

THEORY OF MAGIC

UNEXPECTED MAGIC #3

Patricia Rice



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One

Early November 1830

Clenching her large hands in the billowing skirt of her ample lap, Harriet Christie Russell Townsend tried to appear content studying the flowered walls of the empty parlor of her stepfather's rented London townhouse.

Inside, humiliation crept down her spine, filled her lungs, and crushed her heart. She could not, simply *could* not, do this again. Ever. She would rather walk in front of a run-away carriage.

She'd probably break its wheel.

It didn't bother her so much that not one gentleman sent her a posy after last night's ball. After all, since she had never been to London before and had no acquaintances, she'd not danced a single step and had decorated the wall all evening. In the few weeks she'd been in the city, she had felt like a prize pony being walked around the arena for her stepfather to sell to the highest bidder.

But Townsend had vowed that Mr. Lively would ask for her hand today. She had an attractive dowry, and the gentleman had a need for funds. He had all his teeth and hair and even though he was a bit on the skinny side, he might have made a decent husband. So even if they'd looked like Jack Sprat and his wife, she'd have someone to talk to in the evenings, and perhaps, eventually, there would have been children.

She was so desperately lonely and bored that she would not mind settling for children and a home of her own.

The case clock ticked away another minute. She needn't look. She knew Mr. Lively was already over an hour late. Had she been another woman, she would have been furious at his lack of respect.

But Harriet knew, deep down in her suffocating heart, that he wasn't coming, that he didn't want her, and that like everyone else, he was rejecting over-tall, big-boned, homely *her*, even with all her money.

A few minutes later, a maid crept in to hand her a hastily scribbled note from her stepfather.

Lively ran off with his mother's pretty parlor maid rather than marry you.

Lord Townsend really hadn't needed to add that last phrase. It just served to grind her pride into smaller particles of dust—no doubt as he'd intended. He had made it clear in many ways over the years that he had never wanted to be stuck supporting an ugly duckling for the rest of his life.

The tug at Ash's pocket would never have happened had the thief not targeted him as *weak*.

"Poisonous hunch-backed *jackanapes*," Duncan Ives, Marquess of Ashford, Earl of Ives and Wystan, roared, furious at this insult to his pride.

With that warning, he yanked his ebony walking cane up as hard as he could between the thief's legs. There was nothing wrong with his damned arm, so the blow was strong.

It was his lack of vision that prevented him from disabling the man so badly that he'd never have children.

The thief howled in anguish anyway, which gave Ashford another locator. "*Paunchy beef-witted blood sucker!*" He balled his fingers into a fist and swung hard enough to hear cartilage crunch. The thief staggered backward, if Ash was any judge of sound at all. Behind him, his footman gasped.

"Nab him, Smith," Ash commanded, hearing his victim hit the shrubbery.

He waited while his footman and the maimed thief scuffled in the park hedges. The footman was new and barely trained, another of his sister-in-law's charity cases. Ashford growled in exasperation as he heard the thief splash through the water basin and the footman pound off along the gravel path to pursue him *around* the damned water—no doubt to keep his new boots and livery dry.

The dawn silence was broken only by bird song and a distant wagon rattle. Not until then did Ash realize he was now out here by himself.

He had not been left on his own since he'd been blinded.

He'd seen no purpose in exposing himself to the humiliation of his disability in public, until his brothers had started squawking like chickens every time he refused to go out.

Intending only to show them that he wasn't a coward, Ash had forced himself out the door in the early hours, when all his aristocratic neighbors slept—and thieves apparently still lurked.

This was only his third morning walking in the gated park. How would a damned thief get in without a key?

Standing there abandoned, Ashford realized the better question was—how would *he* get *out*? He had only his walking stick to guide him, and one bush was pretty much the same as another. He could follow the circular fence forever and come out on the wrong side of the square and end up in a real thieves' den. The busy commercial thoroughfares around St. James Park weren't the polite residential streets of Mayfair. The thought of stumbling blindly past the clubs on Pall Mall filled him with revulsion.

To make matters worse, drops of rain spattered against his new top hat and coat. And Smith had run off with the umbrella.

So now he could stand here like a senseless Greek statue and let the pigeons land on his head until someone rescued him, or he could stagger like a drunk along circular paths and pray he found the right gate.

The depths to which the mighty had fallen had been a nagging theme in his head these past months. If it weren't for his stubborn pride—and his immense, annoying family—he'd have cast his whole damned life aside and become a hermit.

Then blown out his brains in boredom.

A light scent of lilies approached, along with the confusing sound of heavy footsteps. Ashford clenched his walking stick in defensive mode.

In the growing light of dawn, he thought he might actually see the movement of a silhouette. Shocked at actually *seeing* motion, Ashford froze, straining to determine the full outline of what appeared to be a less-than sylph-like figure.

"I'm sorry, might I trouble you to explain how this umbrella works?" The contralto was sweet, almost sensual, and very definitely feminine. "I am wearing a new hat, and I fear we're about to be drenched."

"Of course, madam," Ashford agreed, as if he could actually see her blamed umbrella. He might have spent most of his life in a wolf den, but as the heir to a marquisate, he'd had a few good manners beaten into him. One aided ladies who asked for assistance.

She pressed the umbrella's handle into his fingers, then exclaimed in shock, "Your hand, sir! It's bleeding. You should wrap that immediately. Do you have a clean handkerchief?"

Of all the damned things she could have noticed . . . He handed her his walking stick so he could hold the umbrella pole with one hand and push up the clumsy ribs under the canvas with the other. "It's just a scratch, madam. I'll be fine. Thank you for your concern."

Her voice sounded young, but if he was actually seeing her silhouette, she had a tall, matronly figure. Besides, he found it hard to fathom why any young woman would be about at this hour. They'd all be sleeping in after last night's frolics. Could it get any more humiliating that the best he could do was stir some old woman's maternal instincts? He hoped to hell that Smith returned soon.

"It's Miss, my lord, Miss . . ." Oddly, she hesitated before continuing, "Miss . . . Christie."

"Christie? With a *y* or an *ie*?" he asked, because he knew she was lying.

She hesitated again, and he almost heard the wheels in her brainpan whirling. "Does it matter?" she asked, then returned to the subject at hand. "Cuts like that attract infection. Really, if you haven't a clean handkerchief, I can use mine. It's not very large but it will do until you return home."

She still held his walking stick. Irritably, Ashford pulled out his clean linen and wrapped his bloody damned fingers.

"I saw you hit that thief," she said in what sounded like admiration. "I am ever so grateful that you chased him off before I reached this spot! But your man has run off with your umbrella. Here, why don't we share this one? Where are you going?"

"I will not melt . . . Miss Christie with or without a *y*," he said, grating his teeth against his hatred of helplessness. But then he realized what she'd just said—she was out here alone with thieves running amuck. "But you should not be walking alone. Where is your maid?"

"It's a long story," the smoky voice answered with a sigh. "Shall we walk? I'm heading towards Carlton Terrace, but I assume you live closer to the park? I could keep you dry with this umbrella you so kindly opened for me."

Ashford understood the fine art of manipulation. Normally, an insult to his intelligence set off his temper, but he couldn't blow up at a woman who needed his protection as much

as he needed her eyesight—and who refused to admit her weakness any more than he. He amazed himself when he offered his arm. She was nearly as tall as he, and he was no small man.

He wasn't even certain she knew he was blind, no more than he knew if she were young or old. "You are correct, I'm one street past Warwick." When she wrapped a long-fingered, gloved hand around his elbow, he used his stick to prevent walking on her gown. He let her steer him, and returned to finding out why she was here. "I always enjoy a good story. Is yours sad or happy?"

"Hmm, a bit of both, I'd say." She sounded more thoughtful than pleased. "It seems my . . . cousin . . . is to be married shortly. It is a very happy occasion."

Ashford suspected that she lied every time she hesitated, but he'd never see her again, so it hardly mattered. He was escaping the park in the company of a woman. How long had it been since he'd escorted any woman other than his brothers' wives? He sincerely hoped this one was at least remotely attractive and not a gray-haired matron.

"I am happy for your cousin, then," he said solemnly. "And how does this lead to you walking in the park in the rain without a maid?"

"Well, that part is mostly silly," she admitted with a lovely rich laugh. "I wanted some thread to finish a hem, and thought if I hurried, I'd be back before my cousin had her chocolate."

That part *almost* sounded honest. "You do not stay abed in the mornings as your cousin does?" he asked with actual interest, attempting to determine the lady's place in the world. He enjoyed a good mystery.

"Oh, no, I've always kept country hours. We've only just come to the city for the short session. Usually, we stay home, but of course, my cousin wishes to visit the shops for her trousseau."

Ah, there was the sadness. She had an expressive voice. "And you are helping her sew her trousseau?"

"Well, no, I was taking out a hem for myself. I am rather above average size, so my cousin has her gowns made with large hems and seams. Then when she's done with them, I can let them out!" She sounded quite proud of her accomplishment, although he still suspected she was enjoying embroidering her web of lies.

“I see. And running errands for yourself means you cannot borrow her maid?”

Although he didn't know how much was truth, he actually understood the predicament she described. It wasn't uncommon for impoverished relations to live with wealthier branches of the family as companions and general servants. “Where does the sad part come in?” He leaned over to open the gate that she nudged him toward.

“Well, I fear she will no longer need me as a companion once she marries. I can always go home, but I was so enjoying the city. But that's not exactly sad, is it? It means I have an opportunity. Would you know how one goes about looking for a position as a secretary or companion? I am very experienced.”

Her ingenuousness made him want to laugh. Since very few things made Ash laugh these days, he was feeling more in harmony with the world than usual. Surely, she could not be very old to be this unaware of how life worked, even if she normally lived in rural ignorance.

He kept looking for more shadow or light, but they were in the gloom of the buildings now. Flickers of motion were the most he could catch. That was more than he'd seen inside the house, but not enough to be useful, and just might be an indicator that his head was about to explode. The doctor had feared some such for a while.

“If we are lucky, my sister-in-law will be martialing her troops by now,” Ash said with a modicum of maliciousness on top of his frustration, “and you may ask her. She generally trains servants to work in big houses, but she knows a great number of people. Perhaps she could ask for you.”

It should be inspiring to see how Lady Aster dealt with this new stray he brought home. Goats and hounds and orphans hadn't daunted her.

“Oh, that would be above all wonderful, sir,” his companion said with what sounded like genuine excitement. “I hate to impose upon a stranger in such a manner, but another such opportunity might never open. And to think, it all came from being foolish enough to walk in the park in the rain!”

Ash heard Smith's asthmatic huffing and puffing approaching. He could abandon the little liar here, or continue with the charade. In dire need of amusement, he chose the latter.

“Smith, run ahead and warn Lady Aster we're to have company. Come along, Miss Christie. You may miss your cousin's hot chocolate, but I can give you a cup of tea before

sending you back out in this mist.”

“And tend your hand, sir,” she answered. “That must come first.”

He thought she honestly meant it. He despised being treated as an invalid, and still he laughed at her prim command. “Of course, Miss Christie. We must see that my knuckles live to punch another day.”