

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



Love
at
First...



J.D. Lavelle

Thank you for reading this book.

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?"



Chapter Two: A Fairy Tale

“The realm of fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with many things...”

J.R.R. Tolkien

Mariel sat staring before a large mirror. Only she didn't see her own reflection. Instead, memories of a particular tune danced through her mind. She could still hear the strains of the waltz and feel the firm hands guiding her across the floor.

She didn't hear her stylist's voice softly say, “Earth to Mariel.” There was a pause.

“Earth to Mariel.” A little louder.

Mariel blinked, realized where she was, smiled, and said, “Oh, hey! Sorry. I was lost in thought.”

Mrs. Rebecca Mills, hair stylist extraordinaire, saw the happy smile she wore and smiled her own coy smile in return.

“What planet are you on, Ms. Mariel MacEwan? Planet Man? I know that look.”

“What look?” Mariel said. “I don't have a look. I'm just distracted. That's all.”

“So...” her friend said, prompting her as she started inspecting Mariel's hair, “are you going to dodge my questions or tell me his name?”

“I don't know his name,” Mariel confessed. It was easier not to fight the Love Inquisition.

Rebecca's brows furrowed in consternation. There was more to this story than her friend was letting on. That much was clear. “And...” she prodded.

“And what?” Mariel shrugged. “There's not much else to tell. We met dancing.”

And yet there was so much more. Mariel was again lost in thought. He was more than a competent dancer. This Mystery Man had a skewed sense of humor and...there was something else. Self-confidence? Cockiness?

“Oh my God,” her friend whispered. “You're a train wreck.”

She paused her work, “Tell Rebecca all about it. Tell me all of the gory details. You’ve slept with him, of course. Otherwise you wouldn’t be so dreamy. Oh, it’s a good thing we’re adding some color to your hair tonight. I just opened a bottle of wine for us. I want to hear everything.”

“No, no,” Mariel interrupted. She had to forestall any of her friend’s conjecturing or else the tale would expand exponentially. Rebecca would soon have her carrying the love child of a roguishly handsome escaped convict. “I didn’t sleep with him. All we did was dance. And talk. Nothing more.”

Rebecca stared, eyes narrowing. She pursed her lips, then chewed the inside of her cheek, all the while considering the matter.

“Are you on some new medication?” she finally asked. “Some new crazy pill that I don’t know about?”

Mariel laughed. It was one of the reasons she was such good friends with her stylist. She could always make Mariel laugh. Friday nights at the hair salon were wonderful. In addition to being a magician with shears, hair spray, and a round brush, Rebecca could always be counted on to find humor in situations, stir up some humor, or simply stir things up.

“No new meds,” Mariel finally managed. “Just...” Again she was lost in thought for a moment. “Impatient. I want to see him again. He asked me out.”

Rebecca’s eyes narrowed. “But you don’t even know his name. And he asked you out already? My God, what sort of dance were you two dancing? The tango? Something sexy?”

Mariel struggled for the words. There was something about the man - that much was certain. But what was it? His dancing? He was a superb dancer. The man floated across the floor, completely in control, but not domineering. He was a comfortable, confident lead, and Mariel liked it.

“I don’t know...” she thought again about that night. Mariel tried to recall all of the details - his word games, his firm lead while dancing, his voice, and his masculine scent. Wait! That was it. The scent.

“He knew what perfume I was wearing.”

Rebecca stared, confusion furrowing her brows.

“That’s it?” she said. “You go all dreamy on me because some guy knew what brand of cheap knockoff perfume you wear? You’ve got to be kidding me, Mariel. I mean...did he have a scar or something? A war story? Anything? Please tell me it was more than his sense of smell that made you go all crazy.”

Mariel smiled at her friend. “Nope,” she said. “That’s it. His sense of smell. And I don’t wear cheap perfume, thank you very much.”

“But what’s so special about the perfume you were wearing?” Rebecca asked. “So it wasn’t cheap. Does he have a big nose? Please don’t tell me he has a big nose.”

Mariel shook her head.

“Bald?” Rebecca asked, shuddering.

“He has plenty of hair,” Mariel countered. “And as for my perfume, I wear Paris. I don’t wear it very often and I’ve had the bottle for about a year. For some reason, I decided to dab a bit of it here and there the other night. I normally don’t wear it.”

“Didn’t I buy that for you?” Rebecca asked. “For Christmas last year?”

“No,” Mariel said firmly. “You bought me pears. Not Paris.”

“Hmmm, I’ve heard of the city but not the perfume,” Rebecca said. “The fanciest perfume I’ve ever worn is Chanel No. 5.”

“And that’s just it. How many men can actually name a perfume?”

Rebecca nodded. “Yeah,” she agreed. “Most of the time they say stuff like, ‘You smell real good.’ Not many synapses firing when it comes to smell. Maybe his ex-wife or girlfriend wore the stuff. He bought it as a gift for her. There could be lots of reasons he knew what you were wearing.”

“Hmmm,” Mariel shook her head. “No,” she insisted. “This was something more. This was something different. There was no hesitation and a look of surprise like ‘Hey! I know that smell.’ He was casual about it. Like it was matter of fact. How many men are going to be able to pick out a particular scent?”

“Not many,” Rebecca admitted, “

“He said he was in love with me.”

Rebecca’s eyes widened.

“And then he turned and walked out the door. He just left me there.

“Did you get his name?”

“No!”

“He just turned and was gone,” Mariel continued. “I just stood there, stunned.”

“Oh my God. Do you know what this is? Do you know who you are?”

Mariel stared, confused.

“You’re Cinderella.”

“Oh, please...”

“I’m right,” she said. “I know I’m right. You’re Cinderella and you’re living the story. Didn’t you meet at a dance? And you danced all night? And he left abruptly at the end? And you don’t know his name? Oh God, this is perfect. Mariel, you’re living a fairy tale romance. And wait. I left out the best part. The one part that makes it true. The part that has to make it true. He said that he loved you.”

Mariel stared in the mirror. Mariel didn’t believe in fairy tales. She was firmly entrenched in reality. Yes, the man was funny, charming, good looking, and an amazing dancer, but that didn’t make him Prince Charming. He also teased, didn’t tell her his name, and left too soon. She was still a touch grumpy about that.

Rebecca sighed happily and smiled as she said, “Love at first sight.”

Chapter Three: A Scent

“Perfumes, colors and sounds echo one another.”

Charles Baudelaire

“You missed the dance last week,” she accused, moving in perfect sync with her partner. “And you’re late. The night is half over. You promised me a dance and a drink.”

“Actually you’re the one who promised and dance and a drink,” he countered. “Something came up.”

“Paternity suit?” Mariel inquired sweetly, happy to be in his arms.

“Oh no,” he replied. “That was settled some months ago. Turns out it wasn’t mine after all. She said she named him after me anyways.”

“And what is this cherub’s name?”

“Winston.”

Mariel kept her features impassive, moved with music. “Winston what?”

“Oh,” came the reply, “she didn’t saddle him with my last name too. That would have been too much.”

“Is he serious?” she wondered. “Or trying to get my goat.”

Given his tendency to tease, the woman decided to believe the latter. Either way, he was risking a knee to the groin.

After a few turns around the dance floor, he asked, “Don’t you want to know my last name?”

“It’s either Salem or Churchill,” she replied, half tempted to step on a toe. “Your parents were either from England or heavy smokers.”

“Hmmm, neither,” he shook his head, “but you guessed right about my last name. Churchill.”

“Oh, for God’s...” Mariel didn’t get to finish. He twirled her away from him, then pulled her back with just a touch more force than he’d used before. She

almost fell into him. He pulled her close – too close for the casual social dancing that they'd just been enjoying.

“Does it bother you that I'm named after a Prime Minister?”

She stared up at him for a long moment. Her heart was beating a touch faster and she knew that it wasn't because of the tempo of the dance. He smiled.

“Can I call you by your middle name?”

This brought a loud laugh as he released his hold, and Mariel suddenly let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. The man took her hand, winking, and kissed it. This sent new shivers up and down her spine.

“I like you, Mariel MacEwan. More and more. Each time we dance. Each time we talk. I like you more and more. And my people call me Andrew. Winston Andrew Churchill.”

“Andrew,” she smiled. “It's a pleasure to meet you finally. Are you going to offer an explanation for your parents' choice of names, or leave me to wonder?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “I get to quiz you first. Remember? I want to learn about your fear of flying.”

The tempo of the music increased slightly and Andrew moved Mariel in time with his firm, yet gentle, lead. She liked the way he moved her about the floor. It made her forget about the cares of the day. After a few moments of sensual bliss, she murmured, barely audible, “Why do you want to quiz me?”

And it wasn't just a casual question. Truly she was asking why would he be interested in a middle-aged woman such as her when there were several women present who were younger and better looking. They might not dance as well, but certainly they would be more suitable for a relationship, or even a fling. All of this ran through her mind in an instant and the sentiment lay beneath her soft question.

He caught it, both the words and the meaning behind them, and answered, “You're an intriguing woman. I want to know you better. Why wouldn't I want to quiz you?”

Mariel realized with utter certainty that he was not joking. He was being

serious.

Mariel hesitated, brows furrowing slightly. She wanted to know why. It made no sense to her. Out of the blue a handsome man showed up at her weekly haunt – an aging hall filled with dancing, people, and music. The man was a phenomenal dancer who boldly asked her out that first night after flirting with her shamelessly. She didn't exactly know what she liked most about him. His sure, firm lead was a definite enticement, as was his teasing sense of humor, and he was handsome and athletic. But why her? It made no sense.

The music ended. Andrew stood smiling at the woman, still holding her hand. George wandered near, looking apprehensive and hopeful. Mariel purposefully ignored the interloper. Andrew turned to George, and asked, "Did you want to dance with the lady?"

Mariel squeezed his hand, just as the music started anew. The music was slow as couples melted together.

"I don't want to intrude," George said eagerly.

"You leave me," Mariel barely whispered, "and no quiz. No more dancing."

"Let me have one more turn with the lady, and then she's all yours."

George faded into the background, disappointed. Andrew pulled her close, again too close. And she liked it. After a long moment, during which the music, dance steps, and pretty much the rest of the world faded away, Mariel savored the warm, firm body pressed against hers, and his masculine scent. She closed her eyes.

"I don't care why," she said softly.

"It's your scent," he said.

"What?"

"That's what I find so intriguing about you."

"What do you mean? My scent?" Mariel asked, her eyes widening.

Without warning, he stopped dancing, held her still, and leaned into Mariel, his mouth brushing against her cheek. She thought wildly for a moment that he was going to kiss her - right there in the middle of the dance floor. She froze as he

breathed in. Deeply.

“Paris,” he said softly. “I told you the last time we saw each other - our first dance. Don’t you remember?”

He breathed in again, sending shivers up and down her spine, and then whispered, “It was a magical night. I’ll never forget it.”

“But how...”

How did he know? And why did he keep saying those things? Those romantic things, like something out of a fairy tale? There was no such thing as love at first sight. And it wasn’t magic. It was a night of dancing. Just like tonight.

“But why does it feel like magic?” she asked herself.

“Did I guess what you’re wearing?” he finished her thought.

“Yes,” she said softly.

“I’d like to thank everyone for coming out tonight...”

The jarring voice broke the spell. Mariel, still slightly in shock by Andrew’s words and actions, turned toward the announcer and pretended to politely listen. She needed a moment to gather her thoughts and her composure.

She raised her wrist to her nose and smelled where she’d sprayed the perfume. It barely remained – just a hint. How did he know? Mariel decided that she would stop listening to the cautious, rational voice inside her head that warned her away from this strange man who courted her with abandon. This man who spoke of love at first sight. Mariel turned to Andrew and smiled at him.

“I’m thirsty,” she said. “And you said that you’d buy. You did.”



Chapter Four: A Drink

“Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine.”

Humphrey Bogart

“French 75, correct?” Andrew said, raising an eyebrow at Mariel.

She grinned. The waitress looked confused.

“Ignore him,” Mariel said. “He’s being difficult. I’ll have a gin and tonic.”

“The ‘Queen’s drink,’” Andrew said, raising an eyebrow. “Another sign.”

“Of what?” she asked. “That I’m malarial?”

“That she’s from royal stock,” Andrew explained to the waitress. “A princess, I’m sure of it. And make that two of the same.”

Mariel shook her head, smiling. She liked his constant teasing, although, she didn’t know whether she wanted to kiss the smile off his face or bite his lower lip and make him pay for the incessant games.

“Do you always play games?” she asked.

“Just with the pretty ones.”

Mariel leaned forward, and whispered, “Do you play games when you’re in bed with a woman?”

His eyes widened slightly, and the boyish grin faded. For a brief moment he was lost. Andrew didn’t know what to say. Mariel had turned the tables on him and he was left speechless. He could feel his face redden, and then he laughed aloud. Andrew recovered, leaned forward, and whispered, “You want to find out?”

“Damn you!” Without thinking, Mariel reached out and grabbed skin on the back of his hand. She pinched – hard. “Will you ease up for just one minute?”

With a laugh, Andrew caught her hand in his own and held it.

“No pinching,” he admonished. “Only holding.”

It was her turn to blush. She liked the feel of her hand in his. It was an intimate gesture, and if it were any other near-stranger, then she would have pulled her hand

free and sat back in her seat. Mariel would have made some attempt to put some emotional distance between them. But she didn't. Instead, she reached out with her other hand and traced a pattern on the back of his hand.

"Only holding," she said. "I like that."

When their drinks arrived Andrew raised his glass to his nose, nostrils flaring slightly, and looked at her.

"To beautiful eyes."

Mariel's eyes narrowed, as she raised her glass and took a small drink, letting the tonic and alcohol burn her tongue.

"What are you doing?" she asked, curious. "It's a drink. You don't smell your drink."

"I wanted to see if the lime was freshly cut?" Andrew replied. "It is. And I wanted to make sure it's good gin."

"Can you tell the difference?"

"Between a freshly cut lime and one that was cut at the beginning of a shift? Or if the gin's any good?"

"Uh," she said, thoughtful, "Both, I guess."

"Hold the glass up to your nose, but don't drink," he said. "Open your mouth just a little as you breathe in, and smell. Close your eyes and concentrate on what comes to mind."

Curious, Mariel dipped her head slightly and sniffed, without closing her eyes. "I smell the lime - citrus."

"It's stronger when it's freshly cut. Better. Adds flavor. Now try to smell the gin. Really smell it. Can you pick out the different florals?"

"Florals?" she asked. "I thought you were supposed to drink it. Not inhale it."

He winked at her. "Both."

"You are the strangest man I think I've ever met Mr. Winston Andrew Churchill. And this has got to be the strangest..."

Date. She'd almost said the word. But was it an official date? Or was this just

post-dance refreshment?

“Date?” Andrew finished for her.

“Um,” she hesitated, lost for a moment. “What the hell do you call this?” Mariel thought. It certainly was the most unconventional romance-of-sorts she’d ever experienced.

“Easy there,” Andrew said softly. “No need to strain yourself. Let’s not call it a date until the end of the night.”

“Why?” she asked. “What happens at the end of the night?”

“You decide if you want to have dinner with me or not. If you decide yes, then this was a date. If you decide no, then this was just two strangers - although we’re hardly strangers - getting to know one another.”

“All right,” Mariel said, smiling. “If we’re getting to know one another, then why the fascination with smells? First my perfume – how you knew that I was wearing Paris is beyond me – and now this business with the florals and freshly cut lime. What gives?”

Andrew grinned. “My grandfather on my mother’s side had bloodhound in him. I have the gene too. And so I’m forever chasing scents. Everything olfactory.”

Mariel sighed, shook her head, asked wearily, “So is this what our relationship is going to be like? You constantly teasing? Never telling the truth? Be honest with me, so I know what I’m in for. And be careful how you answer. It’s going to determine whether or not we have dinner tomorrow night.”

Andrew leaned forward, smiling as he caressed her hand. “Yes,” he said simply. And before she could say anything to argue, he continued, “And I do have a thing for smells. It’s what I do,” he said, with a shrug of his shoulders. “I’m a magician.”

Mariel took another long pull on her drink and decided to play along.

“Card tricks?” she asked.

“Not my thing,” he said, shaking his head. “Magic potions.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Love potions.”

“What sort of love potions do you make?” Mariel asked, intrigued. He was

suddenly sober. Even though his answers sounded ridiculous, she could tell that he was being serious.

“The kind that you’re wearing,” he said.

For a moment Mariel was confused. Andrew saw the look and decided not to play any more games. He turned her wrist over and gently touched it.

“This,” he said. “Here. The love potion on your wrist. You wore it again. For me, I hope.”

Understanding dawned and Mariel smiled in delight. No wonder he recognized her scent.

“My perfume,” she exclaimed as understanding dawned. “You make perfumes. What’s the word for it?”

“Parfumier,” Andrew said, his accent flawless.

Mariel’s eyes widened slightly. Surely he couldn’t speak French too? She knew that France was considered by some to be the perfume capital of the world, and it made sense that someone in the industry would be familiar with France. But...

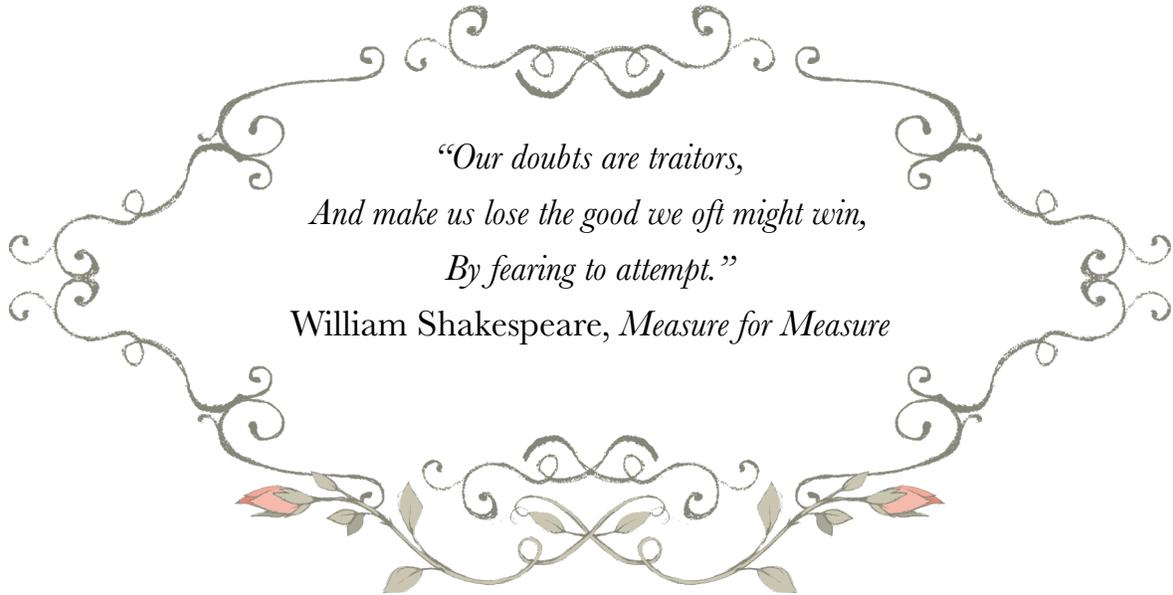
“So was it my perfume, I mean, my love potion that ensnared you?”

Andrew shook his head. “Not entirely. Although that was part of it.”

Mariel cocked her head to one side. He still held her hand, then looked into her eyes, and said, “It was love at first dance.”



Chapter Five: A Doubt



Rebecca eye’s were narrowed in concentration. She was mostly pleased with her work, fussing a few more moments with stray hairs before sighing in satisfaction.

“This’ll do,” she said. “It’s not magic, but it’s at least date hair.”

Mariel gazed at herself in the mirror, more than pleased.

“It looks fantastic,” Mariel said. “Thank you so much. I know this was last minute, but I really want to look my best.”

“Of course you do. And I’m here to help. Plus, I want to hear all of the salacious details.”

Mariel smiled at her friend, shaking her head slightly.

“If there are any details to share, then you will be the first to know. Right now, I’m just planning on dinner. Nothing more.”

“Dinner at his house though,” Rebecca countered. “That sounds risky...and risqué.” She was hopeful for her friend.

Mariel chewed on her cheek. She was hopeful too. But doubts remained.

“So did he say why he missed the dance?” Rebecca asked. “He was supposed to

come back the following week, but he didn't. That's not how Prince Charmings are supposed to act. They keep their word."

Mariel was no longer grumpy about his absence, but it did give her pause about the potential for long-term romance with Andrew.

"He said that he was out of town," she explained. "On business. He's a parfumer. Makes perfume. I assume his work is mostly on the East Coast or overseas - France, maybe. He didn't say who he works for. He..."

Rebecca cocked her head, waiting, and listening. She as curious.

"I don't know much about him," Mariel said. "He has a way of distracting me. A way of not talking about himself."

"Was he nosy?" Rebecca asked. "Too many questions?"

"No," she said. "Nothing like that. It was easy to talk with him. Like we've been friends for years. And years. He asked about my life, but it wasn't like an interrogation or a quiz show. It was just the two of us talking, but I did most of the talking."

She shook her head. The two of them had spent several hours together, sharing drinks and her memories, and the evening flew by in an instant.

"And he was really interested in everything that I had to say."

It was hard to explain.

"Sometimes men listen," Mariel said, continuing. "But you can tell that they aren't really listening. There's something else that's going on in the back of their minds. They aren't totally and completely invested in you. Paying attention to you."

She paused, remembering his eyes as he'd watched her, seemingly memorizing every feature on her face.

"Well, he was."

"It's another sign," Rebecca said. "I know it. He is Prince Charming, after all. Don't worry about his missing the second dance. He was probably preparing his castle for your arrival."

Mariel raised an eyebrow.

“Castle?”

“Absolutely,” Rebecca said. “And I’ll bet he has a daughter. Except in this version of the fairy tale, you’ll be a good step-mother and the two of you are going to get along famously. Oh, I can see it all now.”

She sighed again, happily.

“Please tell me that you’ll let me do your hair for the wedding.”



Chapter Six: A Daughter



“To a father growing old nothing is dearer than a daughter.”

Euripides

Mariel stepped up the door, surveyed the neatly manicured lawn on either side of the walkway, and pushed the door bell. She was a touch apprehensive.

“I don’t mind dinner,” she thought. “But dinner at his house?”

It was a touch intimate. Perhaps too intimate? She couldn’t easily escape if things didn’t go well. At least, in a restaurant she could excuse herself and say that she had to use the restroom. Mariel couldn’t easily walk out the back door of his house if things weren’t going well.

“Stop it,” she told herself. “You two are not strangers. And haven’t been since that first dance. This is okay. This is fine. There’s no need to be nervous.”

But she was nervous. What if his daughter was home? What would that first meeting be like? Mariel took a deep breath, pushed the door bell, waiting and hoping.

She counted twenty seconds and considered pushing the door bell a second time.

Mariel was just counting twenty-five when she heard the sound of a dead bolt turning. The door opened inward and Mariel smiled at a young woman in her early twenties. She was blonde, attractive, and her makeup was perfect. Her hair looked like she was going out too. She looked Mariel up and down, unsmiling.

“Dad,” she called out. “There’s some strange lady here. I can’t tell if she’s a

Mormon or selling something. Either way, I don't like her."

And with that, she turned and walked away, leaving Mariel staring. Fleeting, she thought of Rebecca's words. A fairy tale introduction, this was not. Unless, this was a tale that included evil stepdaughters.

Andrew appeared. He was grinning. He waved her in.

A head appeared from around the corner.

"Does she hate me?"

"We can only hope," Andrew said. "Mariel, I'd like you to meet my second favorite daughter. Emily."

Emily came forward and extended a hand. Mariel looked at the proffered hand, sniffed, and asked, "No buzzer in there?"

"Not tonight," she said, shaking firmly. "He told me to behave. And I'm his first favorite daughter, by the way. Don't let him fool you."

"Not when you're rude to guests you're not." To Mariel, he said, "She won't be joining us for dinner. Thankfully. Would you like something to drink?"

"A stiff drink," Mariel replied. "Barring that, anything not served by your daughter. Unless you taste it first."

"She wouldn't poison you on the second date," he said. "Maybe the third, but you should be safe tonight."

Andrew ushered her into the kitchen, and pulled two wine glasses from a shelf. Mariel knelt to greet a Siamese cat that wandered into the kitchen, tail raised. It sniffed tentatively at first, then let Mariel scratch its head.

"Is white wine okay?"

"Perfect," Mariel said, still attending to the cat. "Is this your first favorite daughter?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," he said.

"Nala is spoiled and ill-behaved," Emily said. "And the only reason she's your first favorite daughter this evening is because she didn't ask you for money. And if I didn't ask you for money, then I wouldn't be going out with my new friends. I

would be staying here, bothering you while you tried to seduce your girlfriend. And we couldn't have that. Could we? Just wait until she's standing on your chest at six in the morning. Meowing for breakfast. Then we'll see who's your favorite daughter."

"Granted," Andrew said. "I do tend to be grumpy at being awakened at cat-convenient hours, but you're both spoiled and ill-behaved. Here's another twenty if you'll leave sooner."

"Bribery!" Rebecca said. "See what's he's teaching me? I accept."

She plucked the bill from his outstretched hand, kissed him on the cheek, and danced from the room.

"Be careful," she whispered to Mariel in passing.

"I will," Mariel whispered back.

"And you passed the first test. The cat test. Congratulations."

"I thought you were the first test?" Mariel asked.

"The feline is the harder sell," Emily said over her shoulder. After she left the room, Mariel shook her head at Andrew.

"She's you."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "I'm not sure you mean that as a compliment." He handed her a glass of wine and pointed to a seat near the stove. There were several pots simmering. Mariel moved to the stool and sat, giving the stove a glance.

"Why aren't you taking me someplace expensive to eat?"

Andrew surveyed his stove, briefly favored her with a raised eyebrow, and then went back to concentrating on a simmering sauce. He was very particular about his cooking.

"This is an expensive place," he said. "Better too. Much better. Taste this."

Andrew offered up a spoon that he'd been using to stir. She leaned forward, eyeing him warily. It smelled heavenly, whatever it was. Mariel sipped and her eyes widened in surprise.

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed. "That's delicious. What is it?"

“Not telling.”

He smiled at her. Her eyes narrowed as she took a sip from her wine glass. The wine and the sauce combined deliciously. Somehow she knew that the melding of the flavors wasn't an accident.

“See,” he said. “I told you that the food is better here. Besides, this is more intimate. And I don't have to wait to get home from a restaurant to take your clothes off.”

She looked away, blushing slightly. His brazen self-confidence was both attractive and irksome. Mariel was not used to being uncomfortable around a man, yet this man made her blush like a teenager. She took another - longer - pull on her wine glass, trying to recover.

“What makes you think I'm going to take my clothes off?” she asked.

“I don't want you to have to do anything,” Andrew replied. “I'll take your clothes off for you.”

Mariel shook her head and said, “Dinner is going to have to be pretty amazing.” She paused. “Even for a kiss.”

“Oh, it will be,” he said, and then he turned to wink at her. “For a kiss...and maybe more. Remember that I'm a chemist? Good cooking is still all about good chemistry - like the chemistry between us. And dinner...” he stirred the liquid, then raised the wooden spoon like a wand, “is guaranteed to be magical. That's why you're sitting close to me while I cook.”

Mariel was intrigued. “Andrew Churchill. You are one of the strangest men that I have ever met. What does my sitting close to you have to do with chemistry or cooking?”

“Everything,” he said, wide-eyed. “I need you close to me while I cook...for inspiration. I need room to move, but I also want to be able to see you. Talk to you.”

“Tease me.”

He nodded, and said, “Always.”

Mariel sighed.

“Why me?”

It was a rhetorical question. Andrew knew it, but he responded anyways. And he was suddenly serious.

“Because you’re beautiful. That’s why. And like I told you before. I’m in love with you.”

Marisol stared. He looked at her, and shook his head slightly.

“You don’t see it, do you?”

“See what?” she asked. “See myself in the mirror? I’d rather not. These breasts,” she cupped them, pushing them up, “look like sagging pears without the proper support, my butt doesn’t look good from any angle, and my arms wobble. Since my divorce, I’ve gained fifteen, well, twenty pounds from comfort eating. I gave up dance for almost eight months. The only thing I like about myself is my hair and my face. And I don’t even do my own hair. I don’t see how you could possibly be in love with me.”

She shrugged in resignation.

Andrew’s eyes painted an entirely different picture. The extra pounds, in her estimation, a negative, he found an asset. Why would he want some skinny ballerina? Extra pounds, in the right places, only added to a woman’s beauty, and Marisol was definitely carrying her extra weight in the places he found most intriguing. He pictured her partially dishabile, and his pulse quickened at the thought. Her face. He found her face to be her most attractive feature. Each laugh line, a budding wrinkle, meant a year of experience. The ability to unflinchingly look at the world, or a man, and not shy from it, or him - this was what he found most attractive about her. Not so much her beauty, which was not inconsiderable, but her attitude. And her sense of humor.

“I’ll show you,” he said. “Not tonight. But soon enough.”

“Show me what?” Marisol asked.

It was his turn to shrug. “What I see,” he said. He paused, searching for the words. “But it’s not something that you see with your eyes. It’s something that you

have to experience. Forget about that for now. I'll explain more after dinner. For now..." he offered up the spoon he was using to stir, and said, "Smell. This is your first lesson."

Mariel leaned closer, and closed her eyes. She breathed in the delicious scent of their supper.

"I smell garlic, olive oil, onions..."

"Good," Andrew said. He leaned toward her, and for a moment she was afraid that he was going to kiss her - right over the sauce. Blushing, she looked at him, then looked down at the sauce. He was watching her intently.

"This is so stupid," she thought. "I'm blushing like a teenager, and we've been much closer than this on the dance floor. What's wrong with me?"

"Close your eyes again." Andrew waited for Mariel to close her eyes. He waited, not speaking, as she blushed anew.

"Stop looking at me," Mariel whispered. "I can't concentrate on your cooking when you're watching me."

"I like looking at you," he said. "But I do want you to concentrate on the smells. Can you tell which kind of onion I used?"

Andrew continued to stare, smiling.

Mariel breathed in deeply, but couldn't distinguish between the onion and the garlic. She was too distracted by his eyes watching her.

"You're still watching me."

"Yes, I am," he admitted. "A saucy creature like you is more interesting than a sauce. But I am curious to know if you've guessed which kind of onion I used. Do you want a hint? Yellow, white, or sweet?"

"Sweet," Mariel guessed. "Like me."

She eased back from the stove, eyeing him warily.

"Good guess," Andrew said. "And you're right. The recipe calls for white onions, but the taste and texture of a sweet onion changes the flavor just a smidgen. Just enough to make something ordinary into something extraordinary. Like you."

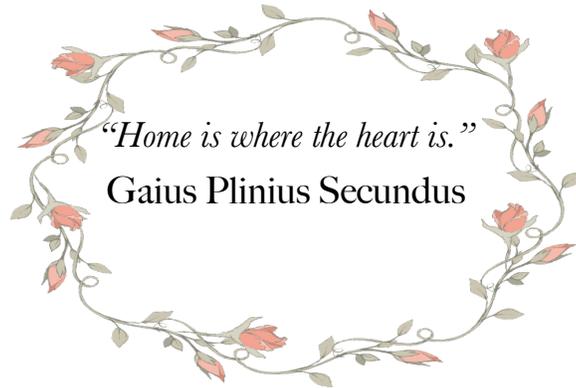
Mariel shook her head. "It's a good thing that your nose works so well, because

I think that you're blind. I'm not extraordinary."

"And I'm not so sure that you're sweet either. I haven't seen it. We'll have to settle for the onion being the only thing in this kitchen that's sweet. More lessons later on the importance of smells. For now, I want you to sit there and look beautiful, tell me why you're afraid of flying, and pay attention to the cat. Not necessarily in that order. Nala approves of you, by the way. That's a sign."



Chapter Seven: A Home



"I'm leaving."

"Not before you say good bye," Andrew said. "Properly."

Emily peered around the corner into the kitchen.

"Is it safe?" she asked.

"That depends," said her father. "On whether or not you are properly dressed."

"And that depends," his daughter answered saucily, "on what you consider proper."

He raised an eyebrow at her, surveying her attire. She was definitely in Saturday night, hitting-the-town, twenty-something clothes - but she didn't look trashy. Somehow Mariel knew that this young lady never looked trashy. Too much class.

And her hair and make-up were perfect. In fact, flawless.

Mariel smiled, shaking her head slightly. She felt sorry for the poor unfortunate male souls that were about to be subjected to her good looks and her equally enticing feminine charms. They had no idea what was about to hit them.

Emily's father was thinking the same thing.

She raised her own eyebrow, cocked a hip, and said, "Well?"

"You look like trouble," he said.

Emily stuck out her tongue at him, and turned her head, offering up a cheek. He kissed it gingerly. She winked at Mariel, grinning.

"Don't mess up my make up," she cautioned.

As she turned to dance out of the kitchen, Emily called out, "Don't let him take

you to his secret lair after dinner. It's dangerous. And he can't be trusted."

"Secret lair?" Mariel asked. "That sounds sinister. Is it like a dungeon?"

Andrew returned his attention to dinner.

"I don't like basements," he said. "Too cramped and the humidity bothers my bones. Makes them creak."

She smiled at him.

"I find it hard to imagine that there's a bone in your body that creaks. Not the way you dance."

"Why, thank you," he said, offering up another spoon. Mariel sipped and was politely complimentary. He was a good cook.

Andrew paused and looked at her. "Truthfully..." he started.

"Wait! What did you just say?" she interrupted. "I think I need another drink. Something to wash the taste of that word out of my mouth."

"Truthfully," he continued, grinning "...and touché, much of my work - much of my thinking - comes from being outdoors. That's part of the reason why I chose this house when we moved here. It had a garden and several acres of woods. Room for me to walk, smell, and think."

"How long have you lived here?"

"About a month."

Mariel stared.

"So you weren't kidding that night we met when you said..."

"...that I'd just flown in," he finished for her. "Nope. I wasn't kidding."

"From where?"

"New Jersey."

"But this place," she said. "Your home. It looks..."

"Lived in?"

"Yes," Mariel agreed. How was it possible? The home was neatly furnished and he moved about the kitchen like it was his own. It felt lived in.

"It's a rental," he explained. "I needed someplace that was already furnished, and

this place had everything that I needed and wanted. Space for the daughter to come home on weekends, as needed. A garden. Enough outdoor space for me to roam about. And a secret lair where I craft my magic love potions.”

Mariel’s mind was turning over and over.

“How did you...”

How had Andrew ended up dancing with her when he’d only recently arrived? How had he found the dance hall? And her? It didn’t make sense. Any of it.

“End up here?”

“Yes,” Mariel said, her mind still reeling.

“I’ve been here before,” Andrew said, with a shrug. “Lots of times. One of the companies that I work for has a manufacturing plant not too far outside of town. Which, I might add, turned out to be incredibly convenient when my daughter decided to attend college here. It was a win-win. I wasn’t ready to part ways with my precious offspring, and moving here allowed me to continue working while still providing her the comforts of home.”

“My work here,” he continued, “has always been short-term. Sometimes I would bring Emily with me. I used to take her on walks around the campus at night after work and she fell in love with the place. That’s part of the reason she chose the university here to go to school. As for me, I’ve never really had the opportunity for social engagements outside of work. Once I settled into my new abode, I looked for someplace where I might find a suitable dance partner. Lo and behold, the first dance hall I go to, I find you. Who would have imagined?”

Mariel couldn’t help but wonder about his future plans. With all of his talk of love - foolish as it sounded - she couldn’t help but wonder. What were their chances of love? Was there a future?

“You just uprooted your whole life - everything - and moved here for your daughter?”

He shook his head.

“This is a rental,” he said. “I didn’t want to buy a home if I wasn’t going to stay

here. I wanted to see Emily settled in. Maybe give her a place to crash when she's tired of dorm food. And the opportunity to bother me. This place wasn't intended to be anything other than temporary. I still have a home - my home - in New Jersey. Most of my work is there. Did you forget that I missed our second appointed rendezvous? That's why I missed the second dance. Work. I had some things to take care of back in Jersey."

"Oh," she said, absently. "Yes. I was miffed."

Andrew could see the thoughts churning in her mind. He shook his head at Mariel.

"And you're wondering what's going to happen with you and me. With us. Am I right? If this place is just a rental, then that means I'm not going to be sticking around. And a romantic entanglement with a handsome stranger is going to be sticky. So why risk it?"

He led her to the dinner table. The table was set - each of the pieces of dinnerware in its place. Dinnerware that was not his. Nothing in the house was his. It was all temporary. Fleeting.

"Uh, something like that," Mariel admitted. "Maybe."

"Because I might up and leave once my daughter is settled into college life? I will let her go, and this place too. I'll leave here and go back to my old life, and it will be like we never even met."

Andrew served the food without speaking. Everything was beautifully arrayed, and had Mariel not been upset by these recent revelations, then she might have appreciated all of the effort that he'd put into dinner. It was quite the display.

He sat down, continued to watch her, then raised his glass. Reluctantly, she smiled and held up her glass.

"Well," he said. "That was the plan."

Mariel caught her breath. A pain - a slight pain - that she didn't know was there, made her twinge.

"Until I met you."

Chapter Eight: A Love Word

“...and from his mouth flow gentle words.”

Hesiod



“I hate you.”

He clinked her glass and smiled. She sniffed.

“Now why would you say such a thing?” he asked. “I’ve prepared a lovely meal, and you’re going to spoil it with that sort of talk.”

“What about these tears?” she said, dabbing at the corner of her eye. “Doesn’t that spoil dinner too?”

Andrew paused to smell the wine and their meal, then answered, “Of course not. There’s nothing wrong with tears. Although I wouldn’t cry on the chicken. There’s already enough salt.”

“Now I really hate you, Winston Churchill,” she said. “Didn’t a woman once threaten to poison his tea? If he was anything like you, then I can see why.”

Andrew cut his meat, raised the fork to his mouth, and said, “I don’t drink tea.”

“But you like the Queen’s drink? I’ll never forget the lesson in limes you gave me on our first...”

“Date?” he said.

“Outing,” she said, ignoring the word. “And how could someone with your name not be a dedicated Anglophile? Surely you must drink tea?”

“Not if it’s served by your lovely hands,” he said. “And if you must know, I prefer France to England. Better wine. Better food. Better scents.”

Happy that the conversation had turned away from her tears, Mariel wondered if he was telling the truth. The man had a penchant for lies, half-truths, and

teasing. She couldn't tell if this was more of the same or not. She decided to table their conversation about plans - his plans - for another time.

"Do you have a favorite arrondissement?" she asked.

Andrew looked up from his plate and studied her for a moment. Her accent was pretty good. Had Fate brought them together? He wondered. First there was conditional approval from Nala, pending further feline review, then Mariel had cleared the second hurdle - his daughter - and now this. Speaking French. Not many people were familiar with the term "arrondissement". He hoped that her choice of vocabulary was not merely an attempt to impress him.

"Not particularly," he said. "I'm more of the Provence-type than the Paris-type. That whole perfume thing."

Mariel stared at him in wonderment, her mouth agape. After a long moment, which he enjoyed, she managed, "What?"

"I lived in Provence for a bit. That's where I met my late wife. We were both in the perfume business. If you do what I do - make perfumes - then there's a good chance that you've spent some time in France. I still have a place there. A small apartment in Grasse."

Wife. Apartment in Grasse. International travel. All of these things spelled doom for their relationship. Mariel was convinced of it. A late wife meant emotional scars, and possibly too much baggage for her to carry. An apartment in Grasse meant that he would be away from her. A long-distance relationship was not conducive to a long-term relationship. She was too set in her ways to endure such an arrangement. And too greedy for his attention. And the final nail in the coffin? The thought of stepping foot on a plane made her shudder.

Andrew saw the thoughts swirling in her head. The attendant emotions danced over her features. He decided that if their relationship matured, and he hoped that it would, then they would stick to dance. No card games for her.

"You're thinking again," he said. "Do you want me to tell you what you're thinking?"

“Do you want me to tell you that I hate you again?” she asked. “Besides, what makes you think that you can read my mind?”

He smiled.

“Do you speak French?” he asked, changing the subject. “Or were you just being saucy? Trying to trip me up?”

Mariel chased a piece of meat with her fork, caught it, then dredged it through the delightful sauce on her plate. She chewed, looking at the man, swallowed, and then said, “I like the sauce.”

“It’s from a can.”

She threw her napkin at him and cried, “I hate you!” Her eyes were shining. “But dinner is delicious. Magical even. Maybe I want you to show me your magic. And not mind reading.”

He looked down at his own napkin that lay draped across his lap. He looked back up at Mariel, cocked his head to the side, and asked, “So soon? We’ve only just started eating.”

Chapter Nine: A Proposal

“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear.”

The First Epistle General of John

“So why the fear of flying? You never answered me. Remember our second dance?”

“Yes,” Mariel said. “I remember.” How could she forget? This man. That night. It was forever seared into her memory.

He waited. She said nothing.

“What does it matter?”

Andrew eased back in his chair, took a sip from his wine glass, and watched her. He took his own time in answering. There were many reasons why she might be afraid of flying. Perhaps a mid-flight bit of turbulence had given her a fright? Maybe she didn’t like cramped spaces? Some people just didn’t like to fly. And that was it. There was nothing more to it.

He wondered though, if there wasn’t something else. Selfishly, he hoped that she would overcome any fears of flying so that she would come to visit him when he was called away for work.

“Let me rephrase that,” he said. “New Jersey is a pretty long drive from here. It would be much easier for you to hop on a plane to come see me, then driving all that way.”

“What makes you think that I’m going to go anywhere to see you?”

Andrew leaned forward in his chair, and smiled at Mariel.

“Because you still haven’t figured out why I’m in love with you. You want to know.”

To her credit, Mariel held his eye, blushed, and said slowly, “Maybe I don’t believe in love at first sight. Maybe I believe that love - falling in love - is a process. It takes time.”

He shook his head.

“I don’t remember reading that in the rule book. Can you find me the page where it says that falling in love takes a long time? Or any time at all?”

Marriel’s eyes narrowed at him.

“You know what I mean,” she said.

He looked at her, eyes wide, and slowly shook his head.

“Nope,” he replied. “I only know what I feel. What I know. What I understand.”

Marriel decided to play the devil’s advocate. Turnabout was fair play. She would see how he liked a taste of his own medicine.

“So let’s just say - hypothetically - that you believe that you’re really in love with me,” she started. “Even though we’ve only shared a few dances...”

“Magical dances...” he murmured, nodding.

“...had one official date where we had a few drinks, and now dinner. I’ve only just met your two daughters. So...”

“So?” Andrew said, waiting.

Marriel hesitated, reluctant to actually put it out in the open. To say the words. She waited a moment longer, took a deep breath, and said, “So if you love me, then are you willing to get married? To marry...me?”

Marriel watched Andrew’s face. She watched and waited. Marriel was playing the devil’s advocate, but she was also being serious. They were both at a time in their lives when it was just as easy to not be married as it was to marry. Both were clearly comfortable and of an age where marriage was not a necessity. It could be more of a luxury, but there was also the very real risk that marriage would complicate both of their lives. Unnecessarily. She had a life. It was a comfortable life. Clearly Andrew had a good life. He travelled the world, had an apartment in France, and God only knew what else. The man was a mystery. So would he be willing to upend his life for her?

Would she be willing to upend her life for him? A near stranger.

He smiled at her, but it wasn’t his typical teasing smile. It was a happy smile.

“Are you asking me to marry you, Mariel MacEwan?”

For a split second she thought he was joking. And she wasn't in the mood. Mariel's emotional state was suddenly volatile - like the chemicals Andrew mixed together to make magic love potions. If he was teasing, then there was a good chance that she would burst into tears and ruin the evening.

Andrew read the emotions playing over her features, and continued before she could say anything.

“Because if you are, then the answer is ‘yes’. Of course, I will marry you. I told you that very first night when we met that I'd fallen in love with you. I meant it then. I mean it now. The only person who doesn't believe it is you.”

Mariel looked away.

It wasn't possible. His words were not possible. She knew it - in her mind. Intellectually, she knew that love at first...anything...was the stuff of fairy tales.

Andrew leaned forward and took her hand. Mariel started at the touch, jumping slightly.

“Mariel,” he said softly. “Maybe it's time I showed you what I do. Grab your plate and your wine glass and follow me. It's time I showed you the power of magical love potions.”



Chapter Ten: A Bit of Magic

*“Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
Adder’s fork and blind-worm’s sting,
Lizard’s leg and howler’s wing...”*

The Second Witch, from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*

“These don’t look like love potions,” Mariel said, frowning, as her eyes scanned a collection of small dark bottles, each with a hand-written label. She noted that the handwriting was crisp and clean – not sloppy.

“They’re not,” Andrew said. “Well, not all of them. Some of these contain bottled memories. Purely sentimental value. While others hold the not-so-secret ingredients that magicians such as myself use to ply our trade.”

“‘Bottled memories?’”

“I’ll explain later,” he said. “First, a lesson in the basics. A lesson in making magic. Have a seat and close your eyes, please. And no peeking. You’ll spoil the fun.”

“I’m not sure that I trust you with my eyes closed.”

He leaned in, and whispered into her ear, “Of course, you can’t trust me, but I want you to experience magic - my magic - and the world of scent. In order to do that, you have to leave your sense of sight behind. You can only use your nose.”

The feel of his breath on her neck made her shiver. She closed her eyes and waited.

“It took me years,” he said, stepping away, “to learn to distinguish the scents that swirl around us. It’s only when you learn how to smell the world around you that you can harness scent. The nose must be trained.”

“How long did it take you to...” she searched for the words. “To learn to smell?”

He nodded at her choice of words. She was correct. He did indeed have to

learn to smell.

“I was a fast learner,” he said. “I have a talent for it. It only took me seven years to get a firm grasp on the nuances of scent.”

“Seven years!” she exclaimed. “That’s a long time.”

He shrugged. “How long does a doctor go to school? Or an attorney? Imagine being a musician or a painter. They never stop learning and growing in their art. Nor have I. It took me seven years to learn the basics, but I’m always learning, studying, perfecting my craft. It’s what I do.”

Intrigued, Mariel opened her eyes and looked at Andrew. He was suddenly so serious. It was strange to see the man so intent. He was almost like a different person. Was his sense of humor a facade? Was she finally meeting the real man? She wondered.

“Close your eyes,” he said, shaking his head and wagging a finger at her. Dutifully, she closed her eyes and listened to the clink of bottles as he gathered this and that. A drawer opened and closed, followed by the sounds of plastic being crinkled and the unmistakable sound of something being unwrapped.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes,” Mariel said, nodding.

“Good,” came his reply. “I want you to breathe slowly and try to relax. Don’t worry about trying to smell something. I don’t want you to sniff. I just want you to breathe in and out naturally. Let the scent come to you. I’m going to let you experience certain scents and I want you to tell me what it is that you see, hear, taste, or feel.”

“What about what I smell? Isn’t this whole thing about what I smell?”

“This is about what you experience,” he said. “Yes, you can tell me what you smell, but part of the magic of scent is that all of the other senses come into play too. Are you ready?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Okay. Here we go.” She heard more movement, a bottle being opened, then

her head was filled with the most wonderful scent.

“Lilies,” she breathed, opening her eyes in surprise and amazement. The scent was strong but not unpleasant or overpowering. Andrew was smiling at her.

“Yes, lilies,” he said. “Good nose. Now close your eyes again and try again.”

Slightly impatient at the game and now more curious than ever to learn more about his brand of magic, Mariel favored him with a look and deliberately closed her eyes. There was more clinking of glass and rustling as Andrew worked with the tools of his trade.

“Now tell me,” he said softly, “What do you smell?”

Mariel suddenly drew her head back in surprise, staring at the small strip of paper before her. She didn’t want to guess and be wrong.

“I know I’m right,” she thought emphatically. “But how did...”

She leaned forward, sniffing the proffered strip again, closing her eyes and savoring the scent that filled her head with memories.

“I’m on the beach,” she murmured, then added, “What is this?”

“A paper scent strip.”

Mariel’s eyes snapped open, ready to swat him for answering her question so literally, but saw Andrew staring back at her intently.

“With a little magic dabbed on its surface,” he continued. “This is one of my secret ingredients. It’s a fragrance type known as ozone. I’m glad you thought of the ocean. It’s supposed to.”

There were layers and layers to this man, and the more layers she uncovered the more Mariel felt drawn to him. He kept doling out portions of his person bit by bit and with each morsel she found herself hungry for more. It was both alluring and frightening.

“Why can’t he just be boring?” Mariel groused internally. “It would be so much easier. So much easier than falling love with a man who might just ride away into the sunset, leaving me forever.”

“I want to smell something else,” she said, pushing away the negative thoughts

that threatened to disrupt their game. "Something interesting"

"Okay," he grinned, reaching for another bottle, enjoying their sport. He took a dropper and let two drops of clear liquid fall onto a fresh paper scent strip, then offered it to Mariel. Her head dipped slightly as she inhaled deeply, eyes closed. A perplexed look came over her features and she squinted slightly in distaste.

"I don't like this one," she said.

Andrew smiled knowingly. "What does it remind you of?" he asked.

"Uh," she struggled for the words. "Strange," Mariel thought, "I can't find the words, but I'll be damned if it doesn't remind me of..."

It was a ridiculous thought.

"...Chinese food?" she said, opening her eyes and looking at him sideways.

Andrew laughed aloud, nodding. "Yes," he agreed. "It's an oriental fragrance. Although I don't think the makers of that scent want visions of fortune cookies and egg foo young running through your head."

Mariel liked the memory triggers that each scent provided. She was starting to understand just how powerful scent and her sense of smell could be.

"Sorry," she said. "This pretty little head of mine just thinks what it thinks. I guess I'm just not that sophisticated."

"Okay," Andrew countered, "then we'll try something a little more your speed. A little something that will appeal to your simple sensibilities."

"Try me."

"Really?" he raised an eyebrow. "Here in the office? It's not very comfortable. Can you wait for the bedroom? Much more comfortable."

Mariel swatted at his arm.

"Careful," Andrew warned. "You'll make me spill my favorite scent."

"Why is it your favorite?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Wait and see," he instructed. "I know you'll like it too."

She watched with interest as he replaced the cap of one bottle and opened another. Taking a fresh dropper, Andrew carefully withdrew a few milliliters of

another clear liquid. With expert care he let a few drops fall onto another strip of scent paper. He gently laid the dropper on the table and picked up the scent-laden strip. Grinning at her, he said, "Close your eyes."

Dutifully, she complied, smiling slightly. Mariel didn't even have to breathe in deeply to suddenly have her head infused with the scent and a flood of memories.

"Oh my," she breathed. "What is that?" Her eyes were open wide as she stared at the strip of paper. Without asking, she took his hand in her own and pulled it closer to her nose.

"Coumarin," Andrew replied. He watched her carefully, enjoying the feel of her hands on his and her close proximity.

"It's my dad cutting the grass on a hot Saturday afternoon."

"Uh-huh," he agreed. "Freshly cut hay. Reminds me of a farm."

"Oh my God," she replied. "That's amazing. So what's next?" she asked, eager for more.

"Bottled memories."

She looked at him, a dubious expression on her face.

Brow knitted in concentration, Andrew surveyed his collection of bottles, and he asked, "Are you ready for the magic?"

"I was hoping for dessert first."

He smiled, refusing to take the bait, and continued his lecture.

"Scent has always played an important part in our survival. Think of all that we need and use with regard to scent? How life has evolved because of scent and its uses? Animals use it to mark territory. Cooks use it to make us hungry and want to eat. Flowers use it to pollinate the world. Think about a cat in heat. What makes the male cat want to breed with her? Scent. It is the stuff of love and life."

"But a cat in heat has not dabbed herself with perfume," she said. "Those are pheromones."

"True," Andrew replied. "And pheromones are powerful triggers, but they may only trigger a physiological reaction - a mating reaction."

He looked at her and winked.

Mariel held his eye, and said, "Let's hope Nala is fixed."

He grinned and continued, "The mating reflex may be temporary. It doesn't last."

"I hope it lasts..."

"Me too," he said. "And even if that only lasts a few minutes, the memory of it won't...if you know how to capture those memories. And that's the magic of perfume. Scent is a powerful trigger for memory, and a well-crafted perfume can trigger a memory, provoke an emotion, long after the event itself has transpired. A slight waft of a perfume can transport a man twenty years in time – back to his high school prom. Back to the night he received his first kiss. It was the perfume that she wore. He can't remember the color of her eyes, but he can remember her scent and the taste of her lips. The feel of his hands and arms around her slender waist. These are the memories that are triggered by perfume. Bottled memories."



Chapter Eleven: A Memory

“The course of true love never did run smooth...”

Lysander, from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*



“Please tell me he kissed you goodnight.”

“No,” Mariel said. “No kiss.”

“What happened?” Rebecca asked, pausing in her work, and favoring her friend with a concerned look. She was mixing hair color in much the same fashion that Andrew mixed scents together, each one an artist in his and her own right. “Did something happen? Oh, please don’t tell me that there weren’t any sparks. I couldn’t take it if there was just fizzle.”

“There were sparks,” Mariel said. “There were lots of sparks. There’s definitely chemistry. I can feel it, and I know he can too.”

“But no kiss? How can there be chemistry and no kiss?”

“He said that we weren’t ready for our first kiss.”

And Mariel believed him. Yes, there was chemistry. He made her laugh, and had even made her cry. He was a dreamy dancer and she loved being in his arms. He could cook, and his attention hardly ever seemed to waver from her. So what was the problem?

“I think I’m the problem,” she admitted.

“You?” Rebecca started, incredulous. “I don’t believe it. Did he say that?”

“No,” said Mariel. “In fact, he told me again that he loved me.”

“Girl, are you crazy? He said that he loved you. Again.”

And that was the rub. Mariel hadn't thought about love in quite some time. Romance? Certainly. But love? She wasn't about to say that she loved the man when she hardly knew him. They hadn't even been grumpy with each other. Or kissed for that matter. How could he say that he loved her when so many things hadn't yet happened? Hell, they hadn't even slept together. Love was a complex thing, and Mariel wasn't ready to say, or even think, about the word love.

"It just can't be that simple," Mariel said.

"Love never is."

"But he makes it sound like it is. Like it's as easy as love at first..." She searched for the words. "Love at first dance. Love at first date. Love at first..."

"So tell me what happened after dinner," Rebecca asked. "Something had to have happened. You said dinner was fabulous. So what happened after dinner?"

"He showed me his work."

"His magic love potions, right? So what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, really," Mariel admitted. "It was actually quite fascinating. I had no idea the amount of work that goes into creating a perfume. There are layers and layers of complexity. Like love. It's not an easy thing, but he makes it sound like it is. He said that love can be found in a bottle. In 'bottled memories'."

"What's a 'bottled memory'?" Rebecca asked.

"What's your favorite song from when you were in high school?"

Rebecca snorted. Memories. The soundtrack of her teenage years played in her mind, and she was transported back to high school when her hair was huge, teased, and covered in hair spray.

"No favorite," she said, sighing happily. "Anything by Duran Duran. Anything at all."

"What are you thinking about?" Mariel asked. "What memories were just jogged by the thought of those songs?"

"Boys," Rebecca admitted. "And the fact that I could fit into jeans that are several sizes smaller than what I wear now. And boys."

“That’s what a ‘bottled memory’ is, except that Andrew uses perfume to capture all of those thoughts instead of a song. He said that some people keep diaries. Other people take pictures with their phones and keep digital albums. He bottles his memories. He has one bottle that smells like cotton candy. He said that it was the memory of his daughter when she was little and they went to the state fair together. It sounds strange, but it reminded me of something that a little girl would wear. It was innocent.”

Mariel paused, thinking about the memories that he’d shared with her. Some were simple and sweet, while others were more complex. Some “memories” were more complex because of the various and subtle ways that the scents combined to form a whole. And some were more intense because of the emotional context of the “memory”.

“I even met his late wife, in a sense.”

“Uh-oh,” Rebecca said, frowning. “That sounds creepy. Does he have her embalmed, hidden somewhere? That sounds like a lot of emotional baggage. Did he show you her picture?”

“No,” Mariel said. “No picture. I have no idea what she looked like...but I feel like I know her. Like I’ve met her. And she’s nothing like me. Nothing at all.”

Rebecca was confused. She frowned at her friend and waited.

“He let me smell one of the bottled memories of her,” Mariel said, at last. “He said that he wanted me to meet her. At least, his memory of her. It was sweet, really. And emotional. I think she was a nice person.”

“You could tell that from a little bottle?”

Mariel nodded. “I’m starting to think that I can. I’ve always just taken smells - scents - for granted. I never realized that there was so much more to it. Memories, emotions. All of it linked by...” She laughed.

“What is it?” Rebecca asked.

“I’m starting to think that Andrew is right,” she said. “That maybe he does make magic potions.”

She shook her head, smiling, and said, "And damn him if he wasn't right."

"About?" Rebecca asked.

"Our first kiss. That we weren't ready." She paused, and was honest with herself. "That I wasn't ready."

Mariel shook her head again at a fleeting, foolish thought. Rebecca saw it and pounced.

"Say it," she said, eyes narrowing. "I saw it. The thought that you just had. Tell me."

"No," Mariel said. "It's stupid and it will only encourage you and your nonsense." She blushed with embarrassment, suddenly feeling foolish that the thought had even entered her mind. Rebecca raised an eyebrow and waited.

Finally, Mariel relented with a sigh, and said, "Sleeping Beauty."

"Oh my God!" Rebecca yelled. "Of course. Why didn't I see it all before? Your first kiss has to be as special as the one in the story. I can't believe it. You really and truly are living a fairy tale romance. First, you were Cinderella at the ball. Next, you'll be Sleeping Beauty, awakened by a kiss from your one true love."

"So what comes next?" Mariel asked. "Which fairy tale am I going to live?"

Rebecca's eyes widened at her own fairy tale thoughts, then she grinned slyly at Mariel.

"Beauty..." she winked. "...and the Beast?"



Chapter Twelve: A Tango?

"You live as long as you dance."

Rudolf Nureyev

"How long is this dance going to last?"

Marisol was happy to be in his arms again. Happy to be so close. To feel him move her about the dance floor. So why did she have to ruin it with a question like that?

"About two and a half minutes, I suspect," Andrew replied.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. Are we going to share a few turns around the floor and then find new partners, or..."

"Careful," he said, stepping quickly, and moving them past a couple that was dangerously close to interrupting their rhythm.

"Whew," he breathed. "That was close."

Marisol looked askance at the interlopers.

"We almost had 'the talk'," he said. "It's a good thing those folks can't keep time."

Marisol suddenly hugged him close to her, messing up their timing. He stopped moving and let his arms drape over her. He didn't speak. He just held her and waited.

She didn't care that they'd stopped dancing in the middle of the floor. It didn't matter to her if people stared. Marisol just wanted to hold him and be held.

"What wrong?" he whispered in her ear. "Did I misunderstand the metaphor?"

"I hate you sometimes," she said against his chest. "Do you know that?"

"Yes, I do."

She pulled back slightly and looked up at him.

"I want to keep dancing."

Andrew eased back, moved his arms to their appointed place, waited four beats, then started moving. Marisol followed.

“But sometimes the music stops,” she continued.

“I keep pretty good time in my head,” Andrew said. “I don’t need music to keep dancing. It’s nice, but not necessary.”

“Maybe the band packs up and moves away? No more music. It doesn’t play here any more. Ever. What happens then?”

“That depends on you.”

“What do you mean?” Mariel asked. She couldn’t help it if his work took him away from her. That was beyond her control. Mariel had no say over the fact that they each had their own separate lives, and that these two lives weren’t necessarily convergent. Certainly they’d met on the dance floor and shared a few dances, but that didn’t mean that they would, or could, stay together.

“Do you know how to tango?”

Mariel did not. She appreciated the sensuality of the dance, but had never learned. The tango required a little more intimacy than was required of the waltz. She’d never found the right partner.

“I thought you lived in France?” Mariel asked. “Not Argentina.”

Andrew shook his head and smiled.

“Don’t you know what they call Buenos Aires? The Paris of South America - a very cosmopolitan city. I’ve done some work there.”

“And learned the tango?” Mariel asked.

“Not yet.”

The music stopped and Andrew brought them to a stand still. He held her though, waiting.

“I’m willing to learn though,” he said. “To learn a new dance. Even something as difficult as the tango. Maybe you could learn a new dance too?”

Mariel stared, her heart beating a little faster. She hoped that the music would start again. She hoped that the music would start again so she could continue dancing - a familiar tune, a familiar dance.

“If I’m going to learn the tango,” he pressed, “then I need the right dance

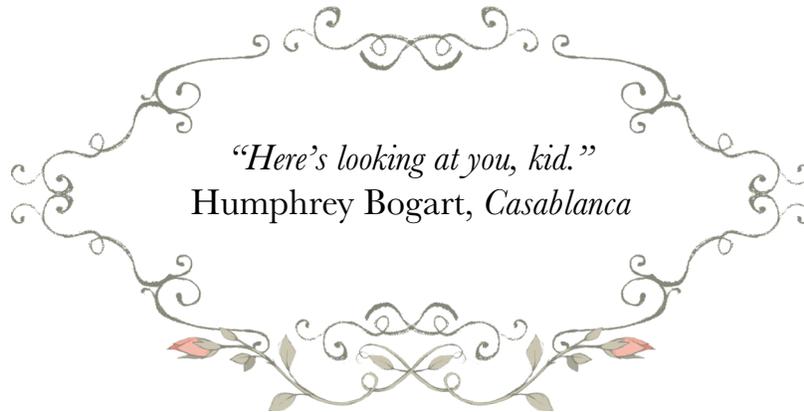
partner.”

“What if I’m a slow learner?” Mariel asked.

“Then I’ll be patient.”

“What if...” she hesitated. “I can’t learn a new dance?”

Chapter Thirteen: A Flight



"Why are we here? Of all places."

"Because we're on a date."

"I'm not sure that this counts as a date," Mariel said. "Torture, maybe. But not a date."

"Trust me," Andrew reassured. "You'll enjoy yourself. Think of it as both a date and...learning a new dance."

"This looks like a terminal. Not the tango."

It was an airport terminal. And part of his plan to help Mariel with her fear of flying. Or whatever it was. He led her past the ticket counters to the main hub of activity. They stepped into a large, open-air atrium filled with chairs, a coffee shop, a bar, and several restaurants. Well, only a few of the eating establishments could actually be classified as restaurants. Most were fast food joints, carefully situated to feed the famished as they disembarked. Andrew walked past the fast food to a small cafe. It had a French-sounding name and boasted of beignets and thick-cut bacon BLT's.

Mariel's eyes widened.

"I didn't even know this place existed," she said. "How strange. It looks nice...and out of place."

Andrew shrugged. "You'd be amazed at what you can find," he said. "If you're open to the possibilities."

"Is that a swipe at me?"

He took her hand, held it up, and kissed it.

"Never, my sweet," he protested. "It's just that airports have a lot to offer. More than you might think."

Mariel sighed heavily. "As long as you don't try to make me get on a plane, I'll be

fine.”

“No getting on planes,” he said. “Dinner. And people watching. There should be a whole slew of evening flights coming in as we dine. Best time to watch folks.”

Mariel looked at him. An airport was hardly a romantic setting for a date. At first she thought he’d been joking when he told her where they were going for dinner. An airport? She wasn’t about to set one foot on the tarmac and the word “boarding pass” made her slightly nauseous.

“We could people watch lots of different places.”

“True,” he said, “but this is a special kind of people watching.”

He waved to the waitress who moved amongst the tables of the nearly empty cafe.

“Sit anywhere you like,” the young woman called out cheerfully. “I’ll be over to get your drink order in just a minute.”

“Thank you,” Andrew replied, and ushered Mariel over to a table near one of the main entrance/exit gates of the terminal. The crush of passengers would move right past their table.

Shortly thereafter, Andrew raised his glass, an eyebrow, and clinked.

“Here’s to love...taking flight.”

Mariel blushed slightly, took a sip of her beer, and ignored his comment.

“So what’s so special about watching people at an airport?”

Andrew leaned forward in his chair to explain. “An excellent question. Think about it. Why are people here? Because they are either leaving or returning...home. They’ve been separated from the familiar - what they know...and love. It could be business or vacation, but this is where you transition from your home to someplace else and back again. It’s that back again that we’re here to witness.”

Mariel thought it was strange. She’d never really given much thought to airports being someplace special. Certainly, she’d flown before, but an airport was just an airport. A mundane part of life. There was nothing magical about the place. For her, airports were a reminder of her past. A past that she would just as soon forget.

“See that mother over there?” Andrew inclined his head, pointing with his eyes. “The one with the two kids? One on her hip and the other in the stroller?”

Mariel looked, saw the trio, and nodded. “Yes,” she said. “What’s so special about them? Do you know them?”

Andrew shook his head.

“No, but I want you to watch them when the passengers starting coming in off

of their flights. I want you to watch her face. And the faces of the children. Watch her when she sees her husband and the kids when they see their father.”

Mariel shrugged.

“I’m sure they’ll be happy to see one another,” she said. “What’s so special about that?”

“Well,” he explained. “I’m going to have to head back out east shortly, and maybe even overseas...”

He was interrupted by the announcement of a flight arrival. The woman with the two children perked up at the mention of the airline and flight number.

Andrew saw it, and motioned with his hand.

“Watch,” he said. “She’s waiting for someone on that plane.”

The pair sat in silence, waiting, and watching. Andrew was patient, but Mariel was not. His patience was rewarded when the mother suddenly lit up and pointed. The child she was holding struggled to be let down, and then started running. A man, clearly her father, knelt with outstretched arms and caught the mess of pigtails - both making delighted sounds. He scooped her up and strode toward his wife. She was just as eager to see her husband as their daughter, but restrained herself - barely. As they drew near, she reached out and gently touched his cheek before kissing him. The child, cramped by the kiss, pushed the pair apart, and all three laughed. The man then bent over the stroller and made happy faces and sounds to the little one inside. The whole time, the young woman never stopped watching her husband.

Andrew looked over at Mariel. She knew that he was watching her, but she waited a moment before returning his gaze.

“So when I get back,” he said, reaching out to touch her hand, “I’d like you to pick me up here at the airport. And I’d like your face to light up like that when you see me.”

Mariel blushed clear down to her elbows. She looked away. There were more people coming in off of the plane, and the rush of people made conversation difficult.

“But I don’t know if that’s going to happen,” he said.

Mariel flinched at his words, and looked sharply at him.

“Why is that?”

“Because of all of this...” he said, looking around at the airport terminal. “...flying that you seem to be so afraid of. Or we could call it dancing. Whichever metaphor you like. Pick one. Does it really matter? In the end, are you afraid of flying...or loving? Of being loved?”

Marisol pulled her hand away, but held his gaze.

“I didn’t realize that we were here to psychoanalyze me.” There was an iciness to her voice. She was suddenly angry and afraid. Angry that he’d hit too close to home, and afraid that he was right.

Andrew was totally nonplussed by her reaction. In fact, he expected something of the sort.

What he didn’t expect was Marisol getting up from the table and leaving the airport - alone.



Chapter Fourteen: A Tear

“Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears...”

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the saddest person of all? Me...that’s who.”

Mariel stared at herself in the mirror, her face streaked with tears, which she’d managed to hold back until she got home. Then the dam broke and she’d sobbed.

“What was I thinking?” Mariel asked. “How could I just leave him like that? He probably thinks I’m crazy, or worse.”

And part of Mariel wondered if she wasn’t crazy. Or something. A perfectly dreamy Prince Charming had come into her life, and what did she do? Push him away.

“It’s not like he was wrong either,” Mariel said to herself. She dabbed at her eyes, then walked into her bedroom. She pulled open the bottom drawer of her nightstand, pushed aside a couple of well-worn books, and stared at it.

Her passport.

It was still valid. She could leave the country at any moment. Only she hadn’t left the country since she’d returned from Germany - five years ago. Alone.

It was supposed to have been a special trip for their anniversary, but instead Mariel and her husband had argued while overseas. He returned early and filed divorce papers six weeks later. Not wanting to waste the money on lodging that had already been paid for, Mariel had stayed in Germany and tried to enjoy herself. To no avail. In her gut, she knew that the moment she returned home that her marriage would be over - was already over. She just wasn’t ready to admit it to herself.

Just like she wasn’t ready to admit that Winston Andrew Churchill might just be a wonderful man, who, for some reason, said that he was in love with her. Her!

It made no sense.

“But him saying that he loves me - that he would marry me - doesn’t make sense either. Nobody can say that and mean it. We barely know each other.”

Mariel pulled her passport from the drawer, opened it, and read the date of the last stamp. She closed it, shaking her head, then clutched it to her chest as she curled up on her bed and sobbed.



Chapter Fifteen: A Lesson

“When life hands you lemons, make whisky sours.”

W. C. Fields

“May I cut in?”

George stared, unsure of what to say. Mr. Allen saved the much younger man from his own folly.

“Because there’s a young lady standing near the punch bowl. Asking about you. Blonde, petite, attractive. I told her that I would cut in, thereby freeing you up...to dance with her.”

“Really?”

“Hurry, George,” Mr. Allen instructed. “Before someone else sweeps her off of her feet.”

And with that, he swept Mariel away in perfect time with the music. After a few turns around the floor and several measures of music, Mariel caught her breath.

“Thank you, Mr. Allen,” she said. “Thank you for saving me.”

He merely nodded and kept dancing. Mariel was glad that it was Mr. Allen who had saved her from the attentions of George. He would share a dance, then move on to another partner. He wouldn’t muddle up the dancing with idle chitchat. Mariel wasn’t in the mood for talk. She wasn’t much in the mood for dancing either, but here she was, waiting and hoping for the right dance partner to come along. Thus far, she hadn’t had much luck.

It had been two days since her last “date” with Andrew, and she hadn’t phoned him for fear of what he might say. Mariel didn’t even know what she was going to say when, or if, she saw him again. She’d come to the dance, hoping that he would show up and that they could dance together and all would be forgotten. All would be forgiven. Everything would be all right.

But he was not there at the dance hall. Mariel had spent the first hour scanning

the doors, waiting and hoping against hope to see him walk out onto the dance floor. Nothing. It was well into the second hour and her hopes were fading fast. To make matters worse, she'd been so distracted that she left herself get ensnared by George. Fortunately, Mr. Allen had seen her predicament and come to her rescue.

"Paris," he said, jarring Mariel from her reverie.

She looked at him, eyes widening.

"What did you say?"

"Your perfume," he said simply. "It's very nice. Paris, I believe."

"How did you..." Mariel started, but never finished because Mr. Allen twirled her away. He caught her on the third beat, hesitated on the fourth, then moved on the first beat of the next measure.

"...know?"

Mr. Allen ignored her question, choosing instead to dance. Mariel waited. She didn't have to wait long.

"I was hoping to see Mr. Churchill this evening," he said.

Although tempted to make a flippant remark, she held her tongue. After a long moment, she admitted, "I was hoping to see him too."

"Probably for different reasons," he said. "I hope."

She smiled. The older man saw the smile and nodded.

"That's better," he said. "And that's the reason I was hoping to see him here this evening. For you."

Tears threatened to well up in her eyes. Mariel blinked and looked away. He noticed and said nothing. When the music ended, Mariel thanked him, excused herself, and practically ran to the restroom.

She attended to this and that, checked her make-up, checked it again, looked at herself in the mirror, and decided that was not a healthy thing to do.

"Get a grip, Mariel," she told herself. "Maybe he's left town? For business. That's why he's not here tonight. Didn't he tell me that he had to head back east

fairly soon?”

Trying to convince herself that her romance with Andrew wasn't over, Mariel heaved a sigh, and decided to call it a night. She left the bathroom and headed back to the hall to collect her jacket. As she pushed through the door, she saw Mr. Allen standing there. Waiting. He caught her eye and motioned with his head to join her. He walked toward the table laden with refreshments, and Mariel followed. She wasn't in the mood to talk, but something about his behavior intrigued her. The man hardly ever spoke, other than pleasantries, but in this one evening he'd said more to her than in all the years she'd known him.

“Join me for a drink,” he said. It wasn't a question.

This time Mariel didn't hold her tongue. “Only if you can pour two, no, make it three fingers. Neat.”

“I left my flask in my other jacket,” he said. “Otherwise, I would oblige you. Tonight you can have punch, lemonade, water, or tea. Your choice.”

“Water, thank you.”

He handed Mariel a glass of water, motioned for her to sit next to him, and got a glass of lemonade for himself.

“Indulge an old man, please.”

Mariel sat next to him and watched as he held up his drink. He looked at it, took a sip, and squinted slightly.

“It's a little tart. Do you know what it needs?”

“Sugar?”

Mr. Allen nodded, and reached over to grab a small packet of sugar from the table. He tore it open and emptied its contents into his glass. He did it a second time.

“Do you know what would happen if I kept adding more and more sugar?”

“Ruin a perfectly good glass of lemonade?” Mariel said.

“Hmmm, yes,” he agreed. “That too. But something else. Say I keep stirring in more and more sugar, and put it on a stove...”

“Then it really won’t be worth drinking,” Mariel said, interrupting. “Unless you’re going to make a hot toddy. And you’ll need that whiskey, after all.”

Mr. Allen shrugged. “It’s already not worth drinking,” he said. “Too much sugar. But that’s not the point. What happens to the sugar after I put my drink on the stove and heat it up?”

It was her turn to shrug. “It dissolves, I guess.”

“Yes,” he said, nodding. “And I can keep adding more and more sugar and it will keep on dissolving. Up until a point. With the heat, this concoction will keep its liquid form.”

He paused to look at her, raising an eyebrow. She nodded, confused.

“But truthfully,” he said, continuing with his lesson, “this glass of lemonade will be holding more sugar than it can handle.”

He reached for another packet and tore it open. Instead of pouring the entire contents of the packet into the glass, he pinched a single granule of sugar, dropped it into his palm, and showed it to Mariel.

“See this tiny bit of sugar?” he asked.

Mariel nodded.

“What do you think this tiny speck of sugar is going to do if I drop it into my glass of lemonade? Lemonade that I’ve pulled off of the stove and let cool. Lemonade that still looks like lemonade.”

“Not much.”

He shook his head, held his palm over the glass, and let the tiny granule slide into the drink.

“When I drop this tiny bit of sugar into the lemonade you will see a change. Immediately. The liquid will start to crystalize, and it will turn from a liquid to a solid in a matter of moments. It goes from one physical state to another.”

Mariel nodded. It had been many years since she’d taken, and barely passed, a chemistry class. She trusted Mr. Allen at his word.

“You’re Mr. Churchill is a chemist, is he not?”

Marisol stared.

“Then he would know something about supersaturated solutions. Like my lemonade with too much sugar. And how something so seemingly small - a tiny bit of sugar - can cause such a dramatic reaction.”

He took a sip from the glass, and looked out onto the dance floor.

“What seems so simple, at first, is actually a complex chemical reaction.”

“What seems so simple,” Marisol repeated. “At first...”

At first sight. That’s what he’d said. Love at first sight. Marisol’s eyes widened in understanding.

“Mr. Allen,” she gasped. “How did you...”

Marisol was speechless. She stared at the man in wonderment. With one small lesson, she finally believed Andrew. She believed that he could have fallen in love with her - that he had fallen in love with her - in an instant. Only it wasn’t in an instant. It was so much more than that.

A sudden thought struck her.

“I have to go,” she said. “Right now. I have to go.”

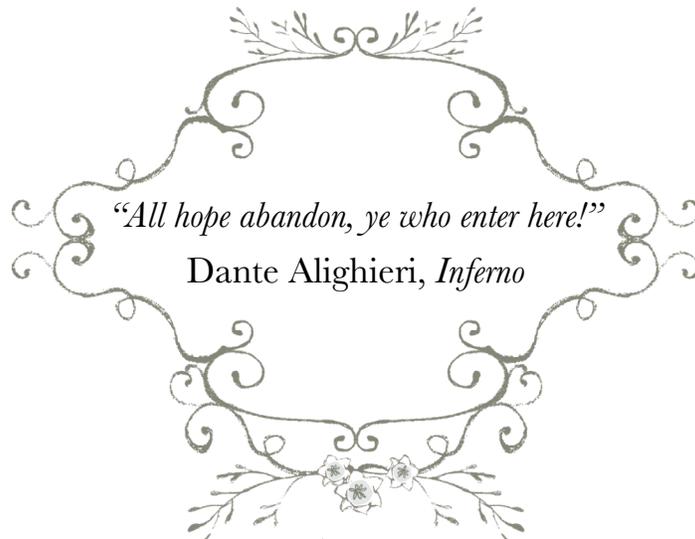
Marisol reached for Mr. Allen, took his head in her hands, and kissed him on his cheek. Startled, he smiled, almost spilling his drink.

“Oh, I love you so much for this,” she said. “I don’t know how I can ever thank you.”

“Go,” he said, shooing her away. “You need to tell him that you love him. Not me.”

“Oh, I will,” Marisol said. “Believe me, I will.”

Chapter Sixteen: A Mess



Marisol stood anxiously. Waiting. This time she only counted to ten before Emily answered the door.

"So just how badly did my dad mess things up?"

Marisol shook her head.

"He didn't," she said. "I did."

Marisol squared her shoulders, took a deep breath, and continued. "I need to fix things between us. The sooner the better. I feel so..." She searched for the words. Empty. Sad. Pick your brand of self-pity and Marisol was wallowing in it.

"Lost?" Emily offered.

Marisol barely smiled. "Yes," she admitted. "Lost is a good word."

"Well, you've come to the right place."

"Really?" Marisol asked. She had no idea how she would be received. If she would even be received.

"Is he here?"

Emily ushered her inside.

"No," she said. "But he left something for you. He told me to give it to you when you showed up."

“Not ‘if I showed up?’” Mariel asked.

Emily shook her head. “It was a firm ‘when’. Not an ‘if.’”

Mariel heaved a sigh of relief. Things were looking better and better. There was still hope.

Then a sudden thought nagged.

“He didn’t want to give it to me himself?” Mariel asked. Maybe it was a break-up letter?

“He can’t.”

It was Emily’s turn to sigh as she handed over a small, carefully wrapped, package. Mariel accepted it gingerly, and waited, watching the young woman.

“Here’s what he wanted me to give you,” Emily said. “And...” the young woman hesitated. “I have some bad news.”

Mariel barely hesitated.

“Tell me,” she whispered, still hopeful that not all was lost. How could it be? Emily was standing here, talking to her. If there was no hope, then surely Andrew’s daughter wouldn’t have even answered the door.

“He couldn’t give that to you because he’s not here. Not here in town. Not here...” she winced at the words, “...in the country.”

Mariel’s eyes widened. Emily rushed through the next bit of information, hoping to break the news in a quick pull-off-the-band-aid-so-fast-you-don’t-feel-it...or not such much.

“And he’s going to be gone for the next two weeks. Maybe even more.”

Two weeks! Or more...

Mariel quailed at the thought of not seeing him for two weeks. There was no way that she could be apart from him for that long. She had to see him. As soon as possible.

“Where is he?” Mariel asked, after she’d taken a moment to catch her breath.

“France.”

Emily shook her head. “Of all the places. He goes to France and I’m stuck here

cat-sitting and housekeeping. And I have to cook for myself, unless I want to eat dorm food. It's not even fair."

Marisol agreed. "You're right. It's not fair."



Chapter Seventeen: A Gift

“...the love-gift of a fairy tale.”

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

“I can’t do it.”

“What do you mean, you can’t do it?” Rebecca said. “Of course, you can.”

Marisol’s shoulders sagged. She looked forlorn. Rebecca paused in her work, comb in one hand and shears in the other. The stylist looked at her friend.

“How long have you been holding onto that?”

“Since last night,” Marisol said. She sat in the chair, covered by a cape, but in her lap she held the small package that Emily had given her. Marisol didn’t have the courage to open it last night, and she wasn’t feeling any more courageous this morning. What if it was bad news?

“And you still haven’t opened it?” Rebecca asked. “Are you crazy? I would have torn it open right then and there. As soon as she handed it to me. Or in the car when I was alone. Or at home. Or this morning. Any time. What are you waiting for?”

Tears threatened to spill from her eyes, but Marisol somehow managed to blink them away. After a long moment, she whispered, “What if it’s goodbye?”

“Then I’ll finish making you look beautiful, I’ll cancel the rest of my day, we’ll get a bottle of wine, or two, and then we’ll have a really good cry. Together.”

Marisol smiled. She felt better already. Rebecca was good for her soul and her spirits.

“But that’s not what’s going to happen,” Rebecca said.

Marisol raised an eyebrow. “And just what makes you say that?” she asked.

“Because I’ve told you from day one that this was a fairy tale love story. And all fairy tales end with happily ever after. Whatever is in that package is...” She searched for the words.

Mariel waited, hoping for the right words. The right words that would calm her nerves enough to look inside.

“...is going to be enchanting.”

Mariel sighed. Enchanting. Another word for magical. She looked at her friend, and said, “Do you mind...”

“Not at all,” Rebecca said. She put down her tools, unsnapped the cape that was draped across and around Mariel’s shoulders, and freed her from its confines. Mariel sat in the chair, still clutching the package, looking vulnerable.

Mariel looked down at the gift a moment longer, then slowly started to pull off the wrapping paper. The paper was expensive and very carefully cut and taped. She almost hated to undo it. The box was just as carefully crafted. With one more hopeful glance at Rebecca, Mariel lifted the lid and gasped. Inside was an exquisitely fashioned glass bottle - a perfume atomizer. The bottle contained a clear liquid.

Mariel’s heart began to beat faster.

“He made me a...” she thought. It wasn’t just a scent that he’d made for her. She knew that it was more than that. There was a note. It was handwritten. Mariel pulled out the note and read.

My Princess,

Once upon a time there was a man who had loved and lost...and found love again. He hadn’t been searching for love, but, in a miracle that he still didn’t quite understand, love had found him at first...

Love at first glance.

Love at first dance.

Love at first laugh.

Love at first...

This man was a maker of magical potions, and through his magic he’d captured a part of this “love at first”...a bottled memory. And more.

He hoped that the magic potion would be the key that unlocked the heart of a beautiful princess. He knew that if there was love, then

there was hope.

I hope that you will meet me at the airport when I come home. I hope that you have the same look on your face as the young woman we saw together at the airport. I hope that you understand love at first...

your Prince Charming

Marciel's hands shook as she gently removed the bottle. What would it smell like? What memories had he captured with this scent? She held the bottle in her hand, and then looked up at her friend. Rebecca nodded encouragement.

"Go ahead," she whispered.

Marciel caught and held her breath as she held the atomizer close, said a quick prayer, and depressed the nozzle. A light mist sprayed out as Marciel exhaled her held breath, and then took in the scent.

Her eyes widened as they filled with tears.

Chapter Eighteen: A Flight

“If you believe, clap your hands!”

Sir James Barrie, *Peter Pan*

“You have to promise me that you won’t tell him that I’m coming.”

“Promise,” Emily said, then continued, “I still can’t believe that you’re actually going to go through with it. Dad said that you wouldn’t or couldn’t fly. Did you go to the doctor and get a prescription?”

“A crazy pill?” Mariel asked.

“Something like that.”

“No,” Mariel replied. “It was your father’s handiwork. Something along the lines of Peter Pan’s fairy dust, but in a liquid form.”

Emily whistled into the phone. “So you’re going to fly...to France?”

“Yes.”

“And you need my help? And you don’t want him to know?”

Mariel took deep breath. She knew that it sounded crazy. For her. But she was bound and determined to go to him as soon as possible. As soon as she’d left the salon, Mariel had gone home and started packing. She didn’t know how long she would be gone, and she didn’t care. Work didn’t matter. The expense of suddenly leaving for a foreign country didn’t matter. Nothing mattered except finding Andrew and telling him that she loved him. As soon as possible.

“Yes,” she said “I need to know where I can find him.”

“When are you leaving?” Emily asked.

“Tomorrow morning. First flight out of town. I’m scheduled to arrive at the Nice Côte d’Azur airport sometime in the afternoon.”

Emily’s eyes widened. She hadn’t fully realized just how serious Mariel was about her father. The young woman already planned to help, but now she understood that this rendezvous needed to be special. Wheels started turning in

her mind.

“Let me call you back,” Emily said. “I need to make some phone calls.”

“Is tomorrow too soon?” Mariel asked, suddenly worried that she was rushing things.

“Tomorrow is good. Trust me. It’s going to be fine. I just need to make some arrangements. I’ll give you a call back in a little while. Go pack...and don’t forget your passport.”

“Okay,” Mariel said, and hung up the phone. And started to worry.

“What am I even doing?” she thought. “I don’t even know how I’m going to get from the airport to Grasse. How far is it? Can I take a taxi? Do I need to rent a car? If I need to rent a car, then I’m not even sure I can drive on the other side of the road without causing an accident.”

She looked down at the bottle of perfume in her hand, then brought it up to her nose. There were faint traces of the scent that escaped, and each time she savored the richness of it all traces of doubt were erased from her mind.

“I’m going,” she said softly. “I’m flying.”

It was indeed a magic love potion.

Mariel busied herself with repacking, making sudden arrangements for mail collection, and rescheduling work commitments. Lost in the details, she lost track of time and was startled when her phone sounded.

“Yes?”

It was Emily.

“Got paper and pencil handy?” she asked.

“Give me just a sec,” Mariel said, moving quickly. “Okay, I’m ready.”

“First things first,” Emily instructed. “Don’t forget to wear the perfume. Now...”

And like a fairy godmother with her wand, the young woman wove a magical spell of her own.



Chapter Nineteen: A Reunion

“Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.”

Blaise Pascal

“Madame? Quel-que...” the man’s eyes were wide, staring at Mariel. “Non, pardonnez-moi.” He shook his head, as if suddenly waking up. “Please, excuse me.”

“What’s the matter?” Mariel asked, not even thinking to reply in the man’s native tongue.

“You are American? Yes?” he asked. She nodded. He started to back away from her, bowing slightly.

“Then it is nothing. I just...”

Manners were trying to win out over curiosity...and doing poorly.

“Please, tell me,” Mariel insisted, stepping closer. A pained expression came over his features as he looked at her, considering. She watched the internal struggle for a moment, saying nothing. Finally, he shrugged, giving in, bowed again slightly, and said, “Would you mind waiting here a moment? I would like to...s’il vous plait?” He held up a finger, as if to ask her to hold still, then stepped off at a lively pace. Mariel stood there in confusion.

“What the hell is going on?” she whispered, wondering what all the fuss was about. She didn’t have long to wait. The man reappeared with an attractive younger woman in tow. Moving quickly, the man pointed at Mariel, talking excitedly. As the pair drew nearer, he slowed his pace, ushered the younger woman past him and waited. The woman approached Mariel, said nothing, yet locked eyes with her momentarily, then looked her up and down, studying her.

Mariel cocked her head sideways, was about to speak, but the younger woman saw it and shook her head, shushing her.

“I know I’m in a foreign country – France, no less – but this is bizarre even by French standards.” Mariel thought. She watched and waited as the French

woman slowly drew nearer, too close, then stepped back.

“Mon Dieu!” she whispered. “What is it?” she asked, turning back towards the man. He shrugged, helplessly. She turned back to Mariel, eyes flashing, “What is that scent that you are wearing?”

Confused, Mariel stared for a moment. “What?” she asked.

“Madame,” the gentleman approached. “We are so terribly sorry. It is not our intention to be rude or forward, but...”

“Your perfume,” his partner continued. “It is...” She searched for the words.

“Superbe,” he finished.

She blushed at the compliment. “But it’s nothing really. It was a gift.”

Both the man and young woman leaned in closer, eyes narrowing. “This is no simple gift.” Again, the man seemed to snap out of a dream, drew himself upright, stepped back a pace.

“My apologies, Madame,” he said in a most gracious tone, extending a hand, “My name is Aubin Tissier and this is Josette Behr.”

Now it was Mariel’s eyes that widened in surprise.

“‘Josette Behr’. You’re the person I’m supposed to ask for. That’s who I was supposed to ask for when I arrived. Emily said...”

“Mon amie Emily!” Josette said, clapping her hands in delight. “And you are Mariel, non?”

“Yes.”

The young woman extended her hand, smiling. “I’ve been expecting you. And I should have known it was you as soon as I smelled Monsieur Andrew’s work. He is...” She searched for the words.

“Gifted,” Tissier finished for her. The two women nodded. “What you are wearing? It is not something that would be...commercially viable. It is too...” He searched for the word. “Complex, maybe. But no, that is not the right word. I don’t know how to describe it.”

Mariel knew the right word. And she wished with all of her heart that Andrew

were right here next to him, so that she could kick him. She hesitated, then said softly, “Magic.”

“Oui,” Josette breathed. “L’enchantement.”

The young woman turned to Tissier, her chin barely raised in dismissal, and said crisply, “Merci. We have work to do, as you know.”

The man bowed slightly, smiling. Or perhaps, smirking. Mariel couldn’t tell. Josette grabbed her hand like they were old friends and led her away.

“Come,” she said. “We have a little time before you will see him. Let’s make sure that your makeup is perfect before you ruin it with your tears.”



Mariel stood surveying the Provençal landscape from a second story balcony. It was a beautiful home to the many plants which provided the lush scents for the perfume industry. As she admired the scenery, Mariel tried to calm her nerves, by taking long slow breaths. It wasn’t working. Josette had ushered her to this spot and told her to wait. By some French chicanery, she was going to bring Andrew to this spot where they would be reunited.

It would be the first time she would see him since that fateful night at the airport. Mariel pushed thoughts of that night from her mind. That didn’t matter now. What mattered was that she was here.

She lifted her wrist to her nose and breathed in Andrew’s creation.

“Everything’s going to be fine...” she said to herself, closing her eyes and drinking in the heavenly scent.

When she opened her eyes he was standing there. Watching her.

Mariel was suddenly overwhelmed with emotions. Her heart raced and thoughts flew through her head. She’d rehearsed again and again what she wanted to say. Mariel wanted to tell him that she loved him. That she’d flown across the ocean for him. She wanted to tell him that she understood now what his magic potion meant. It was love. In a bottle. She knew that he loved her and that she

loved him too.

But nothing came out. There were no words. She stood there, facing him, and was speechless. Mariel was completely and utterly tongue-tied.

Her heart continued to race as the flood of emotions threatened to overwhelm her. Tears welled up in her eyes.

And he just stood there and smiled at her. The man just stood there and watched as the maelstrom of emotions whirled inside of her like a hurricane.

Hurricane Mariel.

“I hate you.”

Andrew’s mouth twitched slightly. The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. In her moment of weakness, there was suddenly no filter between her heart and brain and mouth.

And it was true. She hated him for making her such a complete and utter emotional wreck.

“But those words!” she thought. “How could I...”

And burst into tears. The moment was ruined. She’d traveled halfway across the world to tell this man that she loved, and she ruined it. She’d ruined it by telling him that she hated him. The one shining moment that they could treasure as a magical memory had been ruined by her mouth.

Andrew moved quickly to gather her up in his arms and hold her tight. He held her as she sobbed and said nothing. He drank in the delicious scent of the perfume he had created and waited for the shaking to lessen. Finally, there were only a few intermittent chest heaves, then sniffles against his chest, and finally there was only slow steady breathing.

When she was quiet, he whispered, “I love you too.”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “I didn’t mean to say that.”

“Hush,” Andrew admonished. “There’s no need to say you’re sorry. And yes you did mean to say “I hate you”. Those are your love words.”

“‘Love words?’” Mariel asked. “What are you talking about?”

"It's what you say instead of 'I love you'," he explained. "You've always done that."

Mariel pulled back slightly and looked up at him. Her eyes were large and somewhat sad. Tears still streaked her face. She would have been perfectly content to be held in the warmth of his embrace, but a small doubt still lingered in her mind. What would the future hold for them?

"So what happens now?" she asked.

Andrew winked at her, and said, "Mariel, do you remember what I do for a living?"

She nodded. "You're a parfumer." She pronounced the word perfectly.

He raised an eyebrow, and said, "Yes, that's the technical term, but what do I really do?"

"You make love potions," she said with a tired sigh. More games. Always games with this man.

"And I made one for you and something magical happened when you smelled it."

Mariel smiled. "I flew across an ocean," she said. "Just like in a fairy tale."

"And...if I make magic potions, and this is a fairy tale, then who - or what - are you?"

"Cinderella. Or Belle." Mariel considered for a moment. Which fairy tale princess was she most alike? It was hard to say.

"I'm a fairy tale princess," she said. "I'm not sure which one, yet."

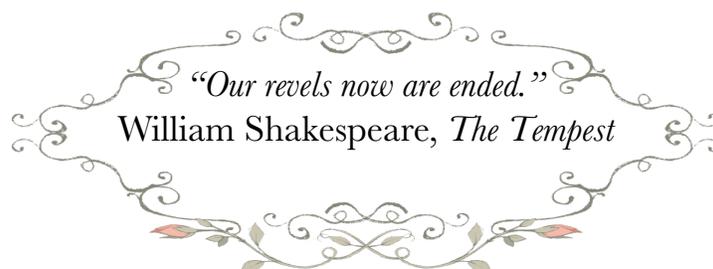
"Neither am I," said Andrew, sotto voce. This earned him a pinch. He smiled at the pinch, then continued. "So this is a fairy tale. Us. You and me. And how do all fairy tales end?"

"...happily ever after," she said, her voice muffled by his chest.

"Exactly", he said. "Now kiss me, princess."

They kissed - lips gently meeting for the first time - and with this kiss Mariel knew that he was her Prince Charming, now and forever. Winton Andrew Churchill filled her with happiness. His love was the magic potion that her soul needed.

Epilogue: An Ending



"What's that perfume you're wearing? It smells great."

Mariel smiled warmly, scanning the room for someone, and said, "Why thank you, George. I don't think it has a name. It was a gift."

She found Mr. Allen, caught his eye, smiled and waved. He nodded, smiling in return. He had an attractive woman on his arm - nearer to his age - and moved her smoothly onto the dance floor. In a moment, in perfect time to the music, the two disappeared amongst the other dancers.

"George? Are you ready?"

Mariel turned at the voice. So did George. His eyes widened and his face broadened into a smile. She was blonde, petite, and attractive.

"Yeah, sure," he said. "I guess."

Mariel happily shooed the couple away and was left alone on the edge of the dance floor. But she wasn't unhappy. She didn't ask God for an intervention this evening. She simply smiled and waited.

"Wanna dance?"

Mariel didn't turn around at the sound of the voice behind her. She turned her head ever so slightly, raised an eyebrow, and said, "Maybe. It depends."

"On what?"

"Do I just get one dance?"

There was a pause. He hardly ever paused when it came to snappy responses.

"How many do you want? I'm willing to offer a three-for-one special tonight. Tonight only. Any more than that is gonna cost you. Big."

Mariel thought for a moment. "Um, let me think," she said.

"I want the rest of them."

Andrew was confused for a moment. Dances for the rest of the night? She stood waiting. Understanding dawned, and he grinned.

"So you want the 'happily ever after package?'"

"Yes," she said, smiling her own smile. "I want the rest of them."

Andrew's arms encircled her waist as he pulled Mariel close. He drank in her delicious scent, closed his eyes, and murmured, "Princess, you got yourself a deal."