

AN ILLUSION OF LOVE -  
SAMPLE

SCHOOL OF MAGIC, BOOK 3



PATRICIA RICE



## **An Illusion of Love**

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## ONE



*SPRING, 1871*

THE CORONER'S DAMP DUNGEON STANK OF FORMALDEHYDE AND WORSE. Azmin Malcolm Dougall turned up the oil lamps to drive the eerie shadows into the corners. She chose to call the underlying scent *mold*—not decay.

She'd seen decomposing corpses before. Calcutta had unfortunately been littered with them after the cyclone. She accepted that the corporeal shell housing the human spirit was a natural element that returned to the earth just as dying leaves did. The spirit was what mattered.

To that end—she set up her tripod, slipped her experimental dry plate into her camera, and perched the box on the stand. The chemicals she was using to produce the dry process plates were cutting into her budget, but she'd created some exciting results that gave her hope she might have discovered her gift.

Tonight, she added to the experiment with her new—and dangerous—magnesium reflector.

The oil lamps flickered in an unexpected draft, and she frowned. The cellar shouldn't allow air currents. That was the reason she had set her

first experiment here. Light was the key to success and flickering would ruin the image.

She set up her new reflector to illuminate the corpse on the slab. Thankfully, for her purpose, the body needn't be uncovered.

Lighting the last lamp, Azmin held her breath, positioned herself behind the box, lit the magnesium coil—and uncovered the lens to catch the flaring light.

The door swung in with a rush of spring wind, extinguishing half the lamps, and plunging the cellar into gloom except for the bright explosion of the magnesium.

“Bloody hell!” the uncivilized intruder shouted in fury.

Muttering an unladylike curse under her breath, Azmin covered the lens. The shot was ruined, and so were her chances of catching the corpse's spirit.

The wretch entering practically electrified the chamber with a furious energy that might terrify both living and dead into fleeing. Azmin, however, wasn't of the fearful sort. She studied the rude apparition in the remaining dim light.

Tall, lean, wearing a white lab coat that failed to conceal menacingly broad shoulders, the intruder visibly calmed himself by shoving a long-fingered hand into his mop of thick dark hair. Swinging to her, he glared. His unfashionably clean-shaven jaw and sharp cheekbones exposed centuries of intimidatingly aristocratic ancestry. In the dim light of the one overhead light, his eyes gleamed silver as they narrowed.

Azmin glowered back. Despite his white lab coat, Azmin recognized the professor, and her insides lurched. She'd once traveled halfway around the world to avoid the rake. He was even more magnificent now than he had been as a student.

“What the . . . *Hades*. . . are you doing?” he demanded, amending his intended obscenity.

“Packing my equipment,” Azmin replied in her brightest, most insouciant manner. She had always liked to irritate Dr. Alexander Dare the same way he irritated her.

*Irritation* might not be quite the correct word. But despite appear-

ances, she was a lady, and she did not use carnal words. Or even think them. The frustration he caused had always been of a physical nature.

“Who gave you permission to be in here?” Recovering from his momentary shock, the good doctor proceeded to the slab and threw back a corner of the sheet, revealing a man’s bare chest. “I haven’t much time. You need to remove yourself forthwith.”

The man still had the world’s longest lashes, concealing stone-cold eyes—iron gray at times like this.

“Forthwith,” she mocked. “Who stuck that stick up your rump? You used to be fun.”

“Children have fun. Men work. And you haven’t answered me. What are you doing here and who gave you permission? This is no place for a lady.” Setting down his leather bag, he produced a small tool case and laid it open on a table.

Azmin packed her far less expensive carpet valise. “The coroner’s wife is interested in spiritualism. I have permission to photograph the spirits of the recently deceased, not that it’s any of your business, but it is thoughtful of you to remember that I *am* a lady.”

“Spiritualism,” he snorted. “Do you rattle bones and raise sheets? The dead are dead.”

“Their bodies are, agreed. And if a spiritualist would allow me into a séance, I might learn whether or not she was actually raising spirits. But for some reason, they won’t allow photographic equipment.” She snapped her valise closed and shouldered the long handle of her reflector.

“And what good would it do you to photograph a spirit, even if they existed? They can’t talk.” He drew a mark over the corpse’s chest. “You’re better off learning something useful, like knitting.”

He hit on a sore point. She *wanted* to be useful. She was a Malcolm. Malcolms had psychical talents that helped others. She should have more useful gifts than knitting—if only she could discover them.

If glass plates didn’t cost so much, she’d throw one at the professor’s head.

She didn’t want his attention, she reminded herself. Ten years ago, she’d traveled halfway around the world to India to avoid having

anything to do with the man. It was just her rotten luck that when she chose to return to the most remote outpost she could visit—Edinburgh—he was here too.

She let herself out of the cellar. He didn't even notice.



ZANE NOTICED THE INSTANT AZMIN DOUGALL DEPARTED. THE SUBTLE scent of exotic flowers disappeared with her, leaving only the stench of formaldehyde and decay.

He hadn't known she was in Edinburgh until they'd both been invited to the same country estate over Christmas. He thought she was in India, where Hindu princesses belonged.

He cracked the corpse's rib cage and pried open a path to the man's heart and lungs. The coroner's notes said the deceased smoked cigars, and the evidence of that was in his lungs. But had that caused the weakened state of his heart?

Absorbed in his work, Zane managed to forget the irritating female and her flashing lamp until he'd snipped out the organ he intended to examine in his lab. Sewing up the incision, he winced as he remembered telling the lady to learn knitting. The Azmin he'd once known would have heaved heavy objects at his head. She'd only been about sixteen then. She'd grown up.

She'd *definitely* grown up. Tightening the lid on the jar containing his specimen, Zane tried to block out memories of the skinny, rebellious adolescent garbed in colorful gossamer that illuminated her dusky skin and made her stand out like a peacock among pigeons.

These days, she appeared to be wearing widow's weeds. He supposed she was old enough to have been married. He should probably tell his niece that one of the marquess's relations was in town. Louisa was lonely for company. . .

Have Azmin flitting around his house? Squash that idea. He should find company more Louisa's age. He'd been meaning to speak to the ladies at the School of Malcolms. Louisa couldn't attend, but perhaps

they had students who might visit. He should have done that months ago, after he'd heaved out the last governess.

He'd been more intent on the research that might save Louisa's life.

After donning his coat and locking up, he stepped into the unlit lane smelling of urine and spring flowers. Only then did he wonder what transport Miss Dougall had used—he had to keep thinking of her as a woman and not an adolescent brat. This wasn't exactly the safest area of Old Town for a lady. His social training really had deteriorated these last years to have let her go without asking.

He scanned the medieval alley between towering stone buildings, but only shadows beckoned. Carrying his physician's satchel, he strode down to the main road where wind cleared the air. He shouldn't be worrying about the damned female. She probably had servants and a carriage. Her father had made a fortune in India, and she had too many aristocratic connections to have married into poverty.

Accustomed to walking the ancient streets of the university and hospital sector at all hours, Zane strode past gaslights toward the Georgian mansion he currently called home. He'd like to return to his laboratory, but he neglected Louisa enough as it was. The whole point of paying the outrageous lease in George Square was so that he could go home occasionally to let the household know he was alive.

A rumble of male voices from the tavern ahead warned of trouble. The tavern attracted students. They wouldn't dare bother him, and he could hope his presence might quell the dispute.

"I'm going after the bugger," one of the men shouted, hunting for a handhold on a wall. The street was a mixture of commercial and obscure businesses, some with enclosed work yards designed to keep out trespassers.

"That damned light nearly blinded me!" another drunkard shouted, waving a fist and nearly staggering backward. "What in hell was that?"

"Photographic equipment," a vaguely familiar male voice suggested.

Zane slowed his stride, recognizing one of his lazier students. Septimus Jenkins leaned against the tavern, drinking from a flask and not joining his inebriated companions in attempting to scale a wall. Perhaps he wasn't as stupid as he seemed.

Photographic equipment? Remembering the bright light Azmin. . . Miss Dougall. . . had been using in the cellar, Zane quelled his instinctive reaction and approached as professor to student. "I'd suggest one not risk head surgery by climbing a wall in your current state, gentlemen, especially a wall into a private yard."

"We were assaulted," the one with his hand on top of the wall cried. "We can't let him escape."

"I will have to report you to the authorities if you continue," Zane said in a bored tone. "As far as I'm aware, there are no laws against bright lights, but there are penalties for trespassing."

The bulkiest, drunkest of the trio raised his fists. "I say we go after the bugger and don't let this toff stop us."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Mickey," the lounge said. "He's a prof."

Ignoring this wise advice, Mickey swung.

Prepared, Zane blocked his attacker's fist with his bag. With a shove, he pushed the inebriate backward, into the vine-covered wall. When the lad gave every evidence of coming after him with two fists—and because he wanted to prevent anyone from going after a *photographer*—Zane released his vexation by ramming his free fist into a broad jaw. The drunkard slumped to the ground.

"Warned you," the lounge said laconically. "Come away, Bill, we'll have another round."

"The light near blinded me," the wall-climbing Bill complained, giving up his handhold and dropping down to weave toward the tavern.

"I'd suggest the lot of you return to your rooms and sleep it off," Zane said in disgust, continuing on his way.

Again, they ignored his painfully, shamefully accumulated wisdom. Leaving their companion to sleep it off, they returned to the noisy tavern.

For a childish moment, Zane savored the punch. Once upon a time, he'd been free to unleash his primitive urges. His current part-time status at the university didn't allow such behavior any longer.

Suppressing further vulgar triumph, he pondered the anomaly here.

*Photographic equipment.* The lady wouldn't be so insane as to try to take night pictures outside a tavern, would she?

The Azmin Dougall he remembered had been a quiet mouse in public—with flashes of rebelliousness in private. She'd always been too clever for her own good. And he'd been an immature idiot.

Because of his juvenile urges, he now owed his sixteen-year-old niece a life, a life Louisa would never have again—

He couldn't risk his position for a long-ago acquaintance who wasn't his problem.

