

## Prologue

Start from the beginning

Tonight, however, was the night that Claire was certain Arthur would return her affections. She was a woman, now, and dressed in her sister's very best blush pink gown. Grace had performed wonders with her ornate unmanageable raven locks, and she felt the prettiest that she had ever been.

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Claire entered the ball on the arm of her sister as they followed their limping mother. She instinctively searched the room for seating and murmured to Grace under her breath that they ought to help their mother to a chair.

Both Grace and Claire were given dance cards, and Claire's excitement was quick to return. This was her first real dance card! She had never even seen one before! She quickly read down the list of dances that would be played and made a note in her head for which ones that she would most like to dance with Arthur.

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As Claire looked up to look around the ballroom, she could see the anxiety upon Grace's face. She knew that she was concerned about meeting the Beresfords. Claire was not even certain that they would make an appearance. Surely a village celebration was too common for the likes of them. Claire hoped that Grace would be able to enjoy herself.

No matter how she had once envied her sister, Lord, did Claire love her. Claire admired Grace above anyone else she knew, and she prayed for Grace to find peace. Even though she pretended that she had, Claire knew that Grace was still haunted by her demons.

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Claire's eyes quickly found Arthur. It was a habit, really, but one she liked. Oh, Lord, he looked handsome. He was dressed every so richly, with a coat the shade of a deep burgundy. He'd had a haircut in the last week, Claire noticed, as his blond curls were not so much in his eyes anymore. He was dancing with a young lady, someone that Claire did not recognise, which made her think she must have been from another village around.

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She felt the sparks of jealousy in the pit of her stomach.

Claire was forced to follow her mother and sister through the crowd, greeting friends and neighbours, before coming to a chair for their mother to occupy.

"I shall get you a refreshment, Mama!" announced Claire suddenly, and she led Mrs Denham and Grace before they could protest. Claire deliberately took the long way to the dining room, purposefully passing the lines of dancers so that Arthur might happen to see her.

As though God was on her side, the dance finished just as she passed by Arthur and his partner. Arthur's emerald eyes settled on Claire just as she had wanted them to. She smiled with satisfaction as she floated past him nonchalantly.

As though he was a duckling trailing after his mother, Arthur immediately followed her. She could have sworn she felt his hand brush the skirt of her gown, and a thrill tickled down her spine.

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As they disappeared inside the dining room, and away from the possible attention of her mother and sister, Claire turned around to face the man she wanted to marry.

"Are you following me, Mr Slickson?" she asked innocently.

"Only because you want to be followed, Miss Claire," he quipped, a wicked, enticing smirk upon his chiselled face.

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Claire felt her cheeks flush and her heart race. He was smiling such a devilish smile at her. Claire willed herself to be bold, enchanting. She would not be seen as a little girl who did not know how to converse with a gentleman.

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Only, she did not know what to say! She was worried that the moment she opened her mouth again, she would accidentally profess her eternal love for him.

"My, how beautifully you look in that gown, Miss Claire," remarked Arthur appreciatively, his eyes slowly moving down her figure. "You are, for certain, the prettiest young lady here."

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Claire felt her blush deepen. "Mr Slickson, please," she rebuffed.

"Did you wear such an ensemble for my benefit?" he wondered aloud, his wicked grin widening.

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Claire's eyes flared with shock and embarrassment as he had seen her motives so plainly.

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Arthur interpreted her silence correctly as he chuckled. "Well, I cannot thank you enough. What a sight you are," he praised.

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While Claire's heart was singing, she had never before heard a man speak in this way, and especially not to her. He was appreciating her, he liked the way she looked, and Claire told herself that this was what she had wanted in her efforts to get ready.

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Her heart quickly picked up speed again.

"So innocent," he murmured to himself, pleased. "So much to offer, and yet you have little idea of what to do with it." Arthur smirked.

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Back in the ballroom, Claire could faintly hear the tail end of the attendant announcing the Beresfords' arrival.

Arthur looked upon Claire with a great intensity that nearly forced her knees to give way. "Have you ever been kissed before, Miss Claire?" he whispered.

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Claire shook her head, fearing that she was about to start trembling with anticipation. Was he going to kiss her here? There were not many in the dining room, not especially since the Beresfords had been announced, but they were certainly not alone. However much Claire wished for her first kiss to be with Arthur Slickson, she could certainly not risk her reputation in front of others.

"I am promised for the next," he continued to utter quietly, only for her, "but I shall claim you for the one after. And before the night is out, you will not be shaking your head to that question."

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Claire was so overcome with anticipation that she walked out of the dining room without a refreshment for her mother. She felt as though she was blushing all over, and looked every bit the innocent, frightened little girl she hoped she wouldn't be.

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But ... but... Arthur Slickson was going to kiss her!

Claire wandered a little aimlessly in the main assembly hall, not taking much notice of where she was standing. Her thoughts were far too occupied. So much so that when she felt a tap on her shoulder, she nearly jumped as she turned around.

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She was greeted by a man, a youngman, and one she did not immediately recognise. The first things she noticed were his eyes. They were hazel, brown almost, with hints of green around the irises. His hair was dark and unruly, and he had a handsome face, with a strong jaw and a straight nose. He was taller, much taller than her, which was not a difficult achievement, and he was smiling. Not a kind smile of introduction, but a grin that told her he was vexing someone.

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He was dressed impeccably wearing a navy ensemble that only deep pockets could afford. It was then that Claire noticed just whom were this man's party. Behind him stood Adam. Claire would know Adam anywhere. His sister, and his parents were all looking upon their interaction, though his mother was glowering.

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Claire recalled the name of Adam's brother as Jack, just at the moment he extended his hand to her. "May I have the next dance, Miss?" he asked, seeming to be in a debonaire attempt to charm her.

Regrettably, Claire felt her cheeks flush. "We have not been introduced, sir," she replied so ly.

Jack looked over his shoulder to his siblings, and Adam, smirking, stepped forward.

"May I introduce Miss Claire Denham," said Adam formally. "Miss Claire, please allow me to introduce my brother, Lord Jack Beresford."

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Claire heard the duchess say something nasty, but she did not quite hear it. She was informed enough to know that the duchess did not like her family. Poor Grace had always felt unwelcome as a girl.

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"There now," said Jack confidently. "We are introduced. May I have the next dance?"

Claire looked over her shoulder briefly, and saw that Arthur was taking his place on the dance floor with his next partner. He had told her thus. Claire's eyes returned to Jack, and she knew it would be rude to refuse a gentleman, especially one of his standing, without a valid reason. "I would be honoured, milord," Claire uttered, curtsying to him as she placed her hand atop his and allowed him to lead her over to the dancers.

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As they took their place in the line of dancers, only a few from Arthur, Jack uttered, "I am sorry to have ambushed you, Miss Denham," sincerely. "But I am glad to stand up with you all the same."

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Claire was almost so focussed on whether or not Arthur had noticed her dancing with another, that she had almost missed Jack's apology. "Oh, no matter," she said breathlessly, as the music began to play.

Claire realised that this was her first proper dance, and how she wished it could have been with Arthur. So much so that she nearly tripped several steps as she kept looking over at him. Much to her relief, Arthur seemed to be watching her at every opportunity, too.

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When she forced herself to concentrate on her own partner, so as not to embarrass herself by tripping over him in the sequence, she noticed that Jack had a kind smile, a genuine smile, that made his overall appearance all the more pleasing. He was a good dancer, light on his feet, and he certainly was outdoing her in that moment.

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When the music finished, the dancers applauded politely, and Jack took the few steps in to stand in front of her. "You are a fine dancer, Miss Claire," he complimented.

It was a falsehood to please her, though Claire knew that she could dance much more proficiently when not distracted. "You are too kind, milord," replied Claire breathlessly. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Arthur leave his partner and start towards her.

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"Would ... would you dance the next with me?"

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Claire's eyes flicked back to Jack. He appeared even brighter, hopeful, and not as teasing as he had been when he had asked her to dance the first. He offered Claire his hand.

"I am afraid Miss Claire is already promised," interjected Arthur boldly, claiming Claire for his own.

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Claire could not help the excited expression on her face as she suddenly found herself on Arthur Slickson's arm. For how many years had she dreamed of this moment!

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Claire quickly regained her composure as she needed to refuse Jack. "Forgive me," she said so ly, "but I have promised myself to Mr Slickson." She hadn't meant the words in any other context than dancing, but her mind raced with the possibilities.

She watched Jack's face fall as he nodded his head politely to Arthur, who returned the gesture.

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"Do not trouble yourself," muttered Jack, before adding, "I am quite used to second place," under his breath.

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"What have you done to me?" whispered Arthur seductively in Claire's ear as they went to take their place for the next. "I about came undone seeing you in another's arms. What spell is this?"

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Claire felt the hairs stand up as Arthur's breath tickled her neck. "I haven't done anything."

"Oh, contraire," Arthur countered. "You do not yet know what you are capable of."

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As they took their places opposite of each other, Claire sincerely believed she could see a reaction in Arthur's eyes. Could he love her already? She had loved him instantly, and from afar. Surely it was possible! Oh, she prayed he loved her!

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As the music began, a blissful smile spread across Claire's face. She could see it in the not so distant future. She was going to be Mrs Arthur Slickson.

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**Oh, dear, innocent, naive Claire-Bear :(**  
**I hope you enjoyed it!!**  
**If you didn't get it, which I'm sure you did, this is what transpired at the ball from Claire's POV, the ball where Adam and Grace confronted each other about the letters. Claire's story begins here ... :)**

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**But, as it's Friday and not Saturday, I'm sure you can tell that I was super excited about writing this for you guys! I'll do my best to get another chapter up tomorrow!**

**By the way, thank you everyone who voted! Biggest turn out ever! Voting is compulsory in Australia, so it always seems strange to me that people can just decide not to vote!**

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**I always love going down to the local school, casting my vote, and buying my sausage in bread (an Australian delicacy, also known as the "Democracy Sausage", a tradition on Election Day).**

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**Anyway, things are looking positive! I cannot ever say I have been so interested in the state of Nevada before now!**

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**Anyway, vote and comment, and let me know what you think!**

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Continue reading next part