packs of cards in preparation for the day ahead, while souvenir sellers took their time to set up stalls along the seafront, chatting as they worked.

‘Well, Mr Perkins approved the loan as I thought he would.’ Cliff was in a good humour as they stopped to allow Clive Rowse to lead his string of donkeys across the promenade. Just lately he’d taken to stabling his beasts of burden in Mason’s Yard along Empire Street, much to the neighbours’ annoyance – ‘Terrible racket; ee-aw, ee-awing all night long!’ – but now, bedecked with jingling reins and colourful pompoms, they plodded unenthusiastically towards the beach. ‘That means we’re well and truly on the up,’ Cliff added.

Sylvia, too, was in a better mood than when she’d spoken with Pearl and Joy earlier in the week. It was hard not to be cheerful on a day such as today; just one look at the sea sparkling in the sunlight like a million diamonds

was bound to raise the spirits. ‘Thanks to you,’ she told Cliff. ‘Mind you, I’m not surprised – I’ve always said you could charm the birds out of the trees.’

‘Pot – kettle – black.’ Cliff raised an ironic eyebrow.

They went on discussing business as they walked; Sylvia knew of a printer in Lytham who would agree a decent price for their new posters and leaflets if she spoke nicely to him. She insisted that it would be up to Cliff to sweet talk her mother when they met for coffee in the glass-roofed promenade that connected the two grand entrances to the magnificent Winter Gardens. ‘I’ll leave it to you to convince her that our latest plan is worthwhile.’

‘I’ll do my best.’ Beset by an uncharacteristic attack of nerves as they reached Coronation Street, Cliff slowed his pace. ‘Your mother’s not keen on me,’ he pointed out. ‘She’s dyed-in-the-wool Imperial Society – waltz, foxtrot and quickstep. I’m a samba and swing merchant; not her cup of tea at all.’

Sylvia did her best to soothe his jitters. ‘Don’t be silly – Mother might turn up her nose at jive, and so on, but deep down she does respect you. And even she recognizes that the world of dance is changing; in the long run she has to change with it in order to survive.’

‘If you say so.’ Taking a deep breath, Cliff approached the impressive arched entrance that led to a vast entertainments complex containing a theatre, dance halls, exhibition spaces, function rooms and cafés. ‘Where exactly did you arrange for us to meet?’

‘Follow me.’ Sylvia led the way past an exhibition hall redesigned more than a decade earlier in the style of a Moorish village, presently used for training RAF recruits. Further on, they crossed the foyer of the spectacular new Opera House until they reached a wide arcade lined with

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tables set beneath palm trees. ‘There she is.’ Pointing at an elegant figure, dressed in palest lilac and sitting, ramrod straight, by one of the palm trees, Sylvia rushed ahead.

‘Ah, Sylvia dear.’ Lorna tilted her head to receive a kiss on the cheek.

Her mother’s smooth skin smelt of face powder. There wasn’t a fair hair out of place beneath her small, brimless hat. Her white kid gloves were neatly folded across her lap. ‘Mother,’ Sylvia began, a touch breathless after the rush to arrive on time. She felt underdressed in white blouse, blue slacks and white canvas sling-back shoes as she sat down opposite, leaving space for Cliff next to Lorna. ‘Have you ordered?’

‘No, dear.’ Lorna turned to Cliff. ‘I’d like tea, please. Nothing else.’

‘The same for me,’ Sylvia added.

An attentive waitress in a lace-trimmed apron and cap arrived on cue.

‘A pot of tea for three, please.’ Cliff’s voice was strained. He was beginning to think that this whole thing was a bad idea.

Lorna’s face gave nothing away. If she was intrigued by the invitation to meet she was determined not to show it. ‘Such a pity that the Royal Air Force has been permitted to take over parts of this building,’ she remarked. ‘The war is spoiling everything. Everywhere you look there are troops doing physical jerks – on the beach, on Central Pier and now here. Nowhere is safe.’

Sylvia gave a loud tut. ‘It’s a small price to pay if we want to beat Hitler, Mother.’

‘You’re right, of course.’ Lorna acknowledged the arrival of the tea tray with a gracious nod. Teaspoons rattled in their saucers as the waitress transferred them

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from tray to table. 'Eddie has explained to me that many thousands of RAF personnel are housed here in Blackpool at any one time, not to mention the WAAFs and the Americans out at Warton—'

'You've seen Eddie?' Sylvia interrupted a touch sharply.

'Of course, dear. He and Mavis come to me twice a week for private lessons; you know that perfectly well.'

'Ah, yes.' The mild reprimand put Sylvia in her place.

'Shall I pour?' Cliff ended an awkward silence. It was time to turn on the charm. 'I take it you're keeping busy, Mrs Ellis?'

'Yes, thank you, Cliff – too busy, as a matter of fact. Eddie relieves the burden by teaching waltz and quickstep in the evenings when he's not on duty at his ARP post. Otherwise I'd be run off my feet.'

*Eddie again!* Sylvia was sure her mother was doing it on purpose. Eddie remained in Lorna's good books, so she lost no opportunity to reproach Sylvia for what she regarded as her heartless rejection of him. 'Yes, yes – we're aware that he's a Civil Defence volunteer,' she muttered.

'And doing a grand job as a first-aider.' Once again Cliff saved the day. 'You must be chuffed by his and Mavis's recent successes. They've reached the very top of the tree in the amateur world, thanks to you.'

'Why, thank you, Cliff.' He was a flatterer and no mistake; extremely well turned out and with lovely manners to boot. 'Now, please enlighten me: what's behind this invitation to take tea?'

Feeling a light kick on his ankle from Sylvia beneath the table, Cliff cleared his throat. 'It's to do with the town council's decision to cancel this year's Easter Dance Festival.'

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