



Welcome to a world filled with magic  
potions, happily ever afters, and...



Love  
at  
First...



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# Chapter One: A Dance

*“Dancing is a perpendicular expression of a horizontal desire.”*

George Bernard Shaw

“What’s that perfume you’re wearing? It smells great.”

Mariel smiled warmly, scanning the room for someone – anyone – to distract George.

“None,” she lied. “Just good ‘ol fashioned soap and water.”

“Oh,” he frowned, deterred for a moment.

“There’s a lot of folks here tonight. Seen any new faces in the crowd?”

The younger man turned to survey the group of people mingling on the dance floor.

“Um, I don’t know,” he replied.

“Who is that cute little brunette over there?” Mariel asked. “The one with the black skirt. I don’t know that I’ve seen her here before.”

There was a sudden squeal of feedback followed by clicks, scratches, and unintelligible words as the M.C., Mike Hammersmith, fumbled with the microphone. It was an unintended ritual that made regular attendees of the dance smile. The man was a klutz with any type of object – from hammers to hats – and his public speaking skills were sub-par as well, but he was a wizard on the dance floor.

“Good evening,” Mike announced. “I’m glad you’re all here tonight.”

That was Mariel’s cue to escape. She put her hand on George’s arm, whispered in his ear.

“Let me drop my purse on a table. I don’t want to miss this first dance. You go grab somebody and we’ll catch up on the next one.”

George was left with his mouth open. She didn’t give him a chance to argue, as he would have followed her around like a smitten puppy. If her luck held, she could avoid George for the rest of the evening. He wasn’t a bad sort. Just young, clumsy, and entirely too fawning.

“That’s the problem,” she sighed. “The young, cute ones can’t dance well and don’t have a shred of self-confidence.”

While she was no fan of paunches, sagging jowls, and liver spots, there was something to be said for the mature male members on the dance floor. The older men were more

sure of themselves, led her confidently, and made no idle small talk while dancing. If a man was interested in more, there were no faltering attempts at seduction. Repeated requests to dance were the usual manner of expressing interest in a woman. If she was interested, she agreed, and if not, she pleaded tired feet and sat out a couple of dances. If this didn't succeed, and further attempts were made, Mariel had the full-proof back-up plan to avoid romantic entanglements on the dance floor. John Smith.

John and Mary Smith were dear friends and they usually spent dance evenings with each other, rarely sharing themselves with the others on the dance floor. If Mariel was being pursued too vigorously by some newcomer, all she had to do was signal John or Mary and Mary would give up her husband for a spell. Such interventions were rare as it was the young ones who usually got caught up in the chase, and their attention spans rarely lasted more than a dance or two. Still, it was flattering to have to fend off a too eager suitor on occasion and John was an excellent dancer.

Mariel caught the eye of Mr. Allen, an older gentleman who was late getting to the dance floor on account of his changing from walking shoes with special supportive insoles to dancing shoes. His arches were all but nonexistent and his joints were stiff with age, but as soon as he stepped onto a dance floor the years melted away. She smiled, raising her eyebrows in a question. He smiled, nodding, and signaled with his eyes that he would meet her on the floor.

"Mr. Allen," she sighed to herself, "if you were twenty years younger, I would do more than dance with you."

And it wasn't just the fact that he was a good dancer. It was the whole package. John Allen was a gentleman – from the old school. The young ones today wasted time and spoke too much. Mr. Allen – she never addressed him by his first name – had that self-confidence that a woman appreciated. He was a sure lead both on and off the dance floor.

"Young lady," he said, catching her up on the downbeat, another small touch she noticed and appreciated, "you look lovely this evening."

"Mr. Allen," she returned on cue, "you look quite dashing yourself."

And that was all the flirting he ever did with her. Never any crude innuendoes, or suggestive touching as they danced. He was always the gentleman, and she returned the favor by never flirting unduly with him. Not that Mr. Allen was a saint by any means.

Mariel thought happily, "I've seen you set your eyes on a target closer to your age and

bring her down.”

It was a matter of dignity and pride for the both of them.



Two dances later, Mariel was annoyed. “All right,” Mariel grouched, “I’m chucking all pride and dignity aside. I want a man to pay some attention to me. A good one. Or, at least a halfway decent one. He doesn’t even have to dance well, as long as he’s interested. Please God, don’t let tonight end without someone tossing me a hook. I promise I’ll bite.”

She was sitting on the sideline, almost ready to snare John Smith and fib about being harassed just so she had someone decent to dance with. The music started, and her lower lip pouted.

“A rumba,” she whispered, leaning down to massage a calf. A passing pair of khakis obscured her view of the dance floor. She sat up. The khakis stopped, turned, a voice asked, “Wanna dance?”

This was certainly not the introduction she’d imagined from Prince Charming.

“Beggars can’t be choosers, young lady,” she told herself, “and besides, God was awfully fast in granting this prayer. Normally He isn’t so prompt.”

Mariel sighed at his age – younger than her - and smiled, holding up her hand. Her smile vanished in an instant as the seemingly younger man swept her up into his arms in time with the music and moved her directly to the center of the dance floor with surprising skill. She immediately revised her initial assessment of his age – upping it a few years. For four minutes and thirty-six seconds neither spoke, and the divorced mother of one thoroughly enjoyed herself. With a flourish of strings, the music drew to a close and the man deftly brought their dance to a close, exactly on cue. He smiled down at her, nodded, said, “Thanks.” And walked away.

Mariel blinked.

“What just happened?”

She breathed into her hand, sniffing for bad breath. No, she took periodic breaks to restock her breath mints.

“I don’t recall stepping on his toes,” she thought. “My God, how could he simply walk away from me?”

She found that her feelings were hurt.

“Either I am slipping, or he simply has no interest in a slightly older woman. How slight? But he asked me to dance? Probably before he got a good look at me. The lights are dim in here. Once he got a hold of me and took a second look he probably didn’t like what he saw. He could have at least danced poorly so I wouldn’t want a rematch. But all the younger men are interested in me?”

Dizzying thoughts plagued Mariel and she stupidly let herself get caught by George. Before she knew it, there she was fox-trotting with a young man who was decidedly interested in her not-so aged carcass. After the fourth stomped toe, Mariel had to grit her teeth as she smiled. It was not entirely George’s fault. She was not paying attention to the music or her current dance partner. Thankfully, George hadn’t the slightest clue and was about to pass out from being in such close proximity to her.

“Where did he go?” Mariel mused, scanning the room for her mystery man who had so easily dismissed her.

“I want a second shot at him,” she told herself, “and it has nothing to do with my pride.”

Her conscience ignored this little fib. It allowed Mariel her little foibles, as she was a gentle soul, even to George.

“George,” she told him as the dance ended, “you have improved quite a bit since we’ve last shared a dance. I’m impressed.”

“Thanks, Mariel,” he stammered.

“Will you excuse me while I go to the ladies room?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding, “sure thing. I’ll be right here.”

She eased herself off the dance floor, eyes peeled for khaki pants. At the door she turned for one last look, then pushed through.

“You’re not leaving are you?”

It was he. She blinked, said nothing.

“Bathroom,” she managed after a long moment.

He nodded his head to the right and back.

“At the end of the hallway,” he offered. “There’s one for the ladies and one for the gents.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, you are leaving?” he asked. “Or, yes, you’re going to the bathroom? Or, yes, you

know which door to go in? I had to ask.”

At last, Mariel’s brain caught up with her tongue and she managed a smile, answered saucily, “Yes, I know which door. The one with the lady, not the tiger.”

This fetched her a smile.

“You got style,” he nodded. “I like that. You wanna take another chance at twisting an ankle with me? I took it easy on you last time.”

She raised an eyebrow archly.

“Do you want to risk it?” she returned. “I might faint.”

He squinted an eye, shrugging, “I’m insured.”

“Good,” she said, walking past him, “I’ll be back in a moment.”

“The clock’s ticking,” he said, tapping his empty wrist.

Mariel ignored him as she tried to walk slowly to the bathroom, breathing in and out deliberately. Her pulse was a touch fast.

“Get a grip!” she told herself. “You are acting like some silly, smitten girl.”

Truth be told, she was slightly taken aback when she’d almost run into him, was further upset by his blunt question. This man was not only an adept dancer, but he was quick thinking and managed all of his lines with a straight face. Another sign of maturity. Did she have to revise his age up again? He looked so young, though. Younger, at least, than her.

She attended to this and that, checked her make-up, checked it again, tried to look at herself in the mirror, decided that was not a healthy thing to do, and returned to the dance floor, somewhat confident about her appearance. He looked at her, the corner of his mouth turning up ever so slightly into a smile.

“If he makes a smart aleck comment,” Mariel told herself, “I’ll stomp a toe. I swear it.”

“Ready?”

“I’m game.”

The music started, a Viennese waltz, and Mariel found herself swept up into the dance, and, surprisingly, a conversation.

“I’m new here. I flew in last just week.”

Mariel shuddered at the words. Flight. Flying. Planes. Terrible words. Terrible thoughts.

“Chilled?” he asked, eyebrows furrowing as he twirled her away.

“Did I say something?” he continued upon her return.

"Yes," she frowned, scrunching her nose in distaste. "That dirty word."

"Which one? I don't think I said anything lewd," he countered, "although I have a few choices examples on my mind at the moment. I always keep a few on the back burner."

"Thankfully, just a few, right? That must be a strain."

His touch was feather-light, signaled a change in direction. She moved easily with his smooth lead.

"Oh, not at all. Especially when dancing with a beautiful woman."

The back of her neck felt momentarily flushed, and she was glad that they were moving across the floor. The breeze of their movement helped cool her.

"There was this brunette - three dances back. Quite striking indeed. Gave me lots to think about."

Mariel stepped on his shoe, thinking, "You wretched tease!"

He smiled at her, watching her reactions, enjoying the moment.

"Perhaps that brunette will enjoy the next dance with you?" she said, smiling.

"I think not. She left on the arm of an older gentleman. His hair was graying at the temples, rather distinguished looking, but a poor dancer."

Mariel thought furiously. There wasn't a man present who fit that description, and she made it a habit of knowing all suitable dance partners present and accounted for. Her eyes narrowed at her present dance partner. He couldn't be trusted.

"Besides," he continued, "I owe you a drink. Something to wash away the taste of that dirty word that I uttered. You still haven't told me what it was."

Mariel considered him for a moment. She was convinced that he was younger than she - no matter how she continued to revise her earlier estimates - and that automatically ruled him out for any serious romantic considerations. It irked and intrigued her the way he teased. And his lies, they had to be lies, were entertaining.

"Flying."

"Yes," he agreed, "several have said dancing with me is akin to flying."

The woman swatted his arm, then kept moving in tempo to the music.

"My God!" she said through gritted teeth. "You are an intolerable tease. You're worse than my nieces and nephews. Are you ever serious?"

"Sometimes," he said, eyes twinkling in amusement. "When it suits me. Otherwise it puts too much strain on me. Are you interested in that drink?"

Was this her hook? Had He answered her prayer? Mariel's brows knitted in concern



for just a scant moment. Her partner was watching, read the flash, and raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not thirsty," she said after four measures of music. He nodded.

"But I could use a drink. Me. Whiskey. Neat. About two fingers."

Mariel counted only two measures this time, then leaned in close on the downbeat, stepped on his other shoe, and whispered, "French 75." He didn't flinch, or back away. Instead, he down looked at her, a curious expression on his face. It was almost as if he was lost for a moment. Lost in private thoughts or lost in famous movie scene? She didn't know. He recovered after a moment and grinned at her.

"There's only one gin joint that I know of that serves those. And it ain't around here."

Mariel smiled. He did know the movie. Was she totally and completely wrong about his age? Was there hope after all?

The song ended and the strange man eased Mariel to a stop right on the final beat of the song. His hand lingered on hers. She didn't mind and she didn't pull away.

"There's a place down the street. I can bribe the bartender," he said. "Maybe he'll make one?"

"What?" she said. "And leave all this dancing?"

Mariel tried to hide the surprise on her face. There it was - a blunt proposal. The hook - dangled before her. Did she dare take the bait? She'd promised God that she would bite, but something made her hesitate.

He saw it. Gave her an out.

"My trick knee is ready to give," he countered. "Besides, my chariot is about to turn back into a pumpkin. I need to get it back to the stable before midnight. And I want to hear about your fear of flying - totally irrational, of course. I want to study you."

He didn't look away or smile when he said it, and Mariel couldn't be sure if he was joking or not.

"Study me?" she said smiling. "How ridiculous. I'm a crashing bore."

"Ah, the flying theme again."

Thoughts swirled inside her head. "I have no business having a drink with a complete stranger who's at least five years younger than me. And he couldn't possibly be interested in me, so..."

She hesitated.

"What's wrong?" he asked gently. "Is this dance too fast?"



She smiled, blushing. "I don't even know your name."

"You tell me yours first," he said.

Mariel didn't know why she answered him, but she did.

"Mariel MacEwan."

He presented his hand. She took it. He bowed slightly, and said, "Pleased to meet you, Ms. Mariel MacEwan. I had a good time dancing with you. And I like your perfume, too. Paris."

"Uh, thank you..." she replied, then paused, waiting for him to introduce himself. He noticed it, yet stood there, smiling at her.

"Are you always this difficult?" Mariel asked.

"Only with beautiful women that I've fallen in love with at first sight."

Mariel's jaw dropped and she felt her face flush red. She was beyond flustered and utterly speechless.

He stepped back and gazed at her admiringly, sweeping her with his eyes from head to toe. The man took a long, deep breath.

"Paris," he whispered, nodding. "What an amazing night this has been. Please say you'll dance with me again? Not tonight...but another time."

Eyes wide, Mariel barely nodded.

"Good because I lied about having a drink, but I wasn't lying about having to leave. I have to go. I'm really late." He sighed. "I didn't want to stop dancing with you. I don't want to stop dancing with you. I only meant to stop by and check the place out. Then I saw you, and..." He shrugged.

Mariel still stood, speechless.

"So next time we'll dance and have a drink."

"Yes," she managed at last.

He winked, squeezed her hand, and then he was gone. She stood alone, eyes staring, her heart racing.

"Mariel?"

She turned at the voice, reverie broken, and saw George.

"Do you want to dance?"

