

Chapter 1

Hillary J. Penrose sat alone in her large bedroom, as she often did, that cold and blustery winter morning. A powerful North Eastern storm shook the panes of her bedroom windows. It was typical Boston weather for December. Hillary felt warm and cozy under her down-filled duvet. She gazed ahead at the flickering flames from the fireplace. Her bedroom was a little different from those of other girls her age. Then again, most things about Hillary were a little different. There weren't any movie or rock star posters adorning her walls. Instead, she had very specifically chosen the design of her bedroom. The ceiling of her room had been carefully painted to look like a perfect summer sky, with fine little fluffy clouds against a deep azure background. A magnificent medieval castle, replete with high turrets, a moat and a drawbridge had been painted on the far wall by her window. The wall by her bed had been painted to resemble an endless three-dimensional green hedge maze. In the corner of her room a massive, ornately carved mirror stood imposingly. Hillary was also lucky to own an extensive collection of interesting stuffed animals. There was a huge, imposing brown kangaroo, a smooth roan colour stallion, a black and silver Gryphon, and many more. One of more would often accompany her on one of her many adventures. She also never traveled far without her pocket princess doll, and of course Digby, who followed her everywhere.

Hillary was quite often told how beautiful she was, and would one day become. The compliment meant very little to her. Her mother, Carolyn Penrose was much more receptive to this sort of praise. The socially conscious and ambitious woman has once tried to enter her in a beauty pageant, but Hillary would have none of it. Now by contrast, if there had been a reading contest for young girls, then she surely would have entered. Books were a vital part of Hillary's life. She had learned to read at an unusually young age. Her mother never failed to mention this to her relatives and strangers they might meet. It was not a matter of showing off for her; it was just that reading came very easily to Hillary. Her passion for words had lately become all encompassing. It was surely her father that played some part in this aspect of Hillary's character. He was determined that his daughter surpass in intelligence all of her peers. She was very early on impressed with the need for knowledge. Alphabetic flashcards and the latest "young genius" electronic gizmos were her principal playthings.

It was not unexpected that her father, Charles Penrose should have been so keenly determined to push his daughter to scholastic aptitude. He was decided that his daughter would not be thwarted in this regard as her had been. Though born into an affluent Boston family, Charles' father was not a believer in excessive book knowledge. The elder patriarch was a classic self-made man that had made his fortune with his hands, not the

capricious mind. Certainly some of this prejudice had been passed onto Charles. His attitude then was complicated, and he wondered if he had pushed his daughter excessively. He wondered if his unrelenting persistence was the cause of Hillary's reliance upon her ever-present imaginary friend.

Hillary did not make friends easily. Other children her own age seemed rather silly to her way of thinking. Their loud, expensive toys and trendy clothes did not interest her in the least. She had tried her hand at a few video games, but had found them generally uninteresting. She most of all preferred to stay in her room reading an engrossing book. Her favourite book by far was the wondrous "Peter Pan", by J.M. Barrie. Hillary had read it countless times. From a very early age, her mother had begun to notice her near obsession with the characters in the story. After the umpteenth bedtime reading of the fantastical tale, her mother had permanently taken the book away from Hillary. It was considered unhealthy to fixate so completely upon one particular book. Still, though she was denied the printed pages, she was still allowed to muse upon the Peter Pan character every night with her mobile. Above her bed the characters from the incredible story drifted in lazy circles, tethered to this world by the thinnest of wires. Such was Hillary's connection to the world around her.

Hillary never felt as though she exactly belonged in this peculiar world. Her own inner world, the world of her imagination always seemed much more real by comparison. She had not yet abandoned her fancy. Her young malleable mind remained wild and unconquered. Indeed, five is an odd and very special age to be, and not just for Hillary. Five is the in-between age, lying still very near the insular world of childhood imaginative reality, and not quite reaching the adult outer world of practical reality. Hillary experienced this difficult transitional state much more acutely than most other children did. Many had no imagination to speak of; and as such the loss of this realm went unnoticed by them. Yet Hillary felt the pain and angst all too well, especially for one so young. Her inner world was being threatened with extinction from all around. Annie had attempted to ease her pain, having also experienced the very same ordeal herself at that age.

Books had always been Hillary's ultimate defense and her safe haven. In addition to Peter Pan, there was also one very unusual book in particular that fascinated the young girl. Her beloved grandmother Annie had given her a very strange storybook the previous year for her birthday. The volume was elaborately adorned with Egyptian hieroglyphics and gilded pages. The wise old woman had told her that the book was indeed magical and special; and that only the two of them possessed the imaginative power to comprehend its contents. For this reason, Hillary kept it well hidden from both her parents. It lay safely

taped up inside her bed's box spring. The volume was indeed both perplexing and unique in respect to its magical properties. It was Hillary's single most prized possession, one that she would risk all to safeguard.

The next day Hillary's mother came into her room and announced that it was time to do some shopping. They left the house that cold morning and drove downtown. Hillary loved the busy stores and the bright twinkling Christmas displays. They arrived at the hectic shopping mall and searched for a parking spot. Hillary held on tightly to her mother's warm hand, as they walked towards the mall. The huge downtown Boston department store was bustling with activity. The air was bristling with the anticipation and excitement of the Holiday season. Brightly coloured lights and cheery faces illuminated the space. Christmas was not that many days away. Her busy mother had nearly finished the gift shopping for the family. The intoxicating wonder of Christmas and Santa Claus was very strong within Hillary. The previous Christmas, she was adamant that she had actually seen the jolly old soul sailing across the wintry night sky. Hillary wore only the very finest traditional clothes. Her mother was insistent that Hillary always look her best. A long pleated red and yellow dress adorned her small frame. A matching red cape fell gracefully from her small white neck. Completing the

outfit was a plaid Scottish bonnet propped up precariously upon her bountiful dark blonde hair.

Hillary was a deeply thoughtful, almost contemplative child. She entertained the sort of thoughts that one would associate with one much more mature. Indeed, her trenchant observations and world-weary quips caused her parents much unease. Hillary was not content to be an ordinary, frivolous child. She possessed an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and understanding. She looked up at her beautiful proud mother and, completely out of the blue, said “Mama, are the people in my imagination dead or alive?” Her mother was distracted by her conversation with a young sales girl; and did not hear the question. “Do these gloves come in a smaller size?” The bored teenage clerk merely sniffed in utter disinterest. “Uh...we only got whatever you see on the table.” The woman with the lustrous auburn hair pushed the issue. “Well can’t you go out back and check for me? It’s important! My husband wants these gloves!” After a moments consideration, the bored girl left to speak with her supervisor. “Please wait here Ma’am. I’ll see what I can do.” Carolyn Penrose was a woman accustomed to getting her own way in most situations. She wore a chocolate brown cashmere overcoat over a long flowing black dress. Only a string of fine pearls spanning her white throat served as adornment. Her fine featured face was impeccably made-up with a subtle flair.

Hillary had watched the animated exchange in her usual quiet, reserved manner. The uninteresting, mundane conversations of adults made little sense to her still impressionable young mind. She tugged hard at the dress of her mother to grab her attention away from the gloves. As the salesgirl left to fetch her superior, her mother gazed down beneficently upon her offspring. “Yes dear, can’t you see that Mommy is busy?” Hillary persisted as she repeated her initial query. Carolyn relented and listened to the odd question. She was not at all unfamiliar with such bizarre, almost metaphysical conundrums being posed by her daughter. For a moment she was puzzled. “What a silly question, Hillary. Your imagination is just for pretend. It’s not real. Hillary listened carefully to the response and furrowed her small brow in an expression of puzzlement. “What about Peter Pan and Wendy and Michael...they’re real aren’t they Mama?” Carolyn shook her head and smiled. “Whatever would make you think that, Hillary? Those are just characters from stories your father and I read to you at night. What is it with you and that book? You haven’t been reading it again have you? Now be a good girl and be quiet while I talk to this man.” The young girl was hardly impressed by the half-hearted answer. She thought her mother a little dim. Of course they were real, if she could think of them, she thought. Hillary looked up to see her mother fervently arguing with the supervisor.

“Well your flyer clearly stated that these gloves were on sale. Now it’s not my fault if you ran out of stock is it? Furthermore, your salesgirl was not at all polite.” With her tirade completed for the moment, Carolyn folded her slender arms across her spare chest. She gazed at the man imperiously as she awaited his response. The comments were directed to a middle aged balding man in his late forties. He seemed begrudgingly resigned to his unpleasant status in life. He feigned an ingratiating smile as he provided his dutiful answer. “Ma’am with all due respect, we cannot be expected to anticipate every eventuality. We have an excellent selection of other gloves to choose from. Let me show you these.” Carolyn merely sniffed in the air with contempt and gathered herself to leave. She looked down to grab hold of Hillary’s hand. The child had vanished.

Hillary had grown tired of listening to the boring conversation. She had surreptitiously slipped away as her mother had let go of her hand. It was not that Hillary was exactly in the habit of disobeying her mother. She knew quite well that it was improper of her to wander away in the busy store. Hillary possessed a deep sense of curiosity. She could not stand to be bored for more than a few moments. It was almost as if a constant battle between right and wrong raged inside her. On this particular occasion, the latter force had won out. The store was loud and exciting, but also a little frightening to the young girl. Adults dressed in heavy winter coats

were all rushing hither and thither. Pleasant Christmas jingles filled the air with cheer. Hillary sniffed and smelled the delicious scent of fresh baked sugar cookies. Hillary was a serious fan of cookies and made her way in the direction of the inviting scent. Shopping concerns filled the mind of every man and woman who walked quickly by her. Barely noticing the unattended child, Hillary was able to slip away quite a distance from her mother. The appealing, warm aroma of baked goodness continued to draw her away. Hillary was unusually courageous and very little would cause her to relent when she had a goal in mind. Finally she was led by her nose down a flight of escalators. Usually Hillary might have been frightened to go down them herself. On this occasion however, she felt unusually bold. When frightened, Hillary tried to imagine what her hero Wendy Darling might do in the same situation.

Carolyn Penrose gasped as she noticed that her daughter was no longer at her side. She first looked around the immediate vicinity and then at the man with whom she had spoken. "What happened to my daughter? She was right here beside me. Did you see her?" The assistant manager was frankly pleased with the change of subject. He adopted his most avuncular, conciliatory manner as he spoke. "Why...no Ma'am...but she must be somewhere." The casual remark did nothing but anger the already perturbed mother. "Well I realize that she is somewhere, you

idiot! Now can't you make some kind of announcement? Do something for God's sake!" The gentleman was hurt, but attempted to remain calm. "There is no need for name-calling. Now you go look for your daughter while I contact security." With that, Carolyn turned from the clerk to search for her daughter. She called out with a loud and tremulous voice. "Hillary! Hillary, where are you?" The assistant manager was speaking into his cell-phone. Carolyn rushed headlong through the vast sea of people searching for her precious daughter. Passersby barely looked up at the clearly distraught woman.

Hillary Penrose finally succeeded in discovering the aromatic treasure. The source of the wonderful cookie smell was found at last. Gazing up rapturously at the seemingly endless display of baked goods, her pert nose stuck up against the glass of the counter. A pleasant and contented looking salesgirl stared down amusedly at the young admirer of her wares. "May I help you young lady?" Hillary was at first taken aback by the pointed inquiry. She had recalled her mother's admonishment to never speak with strangers. However, she was also clever enough, at the age of five, to realize there were always exceptions to this rule. For instance, she knew that it was permitted to speak with police officers. The status of cookie-girl within this complex hierarchy of strangers seemed a gray area to her young mind. She decided in a fairly arbitrary manner to trust the

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