

WHISPER OF MAGIC

UNEXPECTED MAGIC SERIES

Patricia Rice



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Author's Note

Those of you familiar with my magical Malcolms and scientific Ives know that I'm playing with possibilities more than I'm using magic. Centuries ago, flying machines would have been magic and a scientific impossibility. Today, we know they aren't magic at all.

Of course, since I'm not dealing with fantasy magic but elements of humanity, what my protagonists are really learning is to use what they are given for the betterment of all—a lesson we should all take to heart.

So in Erran's book, I'm playing with the possibility of levitation—a psychic gift reported by spiritualists over the centuries and even in the Bible. I'm also flirting with persuasion and Mesmerism—persuasive voices have long been the basis for the success of everyone from snake oil salesmen to politicians. Why else would perfectly sane people do exactly what a particularly eloquent speaker tells them to do, even though they ought to know better?

So as Hamlet says: *There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.* - **Hamlet (1.5.167-8)**

One

June 1830

Lord Erran Ives, barrister, glanced back at his client's shadow of a wife. The babe in her lap sucked at its fist, but even he could tell the child was ill, and the children sitting quietly beside them were undernourished. The family shouldn't even be here, but they had nowhere else to go. His sense of injustice burned like a flame in his chest as he waited for the other barrister to finish speaking.

Once it was his turn, incensed by the half asleep judge's inattention to a poor family's welfare, Erran drew himself up to his full intimidating height and released his outrage in his closing statement. "To allow the monstrous greed of the defendant to deprive a hardworking man and his family the roof over their heads is an injustice so foul that all Britain must stand and *cry for reparations!*"

As if in agreement with this impassioned speech, a gavel rose and banged against the bench—startling the half-asleep judge whose hand wasn't on it. The judge jerked awake and stared in astonishment as the gavel flew from the bench and slammed to the floor.

Hiding his puzzlement at this bizarre flight, knowing he'd indulged in unseemly theatrics, Erran tightened his jaw and squared his shoulders for the scolding to come. He'd be lucky he wasn't thrown out of the courtroom on his first case.

Behind Erran, the baby howled and the crowd awoke, first with a low grumble, and then with increasingly agitated murmurs of "He's right!" and "*Hang all landlords!*"

Surreptitiously studying the now inert hammer on the floor while he waited for the judge to establish order, Erran let his mechanic's mind calculate the possibility of his shouts vibrating the bench enough to bounce off inanimate objects.

Instead of quieting at the judge and clerk's commands, the audience started stomping and chanting louder. They'd found a rhythm in a word Erran couldn't quite

discern.

Wondering what fresh nightmare this was, he refrained from glancing over his shoulder again or he would most likely blow a gasket. Were they chanting at him? Why?

Prepared to face his punishment, Erran focused on the bench. His head itched beneath his newly-acquired wig. Swallowing a lump in his throat, he squared his shoulders and stiffened his spine. He hadn't the wherewithal to fix his clients' problem on his own. The court was their only resource. If Erran lost his plea, the man, his ill wife, and their three very young children would be on the streets.

He had been their only hope. Now he would be their undoing.

The judge nodded in what appeared to be approval.

Disconcerted, Erran lurched back from his self-flagellation. What did that nod mean? Why wasn't the judge shouting at the bailiffs to haul the noisemakers from his courtroom? Or throwing Erran out for inciting a riot?

Beside Erran, his normally apathetic clerk embraced their openly weeping client. *What the deuce?*

Erran regretted becoming more heated than was suitable for a courtroom, but he certainly hadn't said anything new or different to make grown men weep. Everyone despised greedy landlords. No one ever did anything about them. They were part of the landscape like sky and trees. Why tears and sympathy for stating a basic fact?

While waiting for the axe to fall—or another gavel—he finally sorted out what the crowd chanted: *Reparations, reparations!*

The half-asleep audience had picked up on his speech? Erran had observed a lot of cases in his years of study. He had never seen or heard anything of this sort. He glanced across the aisle. His client's criminally abusive landlord and his solicitor were conversing nervously.

What the devil was going on? His stomach clenched and his throat locked. If the judge didn't act soon, Erran thought he might collapse in a puddle of sweat. And the mob behind him was likely to take the courtroom apart.

The audience continued stomping and shouting, while the bailiffs did nothing and one of the new policemen ran in from the street, looking confused at the hubble-

bubble.

The judge was going to throw him in jail and leave him to rot. His brothers probably wouldn't miss him for a year or two if he ended up in chains.

He'd told them to cry for reparations—and they'd obeyed. Why?

With no gavel to restore order, the judge finally shouted, "Let the court record state that Mr. Silas Greene must forfeit the entirety of the building at 16 Foxcroft to Mr. Charles Moore and his family in perpetuity. And if said Mr. Greene should ever face this court again, he shall be fined every cent in his possession. Court adjourned."

The crowd roared jubilantly, threatening to bring down the rafters from the vibrations.

"What does that mean?" Mr. Moore asked anxiously, wiping at his eyes.

"That the whole damned world has gone insane," Erran replied, but the noise was too loud for his client to hear, although his clerk sent him a strange look.

"You're possessed of the *devil*," Silas Greene, the landlord, snarled as he passed their table.

The devil, what a load of crockery . . .

Appalled, Erran shuddered as he recalled that term applied to his Cousin Sylvester—the Ives with a silver tongue who'd repeatedly sold fraudulent investments until forced to escape to the Americas. This wasn't the same at all, he told himself. He had right on his side.

It was just rare for right to triumph over wrong. And for gavels to fly, but that had to be a coincidence of vibrations and atmosphere. Devils did not exist.

Uneasy, but refusing to accept *evil* as an explanation of how an honorable suit over an eviction had become a triumphant melee, Erran stalked out of the chambers, discarding his robe and wig into the hands of his clerk before he escaped from the building.

"The house is mine?" Following in his wake, timid Mr. Moore stumbled in confusion as they reached the less noisy street. The Moore family huddled together, confused and waiting to be told what to do.

"The house is yours," Erran agreed, not believing it either. "The clerks will draw up the papers and deliver them on the morrow. Tell your wife she may move out of

your employer's cellar and back home."

Moore was weeping again, this time in apparent relief as he gave his family the verdict even Erran hadn't expected.

Granted, the landlord had been a greedy bastard who'd thrown the young family out when offered twice the rent by a neighboring merchant—but that was business as usual for London. Erran had simply taken the case to practice in a real courtroom now that he'd passed the bar.

He'd *shouted* at a judge, and instead of rightfully being thrown out on his noggin—he'd won the case in spectacular fashion.

The cloud darkening the previously bright summer day seemed an ominous portent.

A crowd of his fellows swarmed up to congratulate him, and Erran tried to shake off his apprehension. Jestingly, letting himself be momentarily buoyed by triumph, he climbed up on a mounting block and made a grandiose gesture. "All bow before your new lord and master!"

His jaw dropped as his fellow students, clerks, and friends removed their tall hats and bent in half before him.

Worse, everyone on the crowded street—businessmen, urchins, and timid Mr. Moore—all performed awkward gestures of obeisance. And looked extremely confused a moment later after Erran jumped from his pedestal and fled into the nearest tavern.

September 1830

Hunting for dry ground for his polished Wellingtons, Erran didn't see the mud ball until it knocked his black beaver hat into a puddle. *Bloody hell*. Erran stalked into the mews in pursuit of the miscreants while his ten-year-old nephew Hartley Ives-Weldon ran to rescue the expensive D'Orsay.

These days, Erran kept his formidable voice to himself, but that didn't mean he

didn't have fists to shake a few louts into next week. In the narrow mews, he caught sight of the troublemakers taunting a slender woman striding through the rutted mud. Realizing his hat hadn't been their intended victim didn't quell his temper. More mud splattered the woman's long black wool cloak and hood as she marched toward the reprobates without flinching.

Abandoning his nephew, Erran ran after her, hoping to scare the ruffians off with his greater size. He despised his preposterous delusions about his voice, but he was taking no chances in a public venue. To this day, most of his friends steered clear of him.

And once he'd returned to his senses, the judge had banned him from his courtroom.

"You will take your mud balls and run or the wrath of all the gods will rain upon your unworthy heads." The woman berated her mockers in mellifluous accents that sounded more like song than curses.

The beauty of her voice almost made up for the damage to his new hat.

The rain of rocks and mud balls abruptly ceased. Stunned, Erran watched as the lads vanished into doorways and alleys—terrified by a song?

Apparently unsurprised by their retreat, the woman opened a service gate into the yard of one of the substantial houses lining the left side of the alley. Erran strained to catch a better look at the producer of such a marvelous sound, but she didn't turn around. Instead, she slipped into the yard beyond the gate and shut the panel firmly.

Realizing what gate she'd just used—Erran would have flung his hat in a puddle again, if he'd been wearing it.

Bloody damn hell—he'd been trying to get into that house for a week. No one ever answered the door. He'd thought no one was home.

"Miss!" he called over solid English oak topped by wrought iron. He had learned to modulate his voice, but making it carry would require shouting if she got too far away. "Miss, if I might speak with you!"

For a moment, the black cloak hesitated. A head turned, and over the top of the gate, he caught a glimpse of an oval face tinted by the rich hues of a tropical sun, long black lashes, and a frown. Then she hastened her pace and vanished behind a hedge

of greenery.

“Drat.” Erran rubbed at the soiled hat that Hartley handed him, rattled the barred gate, and kicked an errant stone.

Not tall enough to see over the panel, Hartley tried to peer between the cracks. “Why were they throwing rocks at her?”

“It’s a puzzlement,” Erran said, scowling at the damage to his boots. “I’ve not seen so much as a ghost in the place all week. At least we now know there are servants in there, even if they don’t answer the door.”

Even as he said that, Erran wasn’t convinced he hadn’t seen a ghost. She had glided with the elegant grace of a lady, head high, steps delicate, skirts swaying with expensive layers of petticoats. But no lady would have brown skin, wear an ugly black cloak, or use the servants’ entrance. It was *all* a puzzlement.

It was his own damned house he was trying to get into.

His whole accursed life had become a mystery, even to him. He blamed his brother Theo for marrying a witch—although Lady Aster had merely been a thorn in their collective sides at the time the courtroom incident had happened.

Her family research had simply prompted the notion of inheriting the bad strains of prior generations. Just because Cousin Sylvester had persuaded thousands of pounds out of the hands of wealthy investors didn’t mean Erran had inherited his relation’s deceitful streak. Erran considered himself to be a man of education and science, not a superstitious peasant—or a thief.

But with judges unwilling to take his cases, he was an *unemployed* man of education.

“How will we get the house back for Papa if we can’t move out the tenants?” Hartley inquired anxiously. Hartley was the worrier of Ashford’s illegitimate twins. The catastrophic summer had turned the boy’s usual cheerful smile upside-down as the weeks passed and it became evident his father would never be the same. “We’ll never persuade him into town otherwise.”

Erran had his doubts that they’d persuade the marquess to town even if they gained the townhouse, but the family home was the only suggestion his newly-blind brother had shown an interest in. It should have been a simple task to find the

tenants new accommodations and help them to move out. Unfortunately, the tenants had proved remarkably unavailable for moving.

Legally and morally, he could do nothing to evict them. The tenants had a proper, paid contract and no obligation to open their doors to him. He had been hoping to persuade them by offering a better house in recompense. He might have more success battering down doors, but that would make him as reprehensible as the landlord he'd taken to court.

These days, he was working hard to stick to a moral, as well as a legal, high ground, in hopes he would one day be employable again. Being arrested for battering down his own family's door would set tongues clacking and guarantee disbarment.

"It's time to make more inquiries," Erran concluded, steering his nephew toward the tavern now occupying the former stable.

In this street just off St. James Square, the once formidable stone and granite mansions built in the prior century were showing signs of deterioration. Many had been subdivided and turned into shops and taverns or bachelor flats. The Ives town house, however, remained a solid square occupying the entire space between the street and the mews.

"Hunt down those ruffians and find out why they're throwing stones at our tenants' servants," Erran ordered. "I'll be in the tavern making inquiries. Don't take too long. We have to return for dinner at Theo's."

Obediently, Hartley ran off to find the neighbor lads. That there were vast differences in their stations didn't occur to the son of an actress and a marquess. Well, for all Erran knew, the ragged ruffians could have been the bastard sons of dukes. The Crown owned half the property around here.

He entered the smoke-filled dark room to put his lawyerly skills to work—praying he would have no use for the dangerous Courtroom Voice that had caused him to lose his profession and question his sanity.

Celeste Malcolm Rochester removed her muddied cloak with a trembling hand and hung it on a hook by the back door. She'd had enough experience at these

misadventures lately that she no longer collapsed beside the door, shaking and crying. She'd learned to take deep breaths and go on.

But the gentleman—he was a new development, and he'd rattled her badly. His mellow baritone had promised a security she hadn't known since they arrived in London—which was entirely ridiculous. She hurried up the stairs to find a window overlooking the mews. Rubbing her elbows, trying to calm herself, she peered through a gap in the drapery.

The formidable gentleman who had followed her wore a fashionable gray frock coat, the kind with a redingote collar. He'd topped it with a handsome black muffler and held an expensive tall hat. He was no ruffian, although she questioned the origin of the child to whom he was speaking. Were they the instigators of these episodes?

The boy ran off while the gentleman studied the windows where she stood. Dark curls and slight sideburns framed an arrogantly square jaw and high cheekbones, before he slammed the muddy hat back on his head and retreated to the tavern, out of her sight.

"Why do they hate us?" she asked, attempting to expel her fear and despair. "We have harmed no one."

"People fear what they do not know," her African nanny said prosaically, glancing up to verify Celeste was unharmed, then returning to pedaling the machine they'd brought with them.

Nana Delphinia had been with them for as long as Celeste could remember. The older woman had loyally accompanied them to London, leaving behind her own grown children in the process. Therein lay the true tragedy of their lives, and another reason Celeste spent her sleepless nights in tears.

Their faithful servant's hair was turning gray, and lines of worry marred her face, but Nana had lost none of her strength of character. "What happened this time?"

"They've escalated to mud flinging. I'll have to scrape my cloak once it dries. I'm not certain what the gentleman had to do with the attack, if anything." Celeste dropped the old velvet panel back in place. "If he's a solicitor, he's more elegant than the others they've sent. I may actually have to talk to him."

Celeste's younger sister hurried to look and frowned at seeing only the empty

alley.

Her younger brother glanced up from his schoolbook with alarm. “Unless we’ve miraculously found the coin to hire a solicitor of our own, talking to him isn’t wise,” Trevor counseled. At seventeen, he was the image of his great-grandfather in the portraits their great-grandmother had painted—tall, dark-haired, brown-skinned, and handsome, now that he was growing into his bones.

“The lease is ours,” Celeste assured him, trying to convince herself. If they lost the roof over their heads along with everything else, she didn’t know what she would do. “They can’t take away our home. We’ll have a solicitor of our own soon enough. I have a new order for shirts. Sewing in the pleat has proved popular. Young gentlemen lack servants who can wield crimping irons.”

“Popular, but tedious,” Sylvia complained, returning to her chair and her hand sewing. Unlike her older siblings, Sylvia was blond and petite, more like their mother than their father. “I was so hoping for grand parties and elegant gowns and . . .” She let her voice drop off at Celeste’s pointed glare.

“We’re in mourning, and you’re still too young.” And Celeste was too old and too unsuitable, but their father had cheerfully refused to acknowledge that. He had paid for his foolishness with his life and quite possibly the lives of others, but that couldn’t have been predicted. “Your time will come, but first we must earn the funds to find a good lawyer. Be grateful for what we have.” Celeste hunted for her sewing basket.

“Be grateful for a cousin who has appropriated our inheritance?” Trevor asked bitterly. “Or for a half-sister who won’t acknowledge our existence? Or for our father’s unfortunate demise on a miserable ship that nearly took our lives?”

“For being alive with an excellent situation and food in our bellies,” Nana scolded. “You have seen how those back home fare. It will be your duty to help them one of these days. Now study.”

It would be Trev’s duty to save the servants—like Nana’s family—from their cousin’s greed was the admonishment they all heard. Trev paled and dipped his head back to the schoolbook.

Celeste swallowed back tears and picked up her own sewing. If only she’d been born a boy . . . But it would be four more years before Trevor would be of a legal age

and could assume their father's estate. Four years in which their father's cousin, the Earl of Lansdowne, could sell off all their father's assets, along with the people who had served their family for decades. *Free* people, not slaves—although without access to their father's papers, no one could prove that.

Celeste couldn't imagine any English court of law giving a woman the right to take care of her family, not any more than she could imagine them giving Nana her freedom if the Earl of Lansdowne chose to challenge it. He'd already usurped their father's estate by having himself declared head of the family.

Hiring a solicitor was scarcely one small weapon in their puny arsenal.

Hiding for the next four years didn't seem like a brilliant plan, either, but it was the best she had. It wasn't *all* she had, but anything else was built on fairy dust and magic.

Two

Having cleaned the worst of the mud from his boots and brushed off his coat, Erran settled at his sister-in-law's dinner table knowing no one but he would notice if he sat down in shirt sleeves. Fashionable, his brothers were not, despite their wealth and lengthy aristocratic history. Theo's eccentric new wife was cut of similar cloth.

Wearing another of her unfashionable peacock-colored gowns, Lady Azenor signaled one of her footman trainees to serve the first course. "Hartley says neither of you had any luck at discerning the whereabouts of the townhouse's tenants?"

Accustomed to the blunt speaking of his brothers, Erran had no difficulty adjusting to Lady Aster, as she'd asked them to call her. "We've only seen servants," he acknowledged. "As the lease indicates, the tenants are Jamaican, and they've brought foreign retainers with them. If I'm to believe half the tales told in the tavern, they have giants and ogres as well. Hartley says the boys throwing mud balls swore the servants are witches."

Lady Aster immediately lost interest in her soup. "Witches? Why ever would they say that?"

Short, plump, and copper-haired, his sister-in-law might not look much like a witch, but she came from a long line of women who'd once been vilified with that epithet. The women might have a few uncanny talents, but Erran didn't count them as more than the application of illogical conclusions to scientific principles. Although lately . . . He squirmed uneasily, preferring not to consider his own brush with the Wyrd. "The ruffians were incapable of communicating any story that made sense."

He glanced at the footman serving his soup. "James?" he asked, diverting his unease by trying to determine if this was the same footman he'd seen here last.

"Smithson," the servant corrected. He shut up quickly at a frown from the lady, nodded, and moved back to the buffet.

"We're informal," his brother Theo said after Erran's faux pas. "But Aster is trying to train servants for more formal houses. Presumably, elsewhere, they are expected

to only occasionally be seen and never heard.”

“Better to train them to suit ourselves.” Erran tasted the soup and approved. “I still need a valet. Pascoe can’t keep a nursemaid. And Dunc will drive those few people he has left insane, so we can use a steady flow of servants at the estate.”

“I’d thought of that,” Theo agreed. With his neckcloth already coming undone and his overlong chestnut hair falling across his brow, he reached across the table for the bread rather than waiting for it to be served. “Aster can train them so Dunc can dismiss them. Some sort of poetic justice. But then we can give them references from the house of a marquess.”

Erran knew they made light of a tragic situation. His all-powerful older brother had been blinded in an accident that had been no accident, as they had discovered when Aster had overheard their neighbor’s son and a band of hired rogues. The son had fled the country, and there was no one to give evidence or identify the hirelings—not that convicting anyone would give the marquess back his sight.

Erran ground his teeth, sipped his soup, and contemplated how to move the newly-blind marquess into his city home, where Duncan might recover part of his former authority—and possibly restore Erran’s reputation.

The alternative was Erran forfeiting his education to become a tinker. And Dunc could lose his brilliant mind cooped up inside four walls, refusing to emerge from his misery.

“If we can retrieve the townhouse from the tenants, we’ll be able to employ even more of my aunt’s workhouse rescues.” Aster glanced inquiringly at Erran. “Does the place appear to be in good condition? Will it be worth converting the ground floor for Ashford’s use?”

Erran knew she wasn’t rubbing in his failure. Aster was too oblivious to reality for that, so he merely shrugged and posed another possibility. “Hard to say what’s been done on the interior. The tenants—wherever they are—aren’t complaining about leaking roofs anyway. The *location* is what Dunc needs—only a few blocks from Parliament. Perhaps we could lease another place in the area.”

The lady glared at him. “It is *that* house he needs. Astro-geographically, it’s ideal since he was born there. There are strong power points running through that lot. If

anything could cure him, it will be that house.”

There were dozens of reasons the marquess needed the family London town home, but *power points*—whatever they were—weren’t high on Erran’s list. Dunc needed to return to Parliament for his own sanity. The vote on the next prime minister would affect the entire reform movement, including the labor laws and other bills crucial to their family and to the entire country. As Marquess of Ashford, Duncan had influence and responsibility the rest of the family could only aspire to.

As a newly blind man, Ashford refused to leave his chambers. He had ceded his responsibilities to his heir, a reluctant Theo—who was more scientist than politician. Erran accepted that Duncan needed familiar surroundings just to tackle each day, but leaving him to rot in his room wasn’t healthy for anyone.

“Perhaps you should take me over to the town house,” Aster suggested. “I could talk to the women in the area. Surely there are neighbors who gossip? We need to find out where the tenants have gone.”

“Or you could set up as a Gypsy woman on the corner and offer to read their fortunes,” Theo suggested wickedly.

Aster frowned thoughtfully, as if she were actually considering his suggestion. “It’s an expensive neighborhood, but my aunts know everyone. I could obtain an introduction to the neighbors and hold one of my parties. I won’t really read their fortunes, of course, but with their birth dates, I can tell them about their sun signs. People talk at parties. If the tenants have gone to Scotland for the hunting season, perhaps someone will have an address.”

Considering the mysterious cloaked visage he’d observed for that one brief moment—and the flying mud balls in the mews and the insults he’d heard in the tavern—Erran didn’t believe Aster would have much luck questioning the neighbors.

He’d have to find another way in—if only for their tenants’ protection.

“Old-fashioned and dirty.” The Honorable Emilia McDowell sniffed in distaste as she, Lady Aster, and Erran walked down the street beyond St. James Square to study the Ives’ London home. Wealthy and attractive, as Lady Aster’s relations often were,

Miss McDowell was also independent enough to decline the offer of Erran's arm. With her thick black hair and pale complexion, she looked the part of witch that the riotously-colored, cheerful Lady Aster did not.

"Ives House is one of the wider lots, with a yard in the rear," Erran explained. "There should be sufficient space on the ground floor for Duncan's chambers, and there may even be room for expansion in back."

"Only if you remove the tenants," Lady Aster pointed out pragmatically, studying a chart she'd removed from the capacious bag she always carried with her. "This is even a more auspicious location than I'd realized. It should enhance Ashford's already copious powers."

"To the point of healing him?" Miss McDowell asked with interest.

Erran noted she didn't ask *what powers*, like any sensible person. The women talked in a language all their own. Dunc's power was in his wealth and authority. The house's location had little to do with that except as a display of his heritage.

"One never knows about healing. Perhaps if you have herbs that will work for him and grew them here . . ." Aster sighed. "The herbs would be more powerful, too, but asking plants to heal blindness does not seem realistic."

Miss McDowell studied the four-story stone exterior. "It is a very plain structure, not a pilaster or column in sight. But I do feel energy emanating from it. I wonder if it has an herb garden?"

Well aware that Lady Aster was attempting to match him with her wealthy but unconventional cousin, Erran attempted not to scoff at their idiocies. He wasn't ready for a wife, but at the rate he was headed, he might need her wealth. Without the career he'd been trained for, he was existing on his allowance and his brother's goodwill. Neither were sufficient to afford rooms, much less an office and a clerk.

Gardens, however, he could answer to. "There is a large yard in the rear with plenty of room for a garden. I believe one of the greats grew herbs."

"The Malcolm connection," Lady Aster reminded him. "Your great-grandmother was a brilliant Malcolm herbalist and healer. You said the tenants are Jamaican. We have ancestors who lived in the Caribbean. Perhaps we should research your tenants. They may have been drawn to this house for the same reasons we are—the earth

energies beneath it.”

“The chances of someone from Jamaica both knowing the house and being from the same family as ours are about as good as curing Duncan.” Unable to contain his skepticism any longer, Erran spoke more sharply than he’d intended and regretted it instantly. His normally smiling sister-in-law cast him a narrowed look that did not bode well for future peace.

Pretending oblivion, he studied the mansion’s tall windows. Every one of them had the draperies drawn. “There’s a better chance that they’re vampire monsters who never come out in day. That place has to be darker than Hades with all the windows covered.”

The women laughed and returned to discussing nonsensities. Disgruntled, Erran studied the busy street. Expensive bays pulling crested carriages trotted past gas light posts. Inside the carriages sat ladies sporting their wealth with the feathers and finery of the latest fashions. The vehicles stopped at columned mansions to be greeted by liveried footmen or rattled on to the more fashionable shops in Mayfair. Despite its age, the area was still respectable.

The pedestrians pushing and shoving along the cobblestones were mostly men in top hats, foreign ambassadors and their staff at this time of year. In another few weeks, the aristocratic residents might return for the parliamentary session that had just been called to replace the prime minister, and the streets would be even more crowded.

Urchins still swept street corners. In the evenings, prostitutes would hug the walls of the taverns. Tailors had shops just around the corner, convenient for the government staffs that passed to and fro who had need of mending, new coats, or orders for uniforms.

Erran thought the neighborhood safe enough for a blind marquess—but not if ruffians were attacking servants. The whole incident bothered him, but he could not quite put his finger on why.

He escorted the ladies to the entrance of the old house, where they insisted on sending their footman up the stone stairs to rap despite the lack of knocker. When no one answered, as usual, Erran led them down the street to the house of one of their

acquaintances, where they would begin the business of gossip.

Leaving them with a promise to return in an hour, Erran excused himself from the company. Out of all the foolishness the women had spouted, he'd found one gem—he should have researched their tenant more thoroughly. A man who could pay the exorbitant lease on a house like this for the next five years should be a man known in the business community.

Erran didn't possess enough wealth to traverse the rarified clubs where affluent industrialists discussed business, or even the clubs designated for the sons of aristocrats. That put him at a disadvantage for researching their tenant.

Rendered useless by his weird courtroom encounter—and the embarrassing aftermath—he'd been avoiding his usual clubs lately. Wielding a silver tongue, or vibrating inanimate objects, wasn't how he wanted to win his cases—or influence friends.

Unfortunately, if he meant to help Duncan, he would have to return to his clubs for information. The temptation to test his Wyrd Theory was great, but every moral fiber in his body resisted.

Reaching his club, Erran sighed as his path crossed that of one of his inveterate gambler friends.

"I have a pony on you marrying into your sister-in-law's witchy family before year's end," the gambler cried in delight at seeing Erran.

Well, at least he didn't need magical persuasion to counter that idiocy. Pounding his companion on the back, Erran climbed the stairs. "And I have a pony that says you're a horse's arse."

Maybe if he was rude enough, he would restore his reputation.

Stacking neatly folded shirts into a box, Celeste called, "Is the coast clear?"

"No one at the front," Trevor answered from the drawing room.

"I haven't seen anyone in the mews," Sylvia announced from her bedchamber at the back of the house. "Perhaps the gentleman scared off the ruffians."

"The *gentleman* has been making inquiries about the neighborhood," Jamar

intoned in his deep bass with only a hint of wryness as he shrugged on his frock coat. "I will escort you."

Celeste cast him a concerned gaze. Jamar was nearly seven feet tall and very black, more African than Jamaican. He had not met with politeness in these months in London. As Nana said, people feared what they did not know, and unfortunately, they acted very badly when afraid.

"It won't be dark for another hour. I should be safe enough just walking down the street," Celeste argued, hiding her fear of walking these city streets alone—as she had hidden all her fears these last months. "I am just another servant carrying her employer's packages."

She truly didn't mind being reduced from privileged lady to servanthood for her family's sake. But she utterly despised being afraid every minute of her life.

"I will go with you." Jamar straightened his neckcloth and buttoned his coat.

There had never been any arguing with her father's majordomo. If she tried her charm, Jamar narrowed his eyes and muttered in an incomprehensible patois until she gave up. He was probably praying to devils and saints and placing a curse on her. She hoped he was happy that his curses had worked.

She wouldn't encourage his bossiness by letting him see her relief.

"Fine, then. Take a big stick." Huffing in impatience, she threw on her cloak, hid her un-English complexion beneath her hood, and picked up her box. If Jamar intended to be her security, he needed his fists free. She wasn't risking all their hard work.

Knowing how far he could push her, Jamar didn't fight over the box, but merely followed her down the stairs and out the kitchen garden. The September days were growing shorter, and a light fog was moving in, casting the bushes into gray shadow. They would have to adjust their hours soon. She wasn't about to run to the tailor shop at dark. That could mean one less shirt a day—or burning more candles. She'd have to think about raising prices.

Frowning, fretting over new ways of keeping their small household running without access to the wealth to which they had always been accustomed, Celeste hurried down the muddy alley. At her side, Jamar kept his huge fist on the knife

beneath his coat and vigilantly studied the shadows.

"Watch out!"

The commanding bellow so startled her that she nearly dropped the precious box of shirts. While Jamar glanced around for the danger, a well-dressed gentleman grabbed her cloak and shoved her against a brick wall. He shielded her with his big body as noxious liquid splashed where she'd just been walking.

Crushed between the wall and the bulk of a masculine stranger, Celeste stupidly noticed his spicy scent more than the stench rising from the street. Her next frantic thought was not to crush the box in her arms. She struggled to push free from an obstacle as solid as a brick wall.

Before she could react more sensibly, the gentleman gagged on a growl of surprise as Jamar wrapped a brutal arm around his spotless neckcloth and lifted him off of her.

Shakily, she straightened and tried to puzzle out what had just happened.

"Put...me...down," the gentleman said precisely and threateningly, even though Jamar had his head pulled back and could have broken his neck in a single jerk.

Those handsome dark curls looked familiar, as was the expensive tailoring. She thought the stranger's intonation a little constrained, but she applauded his courage under fire. "Jamar, I believe the gentleman prevented a very unpleasant drenching. Put him down, please."

Once Jamar obeyed, both men reached for the weapons beneath their coats, but they refrained from drawing them while they studied each other with male belligerence. Celeste thought the haughty stranger might be the one who had called after her the other day, the one who had come knocking with the ladies yesterday. He was taller than she by half a head—and she was of above average height. Muscular, broad-shouldered, and thick-chested as a boxer, he was still no match for Jamar, despite his defiant stance. She had to admire him for not backing down from a fiercer opponent.

But apparently satisfied he would not be attacked again, the stranger removed his hat and bowed stiffly, revealing a visage as handsome as the rest of him. "I saw the wretch in the upper window with a pail. I did not mean to frighten you. I apologize for

the presumption.”

Dragging her gaze from his taut, angry jaw and compelling dark eyes, Celeste glanced up at the tall brick building they stood below. All the windows were shut and blank now. The only evidence of what could have been a damaging attack to her hard work was the malodorous smell of the slop pail’s contents running down the street.

She would have asked if London was still so primitive as to use slop buckets, but she knew better—this had been another personal attack. Remembering her role, Celeste tugged the cloak tighter, nodded without speaking, and hurried on her way. The persistent gentleman followed. Irritatingly, Jamar did not chase him off but began watching the windows of the buildings they passed.

“I do not mean to impose,” the gentleman said, matching his stride to hers, “But I need to speak with Bardolph, Lord Rochester. It’s a matter of immense urgency. If I could importune you to let me know of his return . . .”

The mention of her father’s name startled her almost as much as his thrusting her against a wall. London had been a difficult learning experience these past horrible months. She was rather tired of the constant need to adapt to new circumstances. She didn’t need arrogant gentlemen pushing their way into her life. What could he possibly know of her origins?

She cast him a sideways glance, but beneath his polished exterior, he seemed most earnest. He really did want to speak with her father.

That meant he wasn’t from her father’s cousin or the estate solicitors.

She sighed as she followed that thought—it probably meant he was from her *landlord’s* solicitor. The letters from them had been far more frequent than any communication from her wretched conniving relation.

Trying to maintain a subservient demeanor, she kept her face hidden and applied her repelling vocalization beneath her most melodious tones. “We do not know, sir. I should not speak with strangers. You must leave. Good day to you, sir.”

She hurried toward the safety of the tailor’s shop around the corner, fully expecting him to go away as she’d commanded. As further warning, Jamar placed himself at her back.

She started in surprise as the audacious gentleman circumvented Jamar, not put

off by her voice or a giant. What manner of devil was this? She halted to glare at him before he discovered her destination.

She had to admit that having an elegant gentleman addressing her with intensity was pleasing, as were his features. He had long-lashed dark eyes beneath slashing dark eyebrows, eyes that studied her with the same interest as she studied him. Blatantly, she let her gaze drop to his very masculine nose with a bit of a crook in it, his supple lips, and his dimpled chin. She adored dimpled chins, even worn on a visage frosty with determination. Still, she did not speak.

“I know you do not understand this country,” he said.

That he had not obeyed her command immobilized her with confusion. Men always obeyed her voice. Despite her pleasure at his looks, her loss of control of the situation made it difficult to comprehend his words.

“You have no cause to sympathize with the problems facing my family,” she heard him say, “but perhaps you are familiar with the fight to free the slaves in places such as your home? What I have to say affects that fight as well.”

Had he just addressed her deepest fear—right here in public? Was he a mind reader? Celeste nearly stumbled in shock.

He reached to catch her before she fell, but she was quick on her feet and righted herself, still in an appalled daze.

Could he really be speaking about the anti-slavery bill that might stop her uncle’s predations? And what would this stranger have to do with her late father?

Three

Erran had never been reduced to begging, especially from beautiful women. But he was too caught up in the urgency of this opportunity to recognize any loss of dignity. Obtaining his brother's town house was the most important goal in his rotten life right now. If he must implore servants to gain access to the tenant, he would bow down on bended knee.

Besides, it was no hardship to study this mystery woman who did not scream assault when attacked or retreat to hysterics when confronted. He had his suspicion that she was no simple servant. From what he could see beneath her concealing hood, she had long-lashed eyes, lush lips, and a complexion as rich as her accent—all of which spoke of foreign aristocratic refinement.

Somehow, he had to breach the lady's rather formidable defenses to resolve the problem at hand. An armed, seven-foot tall Nubian was a rather daunting obstacle—although perhaps not so much as the lady's refusal to speak.

At her nod of dismissal, her bodyguard stepped around Erran to open the door of the tailor shop. The lady hastened inside, and the servant closed the door, blocking Erran from following. Servants did not have servants.

Erran studied his adversary. "You saw what happened back there. You know the lady has enemies."

Garbed in the formal, if old-fashioned, attire of a gentleman, the towering African remained stoic, staring over Erran's head.

"I can find out who would want to harm her and why, but only if I know for certain that she is who I believe she is. It would be rather futile to search for her enemies if she's someone else." He didn't even know if the other man spoke English, but he had to assume he did since the lady had addressed him that way.

No response. Erran contemplated testing his Courtroom Voice on the irritating Colossus, but temptation was addictive and dangerous, not to mention illogically superstitious, and he refused to give in to it. If that meant demeaning himself before a

footman or butler, so be it. It wasn't as if an Ives existed who stood on formality.

"I'm Lord Erran Ives, brother to the Marquess of Ashford," he said stiffly. "My family owns the house in which you're living. If the lady is not safe there, we can arrange better, safer accommodations."

He noted a flicker of interest. Before he could find a more persuasive argument, the lady returned, empty-handed. If she really was a lady, why would she be running menial errands to tailor shops? And yesterday, she had been doing so without the accompaniment of any servant.

Determined to solve the puzzle, Erran refused to be pushed aside. He fell in step with them as they returned the way they'd come. "My sister-in-law has been doing some research," he said.

In actuality, after he'd given Aster all the names he'd acquired, she'd fallen into near fits of ecstasy. But describing Malcolm weirdness was beyond him. He stayed with the facts he understood. "She says that the Rochester family and hers are distantly related, if Lord Rochester is from the same branch. She is a genealogist and would very much like to meet the family, if that's possible."

The lady said nothing, merely hurried toward the mews as if he were no more than a talking lamp post.

"As I've told your friend here, the family of a marquess could be very influential in dealing with those who might threaten your household." Erran considered that a fairly persuasive argument—until the lady finally spoke, decisively turning his own words against him.

"And they can be equally dangerous enemies," she replied in honeyed tones that did not seem to match her meaning. "How do we know *you* aren't the ones causing us grief? I would rather you left us alone."

For a brief moment, she turned almond-shaped, spectacularly blue eyes to him with what appeared to be expectation. He was so startled at the juxtaposition of light eyes, dark lashes, and bronzed complexion that he almost forgot to reply.

Dismissively, she turned to escape into her hidden garden.

He recovered his tongue. "If a marquess wants to harm you," he retaliated, "he'd march an army to your door and haul you out. He wields that kind of power but has

refrained from using it.”

For some reason, his argument seemed to alarm her. She shoved anxiously at the garden gate.

Her bodyguard halted her. “I think we should listen to him.”

At that, she tensed and straightened her shoulders, obviously preparing a rejection. She was tall for a woman, but Erran could tell little else about her beneath the concealing cloak. It was hard to imagine a lady taking suggestions from a servant, but he had no better means of reaching her.

“We do not *know* him,” she said in a tone reflecting hesitation and . . . fear? Why would she fear him?

“How does one come to know anyone without talking to them?” Erran asked. “I can bring my sister-in-law here. I can bring you references from dukes and judges. What do you require?”

“A message from God,” the giant said with wryness.

“He does not respond to my vocalization,” the lady whispered. “I cannot trust anyone that unpredictable.”

Erran raised his eyebrows. “I respond to spoken words just as everyone else. That illogic sounds like my sister-in-law and her relations. Do I have the honor of meeting Miss Celeste *Malcolm* Rochester?” He repeated the name Aster had given him, almost hoping he was wrong. Malcolms were impossibly irrational.

She peered at him from beneath her hood. “You say that as if it’s a bad thing.”

He winced. “Sorry. The Malcolm ladies sometimes have windmills in their heads, and I do not fully comprehend their rationale. It would be better if I could speak with your father, but I’m a desperate man. I’ll bring Lady Aster to translate woman-speak for me, if necessary.”

“Woman-speak,” she said in an expressive tone that probably reflected eye-rolling, if only he could see her eyes again, but she’d retreated beneath her hood. “Yes, it would probably be better if I spoke with this Lady Aster, except you are here and she is not. I cannot imagine how we can help you.”

“You *are* Miss Rochester?” Erran asked, trying not to show his disbelief that Aster had been right. “Then by all means, we must speak. I think we can help each other.”

Celeste doubted that anyone could help her, but this haughty aristocrat had saved her—and their valuable shirts—from a particularly nasty misadventure. That cautious Jamar was willing to listen said much about their desperation.

She was terrified of letting anyone new into their precarious lives, and someone resistant to her . . . charms . . . seemed especially risky.

Jamar would not understand that she needed every little bit of control she possessed to hold herself together. If she could not influence this powerful gentleman by using her voice—as she did everyone else—she would never be rid of him until he had what he wanted. Without her shield, she had no backbone at all. A man like this would walk right over her.

She craved the influence and security she had lost with her father's death. Still, a man who knew a marquess and who had relations who might be distant family . . . offered some small hope.

Crushing her terror at trusting the unknown for the millionth time these past months, she opened the gate and allowed him inside. A wind greeted them as if recognizing an invader, and she shivered with the rustle of her petticoats.

Dusk had fallen, and the air was exceedingly damp. She could not, in all good conscience, leave a gentleman standing in the overgrown garden. Reluctantly, Celeste led him to the kitchen door. She wasn't about to lead him into their lives.

His Arrogance raised a noble brow as she passed by the ground floor door, but he did not comment when she led him down the mossy stone stairs instead. Inside the kitchen the fire blazed, eradicating any lingering cold and damp from outdoors. She might never become used to England's gray fogs, but the lovely hearth with its crackling flames helped immensely.

Nana had apparently been watching from the upper story and hurried to join them—fortunately, without Trevor and Sylvia. Garbed in the printed red and blue cottons of home—not the dull black uniforms of English servants—the cook and kitchen maid they'd brought with them glanced up, but accustomed to Celeste's ways, they returned to their chopping and stirring on the far end of the large cellar.

Celeste was too nervous to care how her colorful company looked in the eyes of a dignified London aristocrat. They were Jamaican, not English. He'd have to accept them as they were.

At least by bringing these few servants with her, she'd been able to save them from the earl's greed—for now. She prayed the dastard didn't know of their presence here, which was why she had insisted that Jamar stay inside. But in his male arrogance, he had refused, time and again.

She slipped off the cloak's hood and waited for the gentleman to introduce himself. To her surprise, Jamar performed the courtesy.

"Lord Erran Ives, brother to the Marquess of Ashford, our landlord," the majordomo intoned. "Miss Celeste Rochester, daughter of the late Baron Rochester." He nodded at Nana. "Miss Delphinia, our housekeeper. I am Jamar, the baron's estate manager in better times."

Brother of a marquess! This was even worse than she feared.

"Delphinia and Jamar are family to us," Celeste said stiffly. "They were given the name Rochester when they were given their freedom, as were all our people, unless they had names of their own already. If you'll have a seat, we can have coffee. We have not yet learned your custom of tea."

To his credit, his lordship pulled out chairs for both her and Nana and gestured for them to sit first. She rather missed such niceties. With a sigh of resignation, she hung up her concealing cloak. She knew her mourning gown wasn't the latest fashion and that she hadn't the buxom hourglass figure so admired by handsome gentlemen like this one. Those things no longer mattered. Survival did.

She waited until the kitchen maid set out cups and saucers and brought the coffee. It wasn't as if she knew where to start.

"Your father is deceased?" Lord Ives asked as she poured the steaming beverage and before she could summon a single opening sentence.

Her tears of grief at any mention of her beloved father had become those of self-pity, so she fought them. "On the voyage here," she acknowledged, adding cream to her coffee but not the expensive sugar. "There was a terrible storm. The crew lost men. Since Father had sailing experience, he helped out, probably saving the lives of

everyone aboard when one of the masts broke, and he knew exactly how to react. But he was injured in the process, and there was no ship's surgeon. Despite every effort, we did not have enough knowledge to save him."

And still, after all these months, she choked back a sob—of sorrow and of exhaustion. Her sheltered life had not prepared her for these months of tribulation.

"That was in spring," Jamar said, taking up the story when she could not speak further. "The baron wished to bring his daughters out in London society and give his son an Oxford education. His executors have other ideas."

Sipping her coffee to steady her nerves, Celeste watched Lord Ives' dark eyes narrow, as if he saw an opportunity. She feared the advantage would be all his and none of theirs. She was discovering that was how this gray, clammy world worked.

"And your mother?" he inquired with caution.

"Deceased, several years past," Jamar answered for her.

His lordship nodded. "Leaving the burden on your shoulders, I understand. If I might suggest . . . I often act as a solicitor for my family. If you give me the name of the firm handling your father's estate," Lord Ives said, "I can carry out any dealings with them that you require. Sometimes, men of business are not amenable to persuasion from females, but they *will* listen to authority."

Celeste didn't even bother testing her charm but spoke bluntly. "His executor is my father's cousin, Quigley, the Earl of Lansdowne."

His lordship covered his shock well, but she could tell by the way he sat back and sipped his coffee before replying that he saw the obstacle, even if he didn't know the goal.

"The earl is . . . a trifle strapped for cash, I hear," he said in a far more polite tone than Lansdowne deserved.

"For all I know, the earl is a degenerate who has gambled away his estate," she said flatly, tempering her anger. "He has stolen my brother's inheritance for his own purposes and is at this moment arranging to sell all my father's free people, claiming there is no proof of their freedom. That is a lie."

Lord Erran glanced at Jamar, who nodded once. That he turned to a *man* to verify her declaration irritated her even more. She bit her tongue, knowing she could not

expect more of this starched and stiff nobleman.

“I witnessed the signing of the freedom papers and the baron’s will,” Jamar said. “You must understand that on the island, we do not have access to your courts of law. The papers should have been properly registered with authorities on the island and a copy sent to solicitors here in England for filing, but we have no proof. We have sent for additional copies, but the earl has placed his people in control of the plantation. They will not give our representatives access to the baron’s office.”

“This does not explain why Miss Rochester is being attacked in the streets,” his lordship said, drawing out his words as if he was thinking while he spoke. “Do you think the earl is to blame for that?”

“Unless you believe in coincidence,” Celeste replied frostily, reminding them of her existence. “We were shattered and lost when we first arrived. Hoping for direction, we sent messages to the earl and to our half-sister, who had promised to bring us into society. We received notes of condolence only. A month later, the attacks began.”

Nana finally spoke. “They were *cruel* to my little ones. Instead of sympathy, these cold English send unkind notes saying they are not in town, without saying when they might return or offering aid. We know *nothing* of this city, and they cannot even give advice. Jamar and Miss Celeste make repeated requests for allowances, for visits, for information, and we hear nothing. These are bad people. We want to go home to our families and friends, but we cannot.”

Celeste patted Nana’s hand, knowing her fear went deeper than expressed. The earl might sell off Nana’s sons while their mother was helpless here in England.

“Lansdowne is a powerful political figure,” Lord Erran said with a frown. “He may be strapped for cash, but I have not heard that he is so degenerate as to ignore his own relations.”

“Why would my father allow a bankrupt to be executor of his will?” Celeste cried in frustration. “I do not understand how this earl we do not know can control our property and lives!”

“Your father may not have named him executor,” his lordship explained. “If there is no formal document filed with English courts, he would be appointed executor

simply as head of the family. You have not received the documents from the island authorities either?"

She shook her head. "I do not understand the delay. We wrote as soon as we realized there was a problem, months ago. There has been time enough for a reply. I fear Lansdowne's hired help has intercepted them."

"Do you know your father's solicitors here in London?"

She was terrified he was simply another swindler out to deprive them of what little they had. She despised living in fear, but she'd lost all her security when her father died. If her persuasive voice had failed her too . . . She had *nothing*. Catastrophe loomed a single word away, no matter how she looked at it. She didn't reply.

Jamar gave his lordship the name of the firm. He'd been handling Rochester affairs for decades. He knew these things better than she anyway.

"It's a decent firm," Lord Erran acknowledged. "I'll draw up a statement that you can sign appointing me as your man of business in your father's London affairs, and I'll see what I can find out. Sometimes, it's simply a matter of who is standing in the office at the time a question comes up. If Lansdowne stepped up, they might take an earl's word over a dead man's."

"Sign papers?" Celeste panicked, fearing anything that might give him authority over her. "Why can you not simply take me to these solicitors and let me speak with them? What do you expect in return for helping us?"

Nana squeezed her hand, but Celeste was not reassured. She could tell from his lordship's hesitation that he most definitely wanted something—and this was his family's house.

A commotion on the stairs interrupted any reply their visitor might make. Already on edge, Celeste rose to meet whatever calamity had arrived on their doorstep now.

"Celeste, there are soldiers out front!" Trevor shouted before he'd even reached the kitchen.

Every chair at the table scraped back.

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