

Chapter 2

Rose sat facing the mirror, permitting herself the glimmer of a victory smile. The simplicity of the Pocahontas outfit was the perfect foil for a ball that would be ornamented by a time-travelling array of lavish costumes from the world's royal courts.

Her mother had been desperate for her to wear something to rival the hostess's own Mary, Queen of Scots costume, reputed to be worth upwards of forty thousand dollars in jewels alone. But Rose figured her plain chemise of soft silk, fringed with turquoise and onyx beads, would allow her to dodge the scrutiny of the families combing the ball for a bride, so that she could wander freely in search of rare and unusual detail inside the Waldorf.

The Birth of Venus fresco in the Marie Antoinette parlour was of particular interest. She hoped the women's reception room would be open tonight, and if not, she'd try to make for the Empire Room, supposedly modelled on the Grand Salon of King Ludwig's Palace in Munich. She was keen to see for herself the feathered columns of dark-green marble and the pilasters with their mahogany and ormolu panels. Any tiny insight into perfection was worth it, even if it meant just wandering the elegant new marble corridor that now joined the Waldorf to the almost-complete Astoria Hotel. It would be a rare opportunity to run her hands over its columns of smooth Sienna marble in private, before it became a place for young ladies to promenade their grace and good breeding before New York's upper classes, like yearlings at a spring sale.

Thea made a face of concentration, wrestling Rose's thick hair into two perfectly symmetrical braids. When they were secured, she topped them with a sapphire-encrusted headband, Rose's only concession to her mother.

Thea stepped back to admire the costume. 'Happy, Rosie?' 'Perfect, thank you, Thea. Not too eye-catching?'

Thea bit her lip and gave a little amused snort, making for the hallway. 'Rosie, it wouldn't matter if you were dressed in a paper bag, you would still turn heads.'

Rose caught a glimpse of her father pacing down the hall and wondered whether he was more at ease now with his decision to attend the ball, but she would probably never know; he hid his concerns somewhere between his pipe-puffing pragmatism and his inscrutable fireside contemplations generally accompanied by a hearty dose of Henry James.

Just then, Edith wandered in, grinning with suspiciously good humour.

'Come with me, I have a surprise.'

That small genial comment set off a cacophony of alarm bells. Edith's generosity never came without a price.

'Quick.' Edith wriggled the tips of her red lacquered finger-nails and shuffled the hallway in her geisha costume. 'Before your father gets back. Shh.' She held a finger to her lips, motion-ing for Rose to follow her upstairs to Arthur's study.

His safe was open. And Edith stood in the centre of the room, flashing a brilliant smile that was eclipsed only by the glittering choker held between her fingers.

'Here,' her mother said, 'face the mirror.'

'Oh, Mother, really? I couldn't,' Rose said, recognising the piece straight away as her father's heirloom.

'Don't be ridiculous. It's all been arranged.' Edith fastened the delicate dog collar of gold, dotted with diamonds and sapphires, around Rose's neck. One large diamond dripped from the choker, landing in the hollow at the base of her throat.

Edith sighed, resting her chin in the palm of her hand. 'You will be the talk of the evening and no doubt catch the eye of only the best and brightest.'

Rose stood speechless, staring back at the woman in the mirror wearing her father's great-grandmother's priceless jewels. The choker was worth every bit of fifty thousand dollars, at a guess. 'Father allowed this?' Rose removed the treasure. Edith nodded but avoided her eyes. 'Really? Do you promise?'

'Don't be so insolent, Amberley-Rose.' Her mother's voice tremored, and she narrowed her eyes accusingly. 'Typical of you to look a gift horse in the mouth. You know, I will put a stop to all your gallivanting around as your father's apprentice just like that.' She clicked her fingers like a magician.

Rose sank into her father's leather chair, noticing the throbbing pulse of blue at Edith's temple, the quiver in the top lip.

'Now then.' Edith swiped her hands together briskly as if dispensing with unpleasantries. 'I'm glad we understand each other. You must remember, Rose, only the brightest lures catch the biggest fish. And you will be the brightest. I am determined you will shine brighter than even Alva Belmont. So take the piece off. We'll put it on in the dressing room at the Waldorf. But shh . . . not a word. I can hear your father now.'

Edith dropped the necklace into its small purple velvet tote. 'Go now, off you trot. And don't worry, your father will be delighted.' Her smile faded and she dismissed Rose with a flick of the fingers.

At 10.30 pm the family's carriage took its place in the long line

of coupés, landaus and hansom cabs out the front of the Waldorf on Fifth Avenue. It was only then, on seeing all the other vehicles inching up to the hotel, that Rose felt the desperate need to rush inside and make the most of her time there.

But it was slow going. First, they had to be shepherded past the onlookers by Roosevelt's police escorts, then guided through the velvet portières at the West Thirty-Third Street entrance. Her mother peeled her away to a bustling dressing room where others were primping, adding troves of priceless adornments to their costumes, far beyond the eyes of the mere mortals outside on the street. Edith snapped the diamond collar-ette into place, and patted Rose's décolletage with a single proprietorial finger.

'There, daughter. You look the part. Now, for heaven's sake, act it!'

The presentations to the host and hostess were held atop a crimson dais, under a canopy of dark velvet. Guests were pre-sented in twos like rare and precious specimens being herded into Noah's ark. Rose registered the faint look of surprise in her father's eyes when she emerged from the dressing room with the collarette in place, but he offered nothing more than a fond smile to her and

Edith as he escorted them up to the dais. Finally, after thirty long minutes Rose stepped into the ballroom on her father's arm.

'Oh my.' She twirled on the spot, stopping for a moment to catch her breath beneath the extravagant gilded splendour that had transformed this ballroom into a replica of the Palace of Versailles. She gazed around at the three-storey hall of mirrors, exotic hothouse flowers, potted palms, gilded candelabra and the glittering sea of faux royalty. Then Rose followed a sparkling trail of crystal chandeliers right to the red-rose-and-vine-wrapped orchestra balcony where a Hungarian band played Chopin's 'Polonaise in G-Minor'.

'Excusez-moi,' she said to her parents and was just about to commence explorations when Edith grabbed her arm and foisted her towards a group of women, one of whom Rose recognised clearly beneath a Tudor disguise.

'Oh, Mother, not Maude Randall!'

'Be quiet. You have ground to make up, Amberley-Rose.' Rose accepted a flute of champagne from a passing waiter and drank it quickly.

A strapping young King Henry VIII, dressed in a figure-hugging red velvet ensemble, stepped into their path. Edith gave an odd curtsy, and coyly dusted her cheeks with her oriental fan. He bowed in return and the funny little papier-mâché head he was toting on a silver platter rolled off and bounced across the floor.

'Forgive me, Pocahontas, your beauty must have made me lose my head.' He laughed. 'Will you bear with me while I fetch it back?' Edith followed after King Henry, delighted to be of service in the recapture of the runaway head.

Rose glanced over her shoulder, through the throng of other kings, queens, courtiers and court jesters, in search of the South Palms Room, where the maître d'hôtel, Oscar of the Waldorf, might be serving his popular salad.

She felt a hand grab her forearm. 'Shall we?' Her father's eyes flickered towards the doors.

'We shall.' They gave themselves a wide berth around Maude Randall, the Astors and the Morgans, as Edith and King Henry returned in good spirits after their successful hunt and nestled in, shoulder to shoulder, with the tremendously wealthy coterie.

'Thank you, Father.'

'Don't mention it. I hear that Henry the Eighth has a heinous record with women, and my daughter won't be next on the chopping block.' They shared a complicit smile and weaved their way to the café, just as the orchestra struck up the tune of the first quadrille. They ignored the protocol of watching the first procession, instead brushing through the gilded café doors and into a jungle of hot-house palms, to find a seat beneath one of the colossal low-hanging chandeliers, burdened by a herd of bronzed electric-candle-wielding minotaurs.

'Look!' Rose pointed to the domed roof. 'See how it revolves?' She pulled a little brown notebook from her chemise. 'Do you mind, Papa? I'd like to make notes.' She bent and began furiously sketching. After a few minutes her father leant over and studied her illustration. 'Perhaps a little more shading, to give dimension.'

'Arthur!' It was Edith. Rose slammed her book shut and hid it in the folds of her costume while Edith smacked her fan on Arthur's shoulder, half in jest, half in perturbation. 'I should have known how

quickly you two would abscond.’ She fluttered her lashes, but her mouth remained tight, bringing attention to the fine lines around her lips and the tiny rivulets of bright red lip paint that had bled into them.

Arthur stood and shepherded Edith sideways, but not out of Rose’s earshot. ‘Dear, don’t make a scene.’

‘Don’t you dare tell me what to do, not tonight of all nights. Please,’ Edith began, turning to her daughter. ‘Step up, Amberley-Rose. Or you’ll be on the first ship out of Chelsea Pier . . .’

‘She’ll be doing no such thing.’ Rose’s father took off his powdered Louis XVI wig and slapped it on the café bench so hard it exhaled a puff of talc. ‘Let’s discuss this elsewhere.’

‘But, dear,’ she heard her mother object, as Arthur seam-lessly manoeuvred their discussion into a corner behind a giant weeping *Monstera deliciosa*.

Rose looked around, wondering what everyone else had made of the scene, but, incredibly, no one had blinked an eye. They were already full to the brim with French champagne.

She backed away quickly, hoping to slip off to find the Marie Antoinette Room before her parents came back, but as she turned, she slammed into a very tall man whose champagne flute emptied its contents all the way down her chemise. She gasped, annoyed at the disruption, but the way the interloper apologised, with a dramatic sweep of his green velvet cape, made her smile.

He raised a white serviette in a kind of mock surrender. ‘Forgive me, Pocahontas.’ His eyes glittered mischievously behind a black mask. ‘Robin Hood at your service. A napkin to help dry you off?’

‘Thank you, Robin.’ She could feel herself smiling again as she dabbed at her dress, unable to tear her eyes from his. They were the colour of the Sorgue River in summer – a curious combination of aqua and lime green. Rose thought it was a colour she might like to luxuriate in on a hot day, when vacationing in the South of France.

‘I find myself thoroughly enchanted,’ he said, as if he’d read her thoughts.

Her heart skipped, a blush rushed to her cheeks and she fumbled around for her fan.

‘Dance?’ he offered, tilting his head and giving the smile of a man unaccustomed to being denied.

‘Oh no, thank you, I’m afraid I have two left feet.’ His dimples faded, and an eyebrow lifted in query. ‘I mean, I don’t dance. With anyone. Not just with you. I just don’t dance. That is, my refusal isn’t personal.’ Oh no, she cringed, I’m blathering. ‘Anyway, sorry, I’m on my way to the Marie Antoinette Room.’

‘Ah, well, I’m reassured that I’ve not been singled out for rejection. But may I accompany you? Or would you like to talk instead, if I can find a quiet place in this madhouse.’ He pointed to a nook beneath the orchestra balcony swathed in asparagus vines and American Beauty roses. ‘Such as one of those little grottoes?’

She hadn’t noticed the adorable little dells before now, and an idea for a grotto for her conservatory burst to life in her mind. ‘That would be delightful,’ she smiled, casting one last searching look for Edith as she took his proffered arm.

In the nook he spread his cape over a seat for her. ‘Now, tell me, Pocahontas, why doesn’t a beautiful woman like you care to dance?’

Rose looked into his eyes. They held hers earnestly. 'I'm not sure how to answer that.'

He shrugged. 'The truth will suffice.'

'It's rather a long and dull story, I'm afraid.'

'Be assured, I won't be bored by you.'

Rose felt herself shiver with a bizarre mixture of exhilaration and fear. She took another hearty gulp of champagne and for once truly appreciated the woozy effect of the bubbles. It really did help loosen the tongue.

'Well, when I was little, I contracted Pott's disease.' Robin Hood's eyes narrowed in query as he tilted his head. 'It's tuber-culosis of the spine, which generally affects children more than adults – gets into the soft growing bones and bends them.' She watched his smile fade, as she knew it would. Next his eyes would cloud over and then he'd make his excuses and she'd be left alone. Only this time, she realised, she didn't want to be left alone.

'Please go on, I'm listening.' She felt reassured, if not a little surprised that he'd encouraged her.

'The disease curved my backbone into a kind of an "S" shape and I ended up crooked. So I spent much of my childhood in a plaster jacket, strapped flat into a bed in recumbence and thus'—she used her index finger to mark a point of exclamation—'unable to do the things expected of proper young ladies – dance, play piano, sit up straight, or drink tea. Instead I was home schooled and cultivated a preference for books and the sciences, much to my mother's manifest displeasure. She would prefer me to be cultivating a preference for wealthy aristocrats.'

His brow creased, though he smiled, and a hint of a dimple appeared and, incredibly, he was still listening. 'So, what happened then?' He rubbed a hand across his chiselled chin. 'You're not exactly Quasimodo.'

'Don't say I didn't warn you.'

'Consider me warned.'

'Well, I had experimental surgery to remove the affected vertebrae and then a caustic solution was poured along my back-bone to create a scar, in the hope my posture would straighten out. It did. And then with the help of Miss Porter's School, all my other creases were ironed out too. Though my mother would beg to differ.' She gave a knowing laugh. 'And so here I sit.

With a straight back and two left feet.' She gave her moccasins a wiggle and he threw his head back with unabashed amusement.

'And now I see a woman who's as straight and elegant as a Fifth Avenue lamp post.'

'Thank you, but I hope I am just a trifle more entertaining than a lamp-post.' She looked into his eyes, expecting to see the laughter still there, but his gaze had turned limpid. He smiled with compassion, and she melted a little inside.

'I'm Rose.' She held out her hand in introduction. 'And you are?'

'The Prince of Thieves, haven't you heard?' He shook her hand then reached a finger, impertinently to the huge diamond sparkling at her neckline. She felt her décolletage flush anew. 'This is a dazzling piece. It suits you.' She patted the diamond to make sure it was still there, but noticed his face had lost its flirty creases. He regarded her feet. 'You know,' he said, looking up at her, 'your feet don't

look all that bad to me. I'd wager I could find you a right foot if you gave me a chance. Are you game?'

'What do you mean?'

'Come, I hear a waltz. I will guide you.' He stood and held out his hand.

'I couldn't.'

'You could, just give me three minutes.'

'All right.' She smiled uncertainly. 'You have one hundred and eighty seconds to work a miracle.'

On the dance floor he positioned her hand on his shoulder and pulled her in close. 'Lean into me. The closer we are, the easier you'll be able to follow my lead.' He placed one hand in hers and another in the centre of her back. The butterflies in her stomach took flight as he whispered the beat of the music into her ear – 'One, two, three, one, two, three' – and the touch of his breath tickled the hairs on her shoulder, and she felt goosebumps flock down her side as she inhaled his musky scent and forgot to count the seconds. Somehow, she fell into step with his rhythm and their bodies moved seamlessly together. 'Tell me, how is it a woman like you hasn't been snapped up?'

'I've no desire to be snapped.'

'Is that right?' He arched an appreciative smile and she felt his hand trailing deliciously up her back and across her shoulders; then his index finger tilted her chin up, their eyes met, and smiles mingled. But out of the corner of her eye, Rose spied her mother's red geisha costume steaming towards them. She pushed him away and the lines on his forehead telegraphed confusion.

'Sorry, sorry, my mother is coming. Please, would you wait here?'

'Of course.' He bowed. 'I promise. I will find you.' He held her gaze like he'd sworn a solemn oath, then melted back into the crowd.

'Amberley-Rose! You were dancing with a gentleman. Who is he?' Her mother seemed genuinely pleased, but Rose realised then that she'd not really bothered to enquire about her masked man.

'Actually, Mother, I have absolutely no idea who he is.'

'I see,' said Edith, mouth turning south. 'Not to despair. I have two gentlemen – very patient, very wealthy gentlemen – ready to make your acquaintance.'

'Where's Father?'

'Gone,' she sang with a high note of dismissal and waved her fan as if shooing away her grievances. 'Come. We must make up for lost time.'

Before she took her mother's arm, Rose turned to search out Robin Hood again, but despite scanning every face in the crowd for his black mask, he was nowhere to be seen. He'd simply vanished. And so, too, had her desire to stay at the ball.

'I'm going to collect my cloak,' she said abruptly, watching her mother's face turn ashen.

'No, you will not.'

'I'm leaving,' Rose said, and stalked off to the cloakroom with a hollow feeling in her stomach and feeling, inexplicably, like she'd just lost a friend.

The carriage rumbled home over cobblestones as icy as the silence sitting between Rose and her mother.

Giles, the family's butler, opened the front door just as the grandfather clock urged itself through a lethargic three chimes. Her mother didn't bother saying goodnight. She clomped upstairs in a huff and Rose was surprised to see her father wait-ing up in the parlour, wrapped in his dressing gown, dog-eared Dickens novel in hand and slippers being toasted by the glow of the late-night embers.

'I trust you enjoyed your evening Pocahontas,' he smiled, peering over the gold rims of his half-moon spectacles as she crept in.

'Papa, you didn't have to wait up.'

'You'll have to forgive an old man for worrying about his only daughter. I'm not used to having you admired by other gentlemen.' His eyes creased and sprouted the fan of smile lines she loved so much.

'I know the real reason you stayed up, Papa, you're just too polite to ask for it,' Rose wagged her finger. 'Tell me the truth, did you know?' His mouth quirked and his silence confirmed her suspicions.

'I'm glad your mother convinced you, Spook. Your great-grandmother would have been as proud as me, my darling.'

'And I'm glad you're happy too.' Rose kissed his cheek and moved her hands beneath the heavy cloak to unlatch the jewels, realising with a searching, sobering horror that her neck was completely bare. In an instant, her woozy champagne haze evaporated, and an urgent, festering panic consumed her. Her tremulous hands emerged empty, her knees buckled, and his smile dissolved. 'It was here!' she said with rising distress and patted herself all over. A furnace lit inside her and sent a marching army of perspiration out through every pore of her body.

She flew to her room, gasping, fingers trembling, as she and Thea ripped off every item of clothing. After a frenetic fifteen minutes of searching – her clothing, the front stoop, the steps, the roadway and their carriage – she met her father at the bot-tom of the stairs.

'I can't find it,' she muttered, determined to look her father in the eye but somehow only managing to stare at the tiny scar on his top lip.

A look of extreme disappointment tightened his jaw and sent her stomach tumbling. His eyes narrowed and he wiped a drip of sweat from his temple.

'I see.'

She would have preferred him to curse or rant; this silent, terse rebuke was the worst.

He ran to the stairs. 'Giles. Carriage,' he bellowed, then he flew upstairs, leaving her slumped in the hallway. She heard her mother's bedroom door open, then shut, and he returned minutes later fully dressed and shrugging on his winter coat. He grabbed her hand.

'Come on, we're going to find it.'

'Wait.' Rose tugged at him. 'Is Mother coming?'

'She's exhausted,' he said, looking disappointed.

Rose ran with him, but she had a dreadful, sinking feeling that her champagne-infused flirtation with the green-eyed Robin Hood might have cost them all dearly.