

*Chapter One*  
*All is calm, all is bright*

London, England  
Monday, December 1, 1873

Lisette Hamilton never saw him coming.

Later on she supposed that because she was rushing it was her own fault. But still he was just as much to blame. A man should always be mindful of where he is going and should take more care when rounding a corner and not throw himself about like a cannon out of barrel. None of it would have happened at all if she had simply stayed in the carriage. But no, she had to stop for a moment to visit with Mrs. Brooks. Since Lisette was planning to marry the woman’s son, of course she should take time to speak with her. It was Henry’s mother, after all, and she would eventually be her mother-in-law. Then Yvette had complained of a headache, so Lisette had instructed their carriage driver to take her younger sister home while she remained. She chatted with Mrs. Brooks longer than she intended before realizing how late she was. Lisette detested being late. Hated to think that anyone was waiting for her or inconvenienced in any way by her tardiness. To Lisette it was the height of rudeness.

Consequently she was walking as fast as she could, her little black boots clicking along the cobblestones of the neat lane behind Devon House. As usual, her long auburn hair was pinned neatly under her fur trimmed hood and her hands pocketed deep inside her matching fur muff. She didn’t typically walk through the back lane, but she was now needed to hurry. The narrow lane was empty of people except for Lisette that chilly December afternoon, and the sky was heavy with dark clouds. She pulled her muff closer

*It Happened One Christmas* by Kaitlin O’Riley

to her body for warmth and increased her pace. Just as she reached the corner, which was bordered by a high brick wall covered in a thick blanket of ivy –BAM – she ran smack into a wall of another kind.

Knocked flat on her back with an impossibly tall man lying on top of her, she could not even breathe.

When Lisette opened her eyes, she found herself drowning. Drowning in a pair of the bluest eyes she had ever seen. Not just a regular, ordinary blue, but the clearest, purest sky blue. The word cerulean came to mind. The color of the sky on a clear spring morning. At first those eyes were wide with surprise but then they narrowed their focus on her. His eyes gleamed with an inner fire and her heart seemed to stop and the world faded around her. The fall must have knocked the sense out of both of them, for neither she nor the man spoke or moved for a full minute.

They simply stared in mute fascination of each other.

Oh, but the rest of him was fine also, Lisette thought. His face was arresting in its perfection. A strong jaw, that was clean shaven and smooth. An aquiline nose with just the slightest tilt at the end. A mouth that looked as if it smiled easily. He was not smiling now though. No, but his lips were close enough for her to feel his breath on her cheek. A lock of his light golden hair fell across his forehead in a charmingly rakish way.

She wondered if she knew this gentleman. The familiarity of him called to her, but she could not place him. Had she met him recently? At the bookshop perhaps? No. No, Lisette had never met this man. For she certainly would have remembered him. And how wonderful he smelled, like spices and bayberry.

*It Happened One Christmas* by Kaitlin O’Riley

As she lay with this handsome stranger, Lisette completely forgot where she was going and why she was in such a hurry to get there. She lost herself in the feel and the weight of the length of his muscular body pressed against hers, barely noticing the cold cobblestones beneath her. His long legs nestled intimately between hers. The heat and strength emanating from him kept her quite warm. A strange lethargy crept over her as her body seemed to melt with his.

The gentleman lightly touched his gloved hand to her face in a soft caress.

“Are you all right?” His voice fell in a silky whisper around her, as he traced the side of her cheek.

The hypnotic sound of his voice only contributed to the strange spell she had helplessly fallen under. Lisette only nodded her head in response to him while her heart pounded in a wild rhythm.

He slowly leaned even closer to her, placing the lightest of kisses on her cheek. The brush of his warm lips on her skin sent a shaft of pleasure coursing through her entire being. Lisette thought she would faint. This was mad! She did not even know this man, yet here he was... Oh, my... His lips moved closer to her own, and she held her breath, suddenly hoping against hope that he *would* kiss her. Heaven help her, for she desperately wanted this man to kiss her. It was madness, but she wanted to feel his lips pressed against hers. She inexplicably yearned to kiss him.

The unexpected and loud barking of a dog in a nearby yard pierced the air around them, breaking their intimate reverie.

Suddenly aware of their awkward position, they both roused themselves in a fluster. The gentleman made a move to stand up. Lisette, her cheeks burning, took a

shaky breath as she removed her hands from her muff and rose on her elbows. Taking her gloved hand in his, he helped her to her feet. As she stood, he did not release her hand. Nor did she pull away from him. Something about him holding her hand felt natural and she did want to let go.

“Are you quite sure you are all right?”

“Yes,” Lisette murmured in a whisper, but she was not all right. Far from it. She had never felt less like herself.

“I am terribly sorry,” he began again. “Forgive me. I did not see you.”

She had to tilt her head back to look up at him. Again she became lost in those blue eyes. Was it a figment of her imagination that he had kissed her cheek? Had she merely dreamed that he almost kissed her lips a moment ago? “I... ah... I did not see you either.”

He still held her hand, and he pulled her slightly closer. “Oh, but we have seen each other now.”

“Yes,” she breathed. The sound of his voice, low and husky, made her shiver with delight. “Now what?”

A slow, magnetic smile spread across his handsome face. It was if the sun suddenly burst through the clouds. Lisette could do nothing but smile back helplessly in response.

“Now I believe we ought to introduce ourselves. I am Quinton Roxbury.”

*Quinton Roxbury.* His name repeated over and over in her mind. Who was he? And why should this man have such a magical effect on her? *Quinton Roxbury.* She

suddenly had butterflies in her stomach. "I..." She paused a moment to recall her own name. "I am Lisette Hamilton."

"Well, Miss Hamilton, please forgive my clumsiness. In my haste I seemed to have knocked us both off our feet. Are you sure you are not hurt?"

Lisette shook her head. No, hurt would not be the word to describe how she felt. Mesmerized. Enchanted. Awestruck. Those were much better words.

"May I escort you home?"

Again, she shook her head. A strange sense of loss surged through her realizing that their astonishing encounter was coming to an end. She did not want him to leave. She glanced across at her hand, still clasped firmly in his. That reassured her somewhat.

He looked disappointed by her refusal. "No?"

"I am already home." Lisette gestured to the tall white house just beyond the brick wall.

"Devon House?" he questioned, his dark blond brows raised. "You live here?"

"Yes."

He smiled and then explained, "I was just there, meeting with Lord Waverly."

"He is my brother-in-law." Lucien knew Quinton Roxbury. This changed everything and she relaxed a bit. He did not seem like such a stranger to Lisette now. But then he hadn't right from the start. There was a strong familiarity about him that drew her to him.

"Well, I can at least escort you to the door. I owe you that much courtesy."

He released her hand and took her arm. As long as he was touching her Lisette did not care what he did. At this moment she would have followed him across London if

he wanted. Instead she walked with him to the front of Devon House. Her heart fluttered against her chest at the feel of his strong hand on her arm. Good heavens! What on earth was wrong with her?

“Once again, I offer my sincerest apologies for knocking you down, Miss Hamilton.”

“It’s quite all right,” she murmured, as they stood in front of the gate, noting with some satisfaction that he did not apologize for kissing her cheek. She stared into his eyes, mesmerized by what she saw within them.

“I should be on my way,” he said.

“Yes, of course.”

“It was a pleasure running into you.” He laughed, deep and throaty, and her heart skipped a beat at the sound. “I hope I have the pleasure of meeting you under more usual circumstances sometime.”

“That would be lovely.”

With what seemed like some reluctance, he released her arm. “Good afternoon, Miss Hamilton.”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Roxbury,” she whispered softly. Her eyes followed him as he walked away, his long black cloak swirling behind him. The assurance and grace with which he moved was surprising for a man of his height. She stood outside the gate to Devon House, completely incapable of taking a step forward. Flooded with emotions she did not know existed before, she didn’t even hear the footsteps coming up behind her.

“Lisette!”

*It Happened One Christmas* by Kaitlin O'Riley

She turned around at the sounds of her name. Henry Brooks stood beside her.

*Henry.* "Henry!"