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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Ballroom

Written by Anna Hope

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# THE BALLROOM

## Anna Hope



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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

To John Mullarkey, my great-great-grandfather,
1863–1918.

And for Dave, who proves, every day, that magic is real.

'The hall is 104 feet long and 50 feet wide, and is fine alike in dimensions and general arrangement. There are dado and frieze in Burmantofts work, string courses, and above these arched windows, which form a further decorative feature. The windows are filled with cathedral glass, and long sprays of bramble with birds flitting about are painted upon it with charming effect. The ceiling is panelled and coved in light brown and gold, and picked out with various tints, all harmonising with the rich hues of dado and frieze, as well as with a magnificent arcaded gallery in walnut. At the opposite end is a large stage, fitted with all requisites in the shape of wings and flies, and accommodation for the band behind the foot-lights.'

*Ilkley Gazette*, 1882

'The garden of humanity is very full of weeds . . . nurture will never transform them into flowers.'

Karl Pearson

# Prologue

## Ireland 1934

The day was fair and warm. She walked slowly, careful on the rutted earth. On either side of the lane were meadows, and the meadows were filled with cattle, lazy in the sun. Summer flowers grew wild from the cracks in the tumbled stone walls. The land was green. Somewhere at the edge of things she could smell the sea.

Rounding a corner she saw the house: low and long, with three windows at the front. Whitewashed. A house that someone had taken care over. Around it lay a plot of land, where the tall stalks of vegetables grew in rows, ready to be gathered in. Close by stood a barn, where a man was working at the top of a ladder, the sound of his hammer bright on the air.

She stopped. Caught her breath. The man had his back to her, absorbed in his work. He had not seen her yet.

She had not expected him to be here. Somehow she had thought there might be time to see the house, to sense his presence, to wonder if it really was the place.

As she watched him, the ease of his movement, the rise and fall of his arm as he worked, she felt herself grow fearful.

Would he know her, after all these years? Would he thank her, for disturbing his peace?

She looked down at herself. She had taken such care as she dressed this morning, but she was all wrong suddenly: her shoes too tight, the colour of her dress too loud. Her hat too smart for the warmth of the day. It was

not too late to turn back. He would never know she had come.

She closed her eyes, the filtered light of the sun flickering against her lids.

She had waited for this moment for too long.

The man's hammer had stopped. She opened her eyes and the day burst in upon her.

The man had seen her. He was standing on the earth now, facing out, his gaze steady. She could not read his face. Her heart stalled.

She lifted her chin. Took a breath. He would not see her falter.

She walked towards the gate, and when she reached it, she opened her mouth and spoke his name.

# Book One

1911

*Winter – Spring*

# *Ella*

'Are you going to behave?' The man's voice echoed. *'Are you going to behave?'*

She made a noise. Could have been yes. Could have been no, but the blanket was pulled off her head and she gasped for air.

An arched hall stretched before her, lit with lamps. The thin hiss of gas. Plants everywhere, and the smell of carbolic soap. On the floor were tiles, reaching out in all directions, polished till they shone, some in the shapes of flowers, but the flowers were black. She knew then that this was no police station, and started shouting in fear, until a young woman in uniform appeared from the darkness and slapped her on the cheek. 'There'll be none of that in here.'

Irish. Ella whipped her head back, tears in her eyes though she wasn't crying. She knew those Irish girls. There were plenty at the mill. They were mean as hell.

Another woman came, and they put their hands beneath her armpits and began pulling her towards two doors. Ella dragged her feet, but they slapped her till she walked for herself. Both of them had sets of keys at the waist. There must have been twenty, thirty keys there, clanging away. They pushed her through the doors, locked them behind her, and then they were standing at the top of a corridor so long the end was impossible to see.

'Where am I?'

No reply. Only the wheeze of the gas and the corridor, stretching. They turned to the left with her, through

another set of doors, marching her between them, uniforms crackling as they walked. Everywhere the same hard smell of soap, and something else, something wrong underneath.

Then, a last door, and a large room, with a stink like a pigpen, where they dragged her to a narrow, metal-framed bed and shoved her down. 'We'll deal with you later.'

Other beds showed themselves in the greyish light, hundreds of them lying end to end. On each a person, but man or woman she couldn't tell. Heavy furniture lined the walls, which were painted dark. She could see the large double doors she had come in from. Locked.

Was this prison then? Already?

She crouched at the top of the bed, breathing hard. Her cheek was throbbing. She lifted her fingers to it; it had split where the men had punched her earlier, and was pulpy and thick. She pulled the rough blanket up over her knees. Someone nearby was singing, the sort of song you'd sing to hush a baby to sleep. Someone else crying. Someone muttering to themselves.

A humming started up. It seemed to be coming from the next bed, but all Ella could see of the woman in there were her feet, soles like peeling yellow paper, until she sat up straight like a jack-in-the-box. She was old, but wore her hair in bunches like a little girl. Thin, tallacky flesh hung slack on her arms.

'Will you come with me?' the woman said.

Ella inched a little towards her. Perhaps she knew a way out. 'Where to?'

'Germany.' The woman's eyes were wet and gleaming. 'We'll dance there, we'll sing.' And she started up a wordless tune in a cracked childhood voice. Then, 'At night,' the woman said, in a loud whisper, 'when I'm sleeping, me soul

comes out – creep creep creep like a little white creature.' She pointed at Ella and smiled. 'But you must let it be. It comes back in the morning, right enough.'

Ella brought her fists over her eyes, curling away from the woman into a small, tight ball. Someone was banging on the walls:

'*Homehomehomeiwantogohomehomehomeiwantogohome.*'

She would have joined in. Except she didn't know where that was.

She stayed awake through the night, but couldn't have slept if she'd wanted to. Her cheek flamed, and as soon as one of the women stopped bleating another one started up, bawling, singing, chelping to themselves:

'*Andhewasthe*'

'*Wouldyoutaketheelectricity*'

'*Reek!reek! didmeagreatfrightand*'

'*But that's it, where the spiritscomeintome*'

As the sky started to lighten, the chorus got louder, and Old Germany in the bed beside her was the loudest of the lot, a terrible songbird greeting the dawn. A bell clanged at the top of the room. But there was movement at least, something happening, Ella could see a woman at the far end, dressed in uniform like those who had brought her here last night, and she slipped out of her bed, walking fast down the middle of the room. 'I've to speak to someone.'

'What's that?' The woman was plump, her face thick with sleep.

'Someone in charge.'

'I'm in charge.' The woman smoothed her uniform out over her belly. She lifted her watch, began to wind it up.

'Where am I?'

'You don't know?' The woman smiled at the round face of her watch as though the two of them were sharing a nice little joke. Another bell rang, louder, somewhere outside the room. The women began to swarm and press themselves into lines. Ella put her thumbs in her palms. For a moment she was back at work – seven in the morning and everyone rushing up the hill so as not to be late, not to have their pay docked – the metal-tasting panic in the mouth. Jim Christy, the pennyhoil man, standing at the gate, waiting to shut it in your face on the stroke of seven.

'You should wait till you've eaten something.'

She turned to see a tall pale girl at her elbow.

'Never fight on an empty stomach.' The girl had a quick, easy smile. 'Come on.' She touched her on the arm. 'I can show you the way.'

Ella shook her off. She didn't need friends. Especially not in here.

She followed the crowd into a large, echoing room, where the women were taking seats on benches set before long wooden tables. One side of the room was all doors, and at each of the doors stood a woman with one of those sets of keys. The other side was all windows, but the panes were tiny, so even if you broke one you'd only get your wrist through.

'Sit down.' She was given a shove by a passing woman in uniform. A bowl clattered on to the table before her.

'Porridge,' said the pale girl, who was sitting on the other side of the table. 'There's milk. Here.' She lifted a large pitcher and poured some for herself, then did the same for Ella. 'The food's not so bad.'

A young, dark-haired woman sitting beside Ella leant towards them. 'It's mice,' she said, pointing towards the

porridge. 'They put them through t'feeder.' Her face was grey and sunken. She seemed to have no teeth.

Ella pushed her bowl away. Her stomach was cramping with hunger, but if she ate here, then it was inside her. It was real. And wherever this was, it wasn't real.

'You've hurt your cheek,' said the pale girl.

'I know.'

'You should get it seen to.' The girl tilted her head to one side. 'I'm Clem,' she said, and held out her hand.

Ella didn't move.

'Your eyes look bad too.'

'They're grand.'

'They don't look grand.'

'Can I take yours?' Mouse-woman's breath was hot on Ella's arm.

Ella nodded, and the woman curled the bowl towards her.

There must have been five hundred women in there, and it was noisier than the mill with all the machines going. An old lady on the other side of the table was crooning to a rolled-up shawl, rocking it in her arms, shushing it, reaching out with a finger and touching it. A uniformed woman walking up and down the lines stood over her and rapped her on the shoulder. 'Give over with that rubbish and eat your food.'

The old lady shook her head. 'Not till babby's eaten first.' She began to unbutton her dress.

'There's no baby,' the other woman said, raising her voice. She grabbed the shawl and shook it out, holding up the holey piece of cloth. 'See? There's nothing.'

'Babby! You've hurt my babby!' the old lady screamed, and fell to her knees, scrabbling on the floor. The uniformed

woman hauled her up by her elbow. More women joined the commotion then, as though they'd all been given the signal to bawl. At the height of it, a bowl shattered on the floor.

'What did you want to do that for?' It was the same hard-faced woman from last night. The Irish one. Ella put her thumbs in her palms to grip them.

'You want the tube?' said the woman. 'You want the tube again?'

Baby-woman was shaking her head from side to side and crying as she was dragged to her feet and pulled from the room.

Across the table, Clem was eating calmly. When she had finished, she put her spoon to the side of her bowl and folded her hands in her lap.

Ella leant forward. 'Where did they take her? Where did they go?'

Clem's gaze flicked up. 'To the infirmary.'

'Why?'

'So they can feed her through a tube.'

'Where am I?'

'Sharston Asylum.' Clem's eyes were a still and steady blue. 'Why, where did you think?'

Ella looked down at her hands, clasped into fists; she stretched her fingers on the table: eight of them, two thumbs. But they did not look like her own. She turned them palms up and stared. She wished for a mirror. Even that old piece of cracked rubbish they had at the end of the spinning sheds. The one they'd all elbow each other out of the way for on a Friday. Even that. Just to see she was still real.

She looked up. Doors. Nurses standing at each like

jailers, carrying one of those big rounds of keys.

*Sharston Asylum.*

She'd heard of it. Since she was small. If you ever did anything stupid: the asylum. For the lunatics. The paupers. *They'll send you to Sharston, and you'll never come out.*

She stood, grabbing one of the passing nurses by the hand. 'Wait. There's been a mistake!'

The woman shook her off. 'Shut up and sit down.'

'No! You don't understand – there's been a mistake. I'm not mad. I just broke a window. I'm not mad.'

'Breakfast's over now. Get back in line.'

A scraping of benches. The clatter as several hundred women stood, lining up by the door. More uniformed women appeared, a huddle in the doorway. One of them was older, wearing a smaller headdress and badge. She was looking over. Now she was crossing the room towards her. There had been a mistake. They knew it now. Relief made her shaky.

'Ella Fay?'

'Yes.'

'I'm the matron here. You're to come with me.'

Ella clambered out from the bench.

'Good luck,' said Clem.

Ella didn't look back. She followed the woman, walking out into the corridor, and when the doors were locked behind her, her knees went, as though they had been kicked from behind. She put her hand against the wall to steady herself.

The matron clicked her tongue in the back of her throat. 'Are you ready then? Come with me.'

'Am I leaving now?'

The woman's jaw twitched, as though a fly had just

landed there and she couldn't brush it off. It didn't matter. Soon she would be outside. There were two shillings sewn in the hem of her dress, and she would spend them this time. Do what she should have done yesterday. Take the train. Far away – to a place where the land stopped and gave way to the sea.

They marched through one set of doors – two, three, four. Every time they reached one, the silent nurse held Ella by the shoulders while the matron clanked around with her keys. They came to a lighter corridor and beyond it was the green of the entrance hall. She could see the plants, hundreds of them, and the thousand little tiles on the floor. She was marched past the front door into a stuffy room with a couple of chairs and a table and not much else.

The nurse shoved her into a seat, put down the papers she was carrying, and Ella was left alone. The windows had no bars in here. Through them was a wide gravel drive. The door opened, and a man entered. Humming. Fair hair. A long moustache, pointed at the ends, ears that stuck out and were pink at the tips. He eyed Ella briefly before coming to sit, and his eyes were blue and pale. He reached out and slid the papers towards him. He wrote something down and then read some more. He carried on humming as he read.

The man looked up. 'My name is Dr Fuller.' He spoke slowly, as though she might be deaf. 'I am one of the assistant medical officers here. It is my job to admit you.'

'Admit me?'

'Yes.' He sat back in his chair, fingers touching the edges of his moustache. They were sharp, as though you might prick yourself on them. 'Do you know why you are here?'

'Yes.'

'Oh?' He leant forward a little. 'Go on.'

The words fell from her. 'I broke a window. In the mill. Yesterday. I'm sorry. I'll pay for it. But I'm not mad.'

The man's eyes narrowed as he held her gaze. He gave a brief nod then looked back at his paper and wrote something down. 'Name?'

She said nothing.

His tongue clicked against the roof of his mouth. 'What is your name?'

'Ella. Fay.'

'Thank you. Occupation?'

'I'm not mad.'

'Occu*pa*tion, Miss Fay.'

'Spinner.'

'And for how many years have you worked as a spinner?'

'Since I was twelve.'

His pen scratched out over the paper. 'And before that? Did you work as a child?'

'Yes.'

He wrote it down. 'Since what age?'

'Since I was eight.'

'And what did you do then?'

'Doffer.'

'And, remind me, that is . . . ?'

'Doffing rolls of thread when they're full. Tying up the ends and that.'

He nodded and wrote some more.

'Are you married, Miss Fay?'

'No.'

'According to the papers I have here, you still live with your family, is that correct?'

'My father. His family. Not mine.'

'And what about your mother?'

'Dead.'

More writing, more scratch scratch scratch.

'And what's your father's address?'

The room was quiet. Outside, clouds raced each other across the sky as though they had somewhere better to be. She saw the house she lived in. The house where she had grown up. That her mother had died in. A black house that was never safe. Her father, his new wife, their children. And her. Like one of those fents of cloth that were left over, that fitted nowhere, were just chucked and left to fray. 'Fifty-three Victoria Street.'

The doctor nodded, wrote and then stood and crossed the room towards her. He took her wrist in his fingers and pressed lightly. With his other hand he took a pocket watch out and stared at it. 'Tongue.'

'What?'

'Put out your tongue.' He spoke sharply.

He peered at it, then went back to the other side of the table and wrote some more. She watched the letters spooling from his pen, marching from left to right like a line of ants she saw once on a baking summer afternoon, crossing the path on Victoria Street. She had been small, sitting with her back on hot stone. Inside, she had heard the rasp of her father's voice, then the thud of fist on flesh. the thud of fist on flesh. Her mother crying, a low, animal sound. She had stared at the ants. They looked as if they knew just where they were going. She wondered what would happen if she followed them. Where she would end up.

'It says here, Miss Fay, that yesterday morning you broke a window in the factory in which you are employed.' The doctor was looking at her again, a keenness to him now.

'That doesn't make me mad.'

'Do you deny you did this?'

'I . . .'

How to explain? How to speak of what she had seen – of the women and the machines and the windows that blocked everything out. It had been so clear then but would muddy before this man, she knew.

She shook her head, muttering. 'There was no damage. Only the glass, and I'll pay for that. I've already said. I'll find a way.'

He bent down and wrote in his book.

'I'm not mad,' she said, louder now. 'Not like those women in that room anyhow.'

He carried on writing.

The room got closer then, darker. Pulsing. Her face was hot. Bladder hot.

'What are you writing?'

He ignored her.

'What are you writing?' She raised her voice. Still, he ignored her. The only sound the scratching of his pen. The furniture, heavy and silent, watching her too.

She hit the table in front of him. When he didn't look up, she hit it again, stood and smacked her hand right down on his papers, his pen clattering on to the floor. The ink splattered over his hand. He snapped back in his chair. Took a bell and rang it, and two nurses appeared, as though they had been waiting in the hall just for this.

'It appears Miss Fay is feeling violent. Please take her downstairs. We can finish the assessment when she's calm.'

The nurses grabbed her, but she landed a bite on one of their arms and wrested herself free. And then – the door

– not locked, running across the entrance hall, the black flowers. The big front door, unlocked too, and her outside on the steps, and the fresh air smacking her face, and her gasping for it, sucking it down, pelting across the gravel. Whistles blaring, shrill and hard. A nurse making towards her. Her turning to the left, to the far side of the building. Then only more buildings, and running from them too, out across the grass. A cricket pitch. Tall trees. Lungs burning. This way only fields, brown and muddy, stretching out, and sheep, and a lane ahead. The top of a small rise. Two men, standing in a hole. One of them waving his arms, shouting. Turning, seeing the nurses behind her, gaining on her. Swerving to miss them, but slipping in the mud, her ankle turning over and her falling, hard on to her front, pitching and rolling down the hill.

The fierce slap of mud. Everything red and black. A hot wetness spreading between her legs.

A face before her, a dark man – hand stretched out, palm open. 'Are you all right there?'

People around her. Upon her. She on her hands and knees, spitting black earth to the ground. Her arms, yanked behind her back. Pain tearing as she was pulled up and made to stand by people she couldn't see.

The dark man there still. Standing, watching her. A little way apart. Looking as if he pitied her.

No one pitied her.

'What?' she screamed at him. '*What are you looking at?*'