

Chapter 1 ***Impressions***

London
August 1876

The bells above the entrance of Hamilton’s Book Shoppe jingled as the front door opened and the drizzling summer rain drifted in momentarily. It had been a slow afternoon with little business and Paulette Hamilton looked up in eager anticipation at the customer who had ventured out on such a dreary August day. A tall gentleman stepped into the shop, holding an umbrella in one hand and clutching the hand of a reluctant little girl in the other.

“Welcome to Hamilton’s!” Paulette greeted the customers with an animated smile. New customers always made her happy.

As the gentleman folded his wet umbrella, Paulette took note of him, which was a habit of hers. Ever curious and observant, she couldn’t help but pay attention to the customers in her store. This gentleman was older, tall and rather broad and wore expensive, well-made clothes. Beneath his elegant black hat, strands of chocolate-colored hair were visible. He was handsome enough, she supposed in a dark, brooding sort of way, but she had never favored that look. Paulette usually found herself drawn to golden, fair-haired heroes. At least she did in the books that she read.

Using her best shopkeeper’s voice, she asked, “How may I help you this afternoon?”

“My little daughter here would like a new book,” he explained, indicating the child hiding with shyness behind him.

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The rich, melodic timbre of his words, laced with the notes of a vaguely familiar accent, filled the air around her. Unable to resist the magnetic attraction of his voice, Paulette suddenly eyed him with keener interest as he looked toward the little girl.

The man possessed an aquiline nose, a strong jaw, and a lean face with dark eyebrows. He was clean-shaven, but she could easily imagine a thin black mustache upon him, giving him the look of a wicked pirate. He seemed tense, almost as if he held his feelings tightly in check, but the slightest disturbance could set him loose in a fury. His full mouth was set in a grim line. In fact, he had a look about his face that conveyed the distinct impression that he had not smiled in a long, long while.

Something about the man unsettled her and the dark intensity about him brought to mind the words “sinister” or “dangerous.”

A little shiver raced through her.

Feeling slightly nervous in his presence and somewhat relieved knowing that her assistant was close at hand in the back room, Paulette silently reprimanded herself for being so foolish as to think of herself in any kind of danger. She had never felt this way about a customer before. Why on earth did she think that this man would cause her any harm? Perhaps she had read one too many gothic romance novels lately!

Her attention was drawn to the little girl, who still attempted to hide behind the man's dark trousers. The child could not have been more than four years old, with a sweet, chubby face framed by golden curls mostly covered under a wide brimmed bonnet.

Paulette knew exactly what the little girl wanted. Hamilton's carried the best children's books in the city and because of that she had dealt with all manner of children

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in the shop before, from the most well-behaved to the most spoiled, so she was no stranger to bashful children either. This shy looking girl would be easy to please.

“Well, you are quite a lucky young lady for your father to give you such a special treat,” Paulette began, favoring the girl with a warm grin. “We have some lovely fairytale books with the most beautiful pictures in them. Would you like me to show them to you?”

Peeking out from behind her father's leg, the little girl nodded in agreement. She did not make a sound, but her cherubic face lit with excitement.

“Thank you,” the gentleman said, seeming a bit relieved by Paulette's suggestion.

“Why don't you both come with me to the children's section of the shop?” she suggested brightly.

They followed her to the rear of the store, where she and Colette had designed an inviting space for their smallest customers. They'd had shelves built at a lower height and miniature-sized tables and chairs to better fit little bodies. A brightly colored area rug covered the wooden floor, lending warmth to the section of books on display. Paulette immediately located their most popular selling book, a gorgeously illustrated volume of fairy tales. She placed the book on the table and motioned for the child to join her while she sat herself on one of the tiny chairs as well.

“I think you might like this one.”

The little girl glanced up hesitantly at her father, seeking his permission. He patted her head in encouragement. “It's all right, darlin'.”

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She moved slowly forward, taking hesitant steps to the table where Paulette waited for her. When she reached the small table, the girl stopped and stared at Paulette in expectation.

“Do you have a favorite story?” Paulette questioned.

The little girl shook her head, her expression extraordinarily serious for one so young.

“Do you like the story of *Sleeping Beauty*?”

The child gave the slightest nod of assent.

“That story has always been a favorite of mine.” Opening the thick volume, Paulette turned to the page that had an elaborate and richly drawn illustration of a grand castle tower covered with an overgrown tangle of thorn-laden vines and a profusion of red roses. The little girl’s eyes widened and a small gasp of awe escaped her.

Paulette asked, “Isn’t this picture beautiful?”

Again, the girl merely nodded. She had not uttered one word since entering the shop.

“I’m Miss Hamilton,” Paulette said, hoping to coax a response from her. “What is your name?”

The child blinked at her and shrugged her tiny shoulders.

“What is your name?” she repeated.

The little girl still did not respond. Paulette had never seen such a withdrawn child. Did she not speak at all? Paulette was usually able to cajole bashful children into an easy conversation by this point. But not this girl. From what she sensed, it was not merely shyness that kept the girl from speaking. Was there something wrong with her?

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Perhaps she was she a mute? Paulette's natural curiosity peaked and she wished to ask the gentleman about it, but it was certainly not her place to ask such intimate questions of a stranger.

The girl's father finally answered for her. "Her name is Mara."

Aware that the man's eyes had been focused on her during the entire exchange with his daughter, Paulette glanced up at him.

They held each other's gaze for longer than two strangers normally would. His deep green eyes were fringed with thick dark lashes that were startlingly long for a man. A tingling sensation raced through her and in that instant, Paulette was almost knocked off the tiny chair upon which she sat.

He was not as old as she had first thought him to be and that surprised her. Although she guessed he was not yet thirty, an aged weariness had settled in his eyes. Struck by the sadness she saw within the emerald depths, she sensed that a profound heartache dwelled within this man. What had happened to him? Paulette was at a complete loss to explain the sudden surge of intense feelings that rushed through her as he looked back at her.

Somehow he seemed less forbidding than he had a moment ago.

"And your name, sir?" she managed to ask, suddenly needing to know.

"Forgive me, Miss Hamilton," he acknowledged her with a slight bow, removing his hat. "I am Declan Reeves."

Of course. The accent. Now she recognized it. He must be from Ireland. Wondering what had brought him to London, Paulette forced her gaze away from his mysteriously sad eyes and turned her attention back to the child. His child.

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“Mara is such a pretty name,” she murmured to the little girl. Paulette was more than aware that the man’s eyes were still on her. She could feel the intensity of his gaze. Her hand moved to smooth her own golden-blond hair.

Again the child did not say a word, just looked at Paulette with somber green eyes that now seemed remarkably like her father’s. Mara reached out a hand and slowly began turning the pages in the book of fairy tales, mesmerized by the colorful pictures.

“Her mother named her.” His voice, smooth and melodic, spilled around her, sending a shiver of a different kind through Paulette.

The mother. Of course there would be a mother, this man’s wife.

Paulette rose from the tiny chair, brushing her striped skirts with her hands in a nervous gesture. “I think Mara likes the fairy tale book.” She returned to being the efficient bookseller once more. “Is there anything else I can get for you today, Mr. Reeves?”

She found herself staring into his emerald eyes again and Declan Reeves answered her question with a desperate look of longing that caused her heart to constrict in her chest. He seemed to be asking her for something. Anything, and she wanted desperately to give it to him but she was not even sure what it was. She held her breath.

Why did this man unsettle her so?

Shaking herself from her overactive imagination, for surely she could only have imagined what had just passed between them, Paulette straightened her shoulders. She should thank them for coming and get on with business. Instead, she then blurted out, “Does your daughter not speak?”

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Paulette immediately regretted her impolite question. Why couldn't she keep her mouth closed? Her sisters were always telling her to mind her own business. She really tried to, but for the most part Paulette could not help herself and always said what she thought. And yes, once in a while she overheard conversations she shouldn't, but that was not her fault. She was simply very aware of what was going on around her.

Still it was quite rude of her. Feeling remorseful, she was about to apologize to him for her bad manners.

"She doesn't speak anymore." He shook his head, sadness emanating from him. "She hasn't spoken a single word since her mother passed away."

"Oh, I see," Paulette murmured. His daughter had been struck dumb with grief at losing her mother. How tragic! This poor little girl, losing her mother so young! And this man had lost his wife.

Heart pounding, she eyed Declan Reeves anew as it suddenly dawned on her.

He was not a married man.