

THE LIBRARIAN'S SPELL -
SAMPLE

SCHOOL OF MAGIC, BOOK 4



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The Librarian's Spell
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ONE



"I DON'T WANT YOUR BOOK OF SECRETS, MR. C." LYDIA WYSTAN BRUSHED aside her employer's long white beard and gently pried the aging volume from his gnarled hands. "I simply want you to sleep so I won't worry you've killed yourself when you make noises like that."

She helped him from the chair by his tower window. He muttered crankily, but since the apoplexy, his words were lost. The Librarian had so very many words in his head. . .

Lydia shook off her sorrow—and fear. She didn't have the ability to fix Mr. Cadwallader any more than she could fix the crumbling castle—or her life, what little there was of it.

He was still muttering and gesturing for his book when she tucked him between the covers. He had a manservant, but Lloyd was entitled to the occasional night off. It was just her luck that it was one of the nights Mr. C felt well enough to get up on his own. She wrapped his arms around the book.

She wished she could see inside her employer's journal, but Malcolm journals were private as long as the owner was alive. Having to wait until he died to learn if he knew the next librarian. . . Worried her beyond measure.

Mr. C had been reticent even when he could speak. She was barely

his secretary, after all, a stranger who had arrived on his doorstep one summer day and never left. He had no reason to trust her or anyone.

Once assured her scholarly employer was settled, Lydia wondered what had drawn Mr. C from his bed. They didn't usually have night skies this clear in mid-summer. Had he been studying the stars? The crisp fresh scent of the open air drew her to the mullioned casement window.

The tower was ancient and almost certainly had possessed only arrow slits at one time. But over the centuries, modern conveniences had been added throughout Calder Castle. Windows were among them.

The skies were beautiful at this hour before dawn, with just a rosy tint in the distance. But a wind had picked up. She reached out to swing in the panes and glanced downward.

She drew in her breath in shock.

A dead body lay spread-eagled on the lawn. A very large one.

Oh, no, she couldn't go through this again. Her knees melted, and she almost sank into Mr. C's chair. This must have been what had him agitated. If she closed her eyes, could she make it go away?

The only dead body she'd ever seen had been her father's, after he'd fallen off the roof attempting to repair it himself. Vicars should not repair roofs. The pain of that day affected her every decision—she did nothing without worrying over consequences.

She doubted the man below was a vicar, however. Anglicans were few and far between in rural Scotland.

Shaken by the painful memories, Lydia pulled on one of Mr. C's old cloaks, hoping the image would fade with the dew. The castle seldom had visitors. Neither she nor Mr. C had friends or family here. Their servants were, by necessity, limited. And they were too far from the city and up in the hills for travelers to stumble upon them by accident. The lane to this ancient, isolated fortress was torturous.

She glanced out again. The body lay flat on his back, as if he'd actually fallen from a roof. Why else would anyone sprawl on the rocky damp ground like that? From up here, the man appeared reasonably young, if she were to judge by his thick, wavy, dark hair. No horrid mustache marred what appeared to be broad square cheeks and jaw. Was his nose maybe just a little large. . . ?

Ives men often had Roman noses. And dark wavy hair. A missing Ives had recently requested aid. . .

Swallowing hard, Lydia pulled up the hood on the cloak. She was taller than Mr. C, taller than most men, so the cloak didn't drag as she ran down the narrow tower stairs.

If this was Lady Agnes's missing son. . . Oh, please, don't let him be dead!

The dew-drenched yard soaked her shabby slippers as she hurried through the unmown weeds that served as lawn. The gardeners had been let go after Mr. C's apoplexy. She had no way to pay them.

Keeping the cloak pulled tight against the morning chill, Lydia halted a few feet from the still figure. He seemed much larger from down here—taller than her by half a foot or more, which was to say very tall indeed. And several stone heavier—a giant of a man.

He was breathing. Thank all the heavens, he was alive! There was no blood. There had been a lot of blood when her father had fallen.

She stepped closer. She could almost swear he was *asleep*. On the lawn, in the dew. He didn't smell of gin. He smelled of raw male and a faint hint of bay rum.

She took another moment to wipe out her horrid memories and compose her stammering pulse. She was quite certain she'd never seen this man before. His bones were too square and solid for handsomeness, but he had curved, sensual lips and laugh lines—and a very large nose, all with a weathered, sun-bronzed coloring rarely seen in these cool climes. She wasn't usually given to unmaidenly desires but if anyone could stir them, it would be a man who looked as if he were forged in steel.

She almost hated to wake him and discover he was as small-minded and venal as most men.

His eyes suddenly popped open, and Lydia stepped back in surprise.

"Ah, Mr. Cadwallader," he said in an amiable baritone. "I heeded your call, at last. Did you know your tower is leaning?"

. . .

NEARLY INVISIBLE IN THE DARK SHADOWS BEFORE DAWN, THE GRAY-CLOAKED figure of his host glanced back at the tower. "You're here to study the foundation?" the librarian asked in a low, husky tone.

The man was elderly, after all, and living here alone, he probably seldom spoke. That *living alone* part was the main reason Max was here. He didn't have to worry about gossiping servants.

Maxwell Ives stretched his road-weary limbs and adjusted the pack beneath his head. "No, I simply thought to refresh my memory of the stars of home and must have fallen asleep. I hope my early arrival didn't disturb you."

"We had no word of your coming," the monk-shrouded figure said in a voice almost certainly hinting of disapproval.

The only approval Max had ever known was his mother's, so he was impervious. "Sorry. The train ran late. There were no horses or carriages to be had. So I walked."

"All the way up the mountain?" Astonishment didn't quite replace disapproval. "That had to have taken all night. Surely you could have stopped in the village."

Explaining why he didn't want anyone to know he'd returned shouldn't be done before breakfast. He hoped to leave as soon as he accomplished his errands.

Aware of the damp seeping through his travel-worn clothes, Max scrambled up, hauling his pack over his shoulder. His host was a good height, but Max still looked down on the librarian's hood. He was accustomed to that. "Oh, aye, but I'd forgotten how lovely a Scottish summer is. After the humid furnaces of other continents, the mist nourishes my soul."

"More likely, you're dehydrated," the Librarian said pragmatically. "Come in. There'll be tea ready at least."

Max searched his weary brain for what little he knew of the recluse who lived here. Malcolm librarians weren't known for their social skills. He'd exchanged letters upon occasion and knew Cadwallader was an older man devoted to his studies and the library.

The librarian's last letter had been insistent that Max come home and take care of his mother and bring his journals with him. Max's mother

was a Malcolm. The family expected him to contribute to their Malcolm library of weird knowledge.

And therein lay the rub.

The only word Max could write with any certainty was his name. He'd been eight before he'd accomplished that, and even then, he'd reduced it to Max Ives for clarity.

"Tea, real tea?" he asked, with the pleasantries he'd learned to divert the inevitable disapproval. "You cannot imagine the bilge water that passes for tea elsewhere."

"From that, I deduce your travels have not taken you to China or India," the low husky voice said from the confines of the hood, still sounding like a disapproving schoolteacher.

"On the contrary, I've been to both, but the poorer parts near the mines don't indulge in expensive niceties. They'd have drunk brewed coal had it been cheap. I learned to carry my own when I could, but the water was often like boiling mud."

"Unhealthy," the librarian concluded, leading the way through a side entrance and into a parlor so unused that Max could smell the must.

His host lit an oil lamp, and the light confirmed Max's suspicion. Linen adorned most of the furniture. Dust covered all else. He was fairly certain there were immense cobwebs decorating the dark corners.

He'd lived in far worse.

"I would appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone I'm back," he finally admitted. "I'll only be here briefly and don't want to disturb the family."

His host hesitated, then pulled an actual bell pull. Amazing. A medieval castle with amenities. And servants—*damn*.

"I had hoped you gathered from my replies that your mother is beside herself with worry." Cadwallader removed a dustcover from a sofa and gestured before taking a wing chair across from it.

Beside herself with worry? Did men still talk like that here? It seemed odd after the rough, usually crude discourse in the places he'd been inhabiting. Max took the seat offered and put his road-wearied boots on a heavy chest that appeared as old and sturdy as the castle.

How did he explain that he preferred that his family think him dead? He hadn't been able to put it into the letters he'd dictated to the family librarian.

"My mother is prescient. She knows I'm alive. She simply wants me to come home and produce grandchildren." He'd produced children, three to be exact, one of the reasons he was here now. His mother would prefer a wife to go with them. He didn't have that.

A thickset woman with a limp, wearing a pristine apron, appeared with a silver tea tray. She scowled at Max's boots on the furniture. He quickly removed them so she could set down the tray. An older woman, she didn't seem perturbed by his presence, he realized with relief.

His mouth watered at the array of breads and pastries set before him. The place might not have a housekeeper, but it had a baker. He could live with that.

His host poured the tea while the cook lumbered away. "Your mother is about to lose her home, and the school that is her heart and soul. I wrote you about that."

"And I sent funds," Max retorted. "There is utterly no reason for her to be short of resources unless she's frittering them away. That's not like her. She simply wants me home. My uncle and cousin are far better executors of my father's estate than I'll ever be."

Ominously silent, Mr. Cadwallader sipped his tea, probably with disapproval.

The librarian's missives had been curt. Long distance arguments did not hold much persuasion. But Max had a favor to ask, so he tried to be patient. He was a patient man. He had to be.

Cadwallader set down his cup. "Your *uncle* is the one preparing to sell your mother's home. He says the estate is bankrupt."

"*What?*" Max almost jumped from his seat, but he wasn't an impulsive youth anymore. He bit angrily into a scone and chewed while he sorted his thoughts. "That's impossible. My father left a substantial estate. The house was part of my mother's dower. He can't sell it. And I've sent a bloody fortune to help with repairs and expenses." He'd simply sent them through a third party so no one knew from whence the funds came, except as income from an *investment* his father had purportedly made before he died.

"Then it seems your uncle isn't the executor you think he is," his host said dryly.

"I don't have time for this," Max muttered. "I'm only here for a few days. I have a job waiting for me in Burma."

"I do hope the situation is more important than your mother, her home, and a school of ladies who need their positions." Mr. Cadwallader rose from his chair.

The librarian rose from her chair like a woman pulling her skirts around her.

He was still wearing his hood inside.

Admittedly, the unheated parlor was freezing. . . Max found himself rising as if his host were a lady. He had no words to explain himself. Apparently, the librarian was brief on words as well.

"Marta will show you to a room. I have work to do." Cadwallader walked away.

It was hard to tell beneath the thick cloak if the librarian walked like a woman too.

