

Chapter One

London, England

May 1870

You Can't Judge a Book By Its Cover

"Hello!" a deep masculine voice called. "Is anybody here?"

The words echoed through Hamilton's Book Shoppe, a small but quaint building on a side lane off Bond Street in Mayfair, London's most fashionable district. Lucien Sinclair, the Earl of Waverly, looked around the dark and cluttered interior searching for signs of the proprietor.

Growing impatient, Lucien ventured another call, this time a little louder.

Honestly, one would think Mr. Hamilton had no desire to do any business if he were not present to greet potential customers when they arrived.

"Just a moment, please!" A dulcet voice exclaimed from the back of the shop. "I shall be right with you!"

Finally. A response of some sort. Well, that explained the delay, Lucien thought to himself. Apparently a woman was left to tend the shop. Perhaps Mr. Hamilton was out for the day, in which case his little venture would be for naught. He highly doubted the lady in the back room would be able to assist him.

He had met the owner of the shop over a year ago and had found him to be most agreeable. A kind and genial man who was very intent on helping Lucien choose the exact type of literature that would interest him, Mr. Hamilton wouldn't rest until Lucien was totally satisfied with his selection of authors. Lucien had only purchased the books out of boredom one day hoping to ease the restlessness that plagued him from time to

time, but by the time he returned home, he had lost interest in the little stack of books chosen by the eager bookseller, and he became immersed in his demanding social life once again.

However, a few weeks earlier his father's sudden illness required him to spend more time at home to look after the weakened man and keep him company. He began to read to his bed-ridden father, finally putting the forgotten books to good use, and surprise of surprises, he had actually enjoyed them. He realized how much he missed reading for pleasure, since he had not done much of it since his days at Oxford. Now he wanted to speak with Mr. Hamilton, not only to thank him, but also to ask his suggestion for new books he and his father might appreciate.

Glancing around he noticed the little bookshop was not quite how he remembered it, but then again it had been over a year since he had visited there last. If he were not mistaken, the bookshop had been remarkably like any other that he had seen in his life; dark, disordered, and fairly dusty. Now it appeared to be undergoing some sort of transformation. Wooden crates, some of which were stacked and some open, and an assortment of hundreds of leather-bound books lay scattered in haphazard heaps on the floor, large buckets of paint and various sized brushes rested on a work table, and long sheets of canvas covered half the room.

"I'm so sorry to keep you waiting." That clear and gentle voice intoned once again and Lucien turned to see a woman walking toward him. "Welcome to Hamilton's. How may I help you, sir?"

Never one to miss a pretty face, Lucien instinctively noted the one belonging to the lady in front of him. From her small stature, he judged her to be very young, perhaps

seventeen, seeing as there was a youthful air about her, for all she approached him in a businesslike manner. She must be minding papa's store for the first time. He frowned.

"I was hoping to speak to Mr. Hamilton," he responded in his most imperious tone.

As she stepped closer he revised his initial impression of her, for she was more than passably pretty. In spite of the dirt smudges on her fair skin, the dust motes sprinkled in her rich brunette hair, and the drab, shapeless gray smock that covered the navy dress she wore, her face was stunningly beautiful in its perfection. Her deep blue eyes, insightful and steady, regarded him with what seemed like skepticism. Even disdain. Her demeanor shocked him. Such an odd thing! Couldn't she tell he was a nobleman? What would prompt the beautiful girl to look at him in such a condescending way? As if she knew more than he did? As if she had dealt with his kind before?

"I am Miss Hamilton, his daughter. I can assist you."

The challenging, practically defiant, tilt to her head almost knocked him over. Once again he realized he was in error. She was older than he first thought, for she handled herself far too confidently. She must be closer to twenty. Again he frowned. He refused to deal with a haughty shopkeeper's daughter.

"I'm sure you are quite a charming young lady, but I was hoping your father could assist me. Perhaps I shall return at another time when he is available to offer his expertise. Would you please tell me when I could expect him?"

"My father passed away six months ago." She stated this matter-of-factly, revealing no emotion, her face calm and serene.

Feeling like a callous idiot, he said earnestly, "I am very sorry to hear that, Miss Hamilton. I only knew him briefly, but your father seemed to be a good man. Please accept my sincerest condolences on your loss."

She nodded her head in acknowledgment of his sympathy. "Thank you."

After an awkward pause, he asked out of polite curiosity, "Who is responsible for running the bookshop now?"

"I am."

That truly took him aback. A mere woman, this little slip of a girl, maintaining a business? It was preposterous. Ridiculous. Unheard of. She ought to be safely married with a home to manage, not working in a store.

"How old are you?" Lucien asked without thinking.

"Old enough. How old are you?" she countered quickly.

Her slightly sarcastic response irritated him. "Surely you have help? You could not handle such an enterprise on your own. A brother or an uncle or a male cousin must be overseeing you," he said.

Again that defiant look crossed the elegant features of her face, making her appear more assertive than he had first anticipated.

"You are aware that a woman is running our country, are you not?"

"Well, that's different," he sputtered in his defense. "Queen Victoria was born and raised to rule and has advisors and counselors to guide her."

"I too was raised to oversee this shop. I have no male relatives to help me, yet I manage quite well without the assistance of men, thank you," she responded with unmasked condescension.

Lucien did not approve of women having to work and for some reason her particular situation upset him. This girl was far too beautiful to be in charge of a business with no male to guide her decisions and ease her burdens. From his point of view, it was simply wrong. A woman should be taken care of, not left to fend for herself.

“You seem rather too delicate and too young to shoulder such weighty responsibilities, Miss Hamilton.”

She sighed heavily, her manner revealing she had explained this many times before. “I’ve been assisting my father since I was a child. I assure you, I am quite capable of running the bookshop on my own, Mister . . . ?”

He gazed at her skeptically, but answered her unspoken question. “I apologize for not introducing myself sooner. I am Lucien Sinclair, the Earl of Waverly. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Hamilton.”

“How can *I* assist you today, Lord Waverly?” she asked with decidedly lofty tone.

He could not help but notice the unmistakable emphasis she placed on the “I” when she spoke. Irrked by her obvious confidence, he glared back at her. She really should be more solicitous of him as a potential customer. And as a gentleman. Something about her made him want to rattle that self-assurance of hers a little.

“I came to speak to your father about selecting some books, but since you are here, let’s see if you can help me. I need to purchase a gift. A present for--” he paused with deliberateness, raised one eyebrow and grinned daringly at her, “--a lady.”

She gave him a withering look and he wondered if she treated all her customers with such disdain or just him in particular.

“Was there a specific type of book you had in mind for this *lady*?” she questioned with an air of superiority.

Noting her skeptical inflection of the word *lady*, Lucien felt slightly vindicated. “Are you knowledgeable about poetry?” he asked, for lord knew he was not.

“Knowledgeable enough.”

Something about the shape of her mouth intrigued him and he could not stop staring at her lips. They were full, sensual looking, and the color of summer ripe berries. He found himself wondering what they would taste like and if they would be as sweet as they looked. How was a girl this beautiful not married yet? She must be an awful harridan. It was the only explanation that made sense.

“What about love poems?” he continued. “Do you know anything about love poems?”

“I think I know what you have in mind,” she stated dryly.

He was trying to bait her and she refused to be reeled in. Miss Hamilton merely turned and made her way carefully to a stack of books in the corner. She picked up a small, red leather-bound book and handed it to him.

“This should do.”

He glanced at the gold-lettered title, *A Collection of Romantic Love Poems*, and laughed. “Now how did you know this was exactly what I had in mind?”

“Experience,” she retorted without hesitation.

He shook his head in mock surprise. “My, my Miss Hamilton, I wouldn't have expected it of you.”

Ignoring his innuendo, she gazed at him wearily.

When His Kiss Is Wicked by Kaitlin O'Riley

“Have you read this?” he asked out of perverse curiosity.

“Yes.”

“Which poem do you recommend as being the most romantic?”

“Page seventy-four.” She folded her arms across her chest and sighed. “Now is there anything else I can do for you today, Lord Waverly?”

“Most definitely, Miss Hamilton, but I don't believe you would agree to it,” he surprised even himself by saying.