

MAGIC MAN

MAGICAL MALCOLMS #6



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PROLOGUE



OUTSIDE EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND, 1734

"IT ISN'T FAIR!" FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD AODHAGÁN DOUGAL'S SHOUT RATTLED the ancient timbers of the great hall of his home. His wide shoulders and long legs displayed the promise of the man he would become as he paced restlessly before the meager coal fire in the enormous fireplace.

Mairead Dougal, his mother, glanced up from the book she was poring over and shook her head in disapproval. "Learn to control your ill humors, if you please. The rafters cannot tolerate your temper tantrums, my boy."

Disgruntled, the tall, black-haired lad gazed at the dust sifting from the distant ceiling. He visibly relaxed taut shoulders and took a breath before speaking again, this time more calmly, in the deep voice he'd so recently grown into. "If I cannot go to school with the other boys, then I want to go to India."

"You are too young to go to India," she said in the same even tone. "You have books here to study. The vicar will help you with your Latin."

"My knowing Latin will not repair the roof!" he shouted. This time, the coal in the bucket vibrated. Glaring, he returned to pacing the hearth, and the rattling halted. "Go to India with me. The doctor said warmth is better for your lungs."

She smiled benignly. "My place is here, and so is yours. The hills provide

the coal we need for warmth and the food we need for the table. If you would learn to harness your passion toward more productive purposes, the roof would not crumble so quickly."

"I do not cause the roof to crumble!" He shook his fist at the ancient timbers. "It is old and decrepit, and the stones need mortar. I cannot dig enough coal to heat this place. I read that in India, there are rubies and emeralds to be found for the looking. I can find them, just like I find the coal. There is an East India ship in port this week. I could book passage with them."

Mairead's broad forehead developed a small line of worry. "Your place is here, my son, on this land where your grandmother's grandmother grew up. It is your heritage. I wish that your grandmother had lived to share her knowledge with you, but I am trying to learn enough to control your gift. Give me time. Learn from my mistakes. You cannot run away from what you are."

"I am a great clumsy ox with a *gift* for breaking things," he cried, storming toward the door. "I am not fit for civilized society." He repeated what his teacher had said after he'd broken a valuable lamp with his temper. "I am man enough to make my own way in the world."

He slammed out the timbered door, and the wind sighed down the chimney, shaking the hall's old stones.

A moment later, the door opened again. "I am sorry, Mama. I will fetch some more coal." With the calm assurance he'd been taught from a very early age, Aodhagán closed the door more gently this time.

"How can I teach him what he won't believe?" Mairead muttered to the wind whispering through the tapestries.

A tear of frustration and despair hit the book Mairead was studying. It would do no good to teach her son of his heritage until she could find the woman with whom he needed to share it.



SOMERSET, ENGLAND, 1737

"NO ONE ELSE WANTED THE CHILD, MARTHA. I BELIEVE SHE WAS SENT TO US BY God in answer to our prayers."

Clutching the book in her arms, Morwenna Morgan ducked her nine-year-old head. She couldn't expect strangers to love her when she was so

unlovable that even her own father wouldn't claim her. The only person who had ever loved her had died so horribly, so suddenly, that she still could not allow her mind to dwell on it. She sniffed back a tear, refusing to let it fall.

"She's such a lovely child, John!" The plump woman standing in the dark vicarage parlor touched a hand to the wild auburn frizz of Morwenna's hair. "If we brush out all these curls and braid them, she'll look like a proper little princess. May we call you Mora, dear?"

Your name is Morwenna. Never forget it. I am here if you need me.

"Mama?" Morwenna lifted her head and looked around, hope and love filling her eyes. "Where are you, Mama?"

The plump woman looked doubtfully at the gray-haired man who'd rescued the orphan in Wales and brought her all the way back to Somerset.

The vicar shook his head. "It was a very rural, superstitious community. They thought her mother was a witch. The fire that killed her may have affected the child's mind a little, but she'll be fine once she's been here a while."

"I suppose, if Mora resembles her mother. . ."

The vicar finished the thought for her. "She was beautiful, and made herbal remedies, yes. It's an old and sorry tale of jealousy and superstition. Mora will be better off here with us, where we can give her a good education and upbringing."

The vicar's wife nodded in firm agreement and asked sympathetically, "Would you like a big glass of milk and some biscuits, dear?"

"I want my mama," Morwenna replied, tears finally spilling down her cheeks. "She's here. I heard her."

The woman smiled and patted her shoulder. "That's just your imagination you hear, darling, but your mama will always be in your heart."

Her mama wasn't in her heart; she was in her head.

Clutching her mother's most precious book, Morwenna didn't want the voice she'd heard to be her imagination. The voice was all she had of her mother besides the book, and she meant to keep it.

ONE



SOMERSET, VALENTINE'S DAY 1757

MORA ABBOTT SHOVED A LOCK OF CRINKLY AUBURN HAIR BENEATH THE PLAIN rim of her cap and fought off tears by defiantly opening her beloved book, looking for guidance. The page fell open on *A Spelle for Trubble*. She already had plenty of trouble. Why would she need more?

She longed for just a whiff of the vicar's pipe smoke, or the scent of cinnamon drifting in from her foster mother's apple tart. She'd often internally rebelled against their narrow strictures, but they'd offered her a home when she'd had none, and over the years, they'd made a family together. And now she was without either again.

Both her adopted parents had died in the ague epidemic last month.

Orphaned twice and still unmarried at nearly thirty, she was free to do anything she liked now. Instead of letting the freedom intimidate her, she ought to find some positive use for it.

Why not start by trying the spells she'd been forbidden to use? For Valentine's Day, she could hunt recipes for love potions. She could think of no better way of deciding what to do next, although a spell for trouble appealed more than one for love.

Reading the receipt her hand had fallen on, she learned it was to be used to call for help in times of trouble. She didn't know what constituted trouble,

but homelessness ought to count. She couldn't keep living in the village's only vicarage.

Perusing the page of required ingredients, she realized she had goose fat left from Christmas, and salt and thyme, and no one to object should she accidentally burn the pot. *Spirits* were a trifle difficult to obtain since the vicar hadn't approved of alcohol. Perhaps the fermented cider from last fall.

It seemed exceedingly odd to have no one to question her actions, but she supposed she would eventually adapt to living alone.

Puttering around the kitchen kept her from having to think too much about her lack of family. The duke who owned the vicarage was a kind man and would never throw her out, but she couldn't deny the village a new vicar by usurping the only house available for his use. She simply needed to find a new place to live. Somehow. Without family who must take her in, she didn't precisely fit in easily elsewhere.

She smoothed the page of recipes and mixed the fat and other ingredients in a pot over the fire, flinging salt on the flames as instructed. She couldn't imagine that such humble ingredients could produce anything except the smelly smoke that was traveling up the chimney now. Very possibly her mother had burned up in a fire caused by such foolishness. Mora had spent twenty years harboring an insane hope that the haunting voice in her head meant her mother was still alive and would one day come for her. But she knew it was past time to let go of that false belief.

Still, she murmured the incantation with a whisper of prayer. She knew she didn't belong in Sommersville. No matter how hard she'd tried to blend in, she'd never been as honest and good as her adopted parents, or as humble and accepting as the villagers. Always there was a little voice in the back of her head urging her to do things differently than she'd been told, telling her there was more to the world than her limited view suggested. If only the spell could tell her where she *belonged*.

In her youth, she had thought being good would make her loved, but no matter how hard she tried, even her adopted parents had come to accept that she would never be the proper little princess they wanted. That failure had hurt most of all.

At nearly thirty, Mora had to accept that she was cold and unlovable. Most days, it didn't bother her greatly. Practically speaking, though, that meant no one wanted her around.

The grease in the pot popped and bubbled, then caught fire. Feeling foolish at the dreadful stench from the burning grease smoking up the kitchen, Mora doused the fire with flour, and opened the window to dump

the pot's contents on the garden. So much for witchery. The least the stink could have done was arouse her mother's voice to scold her for playing with fire. But Mora had ignored the voice for so long that it had taken to hiding.

A brightly garbed, slender woman stepped briskly through the fog outside the window, and Mora hastily attempted to blow the lingering smell away with a towel.

Since the first time they'd met, Mora had felt a connection with the wealthy young woman who had married the duke. She supposed it was because the duchess had book learning to match Mora's, even if Christina tended to be more athletic than intellectual. Mora counted Christina Malcolm Winchester, Duchess of Sommersville, as her only friend. An eccentric one, perhaps, but one who did not question Mora's unmarried status or odd notions as every other person in the village was inclined to do.

Mora opened the door to the damp spring air before Christina had time to knock. "You really must learn to use the front door or scandalize Mrs. Flanagan with your lack of ceremony," Mora warned her.

Christina breezed in, unfastening her rich cloak with a dramatic sweep that scattered droplets in her wake. "I have already scandalized her. I do not know how you hold your tongue so politely in her presence. It is more than I can do."

Taking the duchess's cloak, Mora ignored the old complaint. As the daughter of the vicar, Mora had never had any choice except to be polite. Holding her tongue so often had fed her hidden mutinous nature—not to mention raising calluses on her tongue.

"The grocer just brought me a tin of his new tea shipment." Hanging up the cloak, Mora took the faded teapot down from its shelf. "Let's celebrate Valentine's Day by having some before you tell me who needs aid now."

"Tea would be lovely. Douglas refused to eat his porridge this morning, and it is now decorating the nursery ceiling. I could not abide his nanny's scolding any longer." Christina roamed the kitchen rather than settle in a chair.

"Are the maids blaming ghosts or Dougie's unnatural abilities today?" Mora asked in amusement. A one-year-old who flung porridge onto a twenty-foot high ceiling made for much speculation.

"Both. You do not want to hear what admirable diaper habits he's developed." Christina came to an abrupt halt.

Her unusual stillness alerted Mora. Cursing herself for not hiding her mother's peculiar book, Mora set down the tea tin, but it was too late. Christina had already opened the cover. "Let me put that old thing away."

Feeling oddly protective of the ancient tome, Mora reached to take it from the counter.

Christina caught her hand. "No, wait. This is fascinating. My family keeps journals just like this one." She flipped the old vellum to the title page. "*A Journal of Lessons*, by Morwenna Gabriel. *Wherever* did you find this?"

Mora attempted to wrestle the tome from the duchess's grasp, but Christina pressed her hand against Mora's, preventing her from closing the book.

"It belonged to my mother," Mora admitted reluctantly. "Her name was Brigid Morgan, so I do not know who owned it originally. I had hoped Morwenna might be a distant relative." As a child, she had dreamed of having a real family, and Morwenna Gabriel had often played the role of fairy godmother in her imagination. But she wasn't a child any longer. "It's mostly foolishness, but there are some excellent recipes—"

"But wait! There is something appearing beneath our hands. Lift your thumb. Look."

Mora removed her palm from the page. In the weak light from the window, she could see nothing unusual. "It's stained, that's all. It's a very old book."

Christina lifted the page closer to the window. "No, there—it's writing, just where our hands met. I'm sure of it."

Mora strained to see. She wasn't short, but Christina was taller than most women, and Mora had to stand on her toes to come closer to a page she had seen a thousand times over the years. "It's impossible."

"Heat," Christina replied abruptly, bringing the book back to the sink. "The heat from our hands brought out the letters. Hold the teakettle behind the page."

"That will ruin it!" But Christina was a duchess, and years of serving the church and her adopted family had taught the efficacy of obedience. Mora brought the steaming kettle to the sink.

"Gently, now. I'll hold the page, you hold the spout behind it." Christina lifted the book.

Trying not to harm the brittle pages, Mora swung the steam back and forth. At Christina's cry of triumph, she set the kettle down and peered over her shoulder.

An aging brownish yellow script appeared right beneath the author's name.

"It's an old trick," Christina explained. "My sisters and I learned it from

one of our mother's books when we were little. You write with lemon juice and it is impossible to read. Add heat, and the writing appears."

It hadn't appeared in all the years that Mora had perused the book, but she refrained from saying that aloud, or from mentioning that Mora's mother had been too poor to buy lemons. The duchess talked with ghosts. Perhaps she could read ghost writing as well.

Years of upbringing in the Church of England had failed to dispel Mora's fascination with supernatural subjects. Her mother's voice had faded over time, perhaps because Mora had been forced so often to deny its existence. Her adopted parents had disapproved of the spell book, but they had not objected to her experimenting with the book's herbal recipes. By selling possets and potions, Mora had helped keep the table full in times of scarcity. Making scented lotions wasn't the same as performing magic, her foster parents had reasoned.

Hoping the faded words would provide the answer to her prayers, and afraid that they wouldn't be, Mora left the book in Christina's hands. "What does it say?"

"It's an inscription. 'To Brighid Gabriel upon the birth of our daughter, Morwenna, named after our common ancestor. With love and adoration, your husband, Gilbert.' Is Gabriel your real name? If so, your father may have given this to your mother as a christening present."

Struck dumb by the suggestion, Mora stumbled to a kitchen chair and sat down with a thump. The chair skidded. "My mother's name was Brighid *Morgan*, not Gabriel."

She had never known the name of her father, had never been certain that her mother was married.

If this inscription was meant for her mother, she'd been named after a *common ancestor*. She might have a family. The world as she knew it had just turned upside down. She was so shaken that she didn't think she could stand again.

Mighty heavens, was this the answer to the spell she'd conjured? Had she performed magic and found a solution to her problem?

Christina laid the book in front of her. The magical writing was still there. Her name might be *Gabriel* instead of *Morgan*. Perhaps she was making too much of the first name. Other Brighids existed.

"Gilbert Gabriel, isn't that the name of the viscount who lives in the north?" Christina asked.

"I don't know." Mora stared at the yellowed ink. "We seldom had

newssheets." She caressed the page her real *father* may have held. "I had no idea—"

"You said Brighid was your mother's name, didn't you?" Christina asked blithely, settling on a chair with her tea as if prepared for a cozy gossip.

"But she was Brighid Morgan, or so I thought."

Mora had used *Abbott*, the surname of her adopted parents, all these years, but she'd always thought her real name was *Morgan*, a common name in Wales. She'd thought her given name had come from the author of the book. Her mother was eccentric enough to name a child after an author she admired. But to change her last name from *Gabriel* to *Morgan*? Why? None of the possible reasons were good ones, and Mora shivered even while staring at the writing with rapt interest.

She was aware her past was mysterious, that her foster parents often whispered about her origins when she was particularly defiant in those early years. But she remembered her real mother as having loving arms and laughing eyes and a carefree acceptance of her childish foibles. That was the last time she'd felt truly loved for who she was, and why she so desperately wanted to find her family now. The book had to be an answer to her prayers. Or to her spell.

"*Brighid* and *Morwenna* are unusual names. Surely it refers to my mother and me," she murmured.

Christina raised her golden-brown eyebrows. "I've always thought of Gabriel as a Scots name. I thought the vicar adopted you in Wales."

"He did," Mora murmured, still dizzy with new knowledge. "I'm Welsh. *Morwenna* is Welsh, isn't it?"

"Not necessarily. *Morgan* is certainly Welsh. *Gabriel* is biblical, so it could be also." She frowned at the inscription. "Didn't you say the book was saved from a fire? I wonder why the writing did not appear then."

"The book was kept in an iron box in the vegetable cellar," Mora said, her mind racing. "The heat never reached it." Perhaps if it had, her life might have turned out differently. Instead of being the adopted daughter of a village vicar and his wife, trying desperately to fit her wayward nature into their unassuming lives, she might have lived with her real family—if they could be located.

Christina looked at her with curiosity. "Mora? What is wrong? Your aura is quivering."

That bit of nonsense brought a smile to Mora's lips. "I never thought I had a legal father. How would I find out if this Gilbert Gabriel is still alive?" She didn't dare express all her hopes aloud.

But the duchess understood. Her eyes widened. "If your father is still alive, you may have family!" Her expression changed to one of dismay. "Surely you would not desert Sommersville? How would we get along without you?"

This was the only home Mora had really known. She had spent a lifetime watching the children of the village grow up, marry, and have children of their own. She had nursed the elderly and babies alike, laughed with their joy, and wept with their sadness.

Yet, she had never, ever been one of them.

Such aching longing ballooned inside her that it was all Mora could do to hold back tears. "A real family might accept me as I am, wouldn't they?"

Christina chuckled. "Families don't necessarily accept one's faults, but I cannot imagine any family not welcoming a calm, prudent, orderly woman of rare practicality such as yourself."

In her heart of hearts, Mora knew that wasn't who she really was. That was who the Abbotts had wanted her to be, and she had tried very hard not to disappoint them. In the eyes of the world, she was a staid old maid. In her heart—she was a terrible, wicked person who wanted to fling off her cap and dance beneath the stars with her hair blowing unbound. To sing with joy without people staring. To practice magic, experiment with herbs, think odd thoughts. In her very deepest, darkest soul, she longed to *live*.

Fingering the starched linen covering the tight plaits that held her unruly hair, Mora dared open her mind to the immensity of the world beyond the village.

"The village," she said, abruptly brought back to earth. "There is none left to help. And I have no means to go looking for a family that may not exist."

The duchess waved her hand as if it contained a magic wand. "Nonsense. You've devoted your life to Sommersville. If this is what you wish to do, we owe you the opportunity to seek your family. Now that the weather is improving, Harry and I must go to London to round up my nieces and nephews and take them to Wistan. That is very near Scotland and the home of the only Gilbert Gabriel I'm aware of. You shall go with us!"

The tiny spark that was Mora's inner self flared and spoke in her mother's voice. *You must go, my love. Without you, he may die.*

"Who will die?" she protested aloud, startled by the sudden clarity of the voice. Had she really just heard her mother speaking to her after all these years of silence? Was her mother telling her that someone was in danger? Who?

Her father?

Instead of looking shocked, the duchess grinned. "The children will love you. Just think, your father could be a wealthy viscount. You could be a long lost daughter whom he has mourned for years."

Which would mean that Mora's mother had run away from him, for a reason or reasons unknown. That was not necessarily a possibility she wished to explore.



SCOTLAND, VALENTINE'S DAY 1757

AODHAGÁN—FAMILIARLY KNOWN AS AIDAN—SWUNG HIS SLEDGEHAMMER LIKE A golf stick at the parapet of his castle roof. A fifty-pound stone flew from the loosened mortar with the speed and accuracy of a ball, soaring through the air, and hitting the pyramidal stack of previously smashed stones in the kitchen garden three stories below.

A shattering blast in the hills beyond echoed the stone's landing.

"It's a crumbling pile of rock, by damn!" he shouted into the growing force of the wind. "What care I if the old witch turns the cellar into a coal shaft and tumbles the eyesore into the ground?" The question was rhetorical since no one was present to answer. Winter-brown hills sprawled empty as far as the eye could see—except for a lone figure in the distance riding this way.

The witch approaching wasn't the woman he wanted to see this Valentine's Day.

Aidan knew the folds and creases of the hills surrounding his home like a lover knows the face of his beloved. He had a sense for the way different layers of rock formed angles, which ones were under pressure from the earth's weight. He'd used that talent to uncover riches in exotic lands.

It was a fairly useless talent here, where the hills hid only a seam of coal—and the cottages of people who kept their small herds on the barren rocks, the people who called him laird even though he was nothing of the sort.

Another blast of black powder in the distance shook the old stones, sending trickles of ancient mortar from between the blocks. With the fury of frustration, he swung at a loosened stone, one large enough to bend the backs of two brawny men. The stone shot straight toward the pile below, and the parapet shivered with the force of his blow—or with the force of his fury,

as his mother would have had it. But his mother was dead, and he needn't heed her foolish superstition any longer.

Mairead Dougal had been a fiery redhead with the fierceness of a soldier and the imagination of a poet. Her tenants barely supported themselves, so his mother had never charged them rents, leaving her nearly penniless.

With the wanderlust and idealism of youth, Aidan had marched off into the world to seek his fortune. His instinct for locating precious stones had found fertile grounds in the mines of India. Over time, he'd sent home wealth enough to turn the keep into a palace. Instead it remained a drafty pile of rock.

He hadn't expected his mother to use the money to build palaces, but he had expected her to improve the lot of their tenants, and still have enough to keep from freezing.

When his mother's health had worsened, he'd sent more than enough money for her to hire the finest physicians. Instead, Mairead had thrown his money away on moldering books and manuscripts that had done nothing to save her. She had died before he'd returned.

When he'd learned of her death, he had wallowed in grief and nearly burned the books she had collected, until he had used one of the papers to scratch his itchy nose. He'd glanced at the paper before burning it and discovered the name of his unknown father. That knowledge had been all that had kept him sane and saved his mother's collection.

He hadn't been much interested in knowing he was the by-blow of an English earl, but he'd been fascinated by the collection of half -brothers he'd acquired with the information.

Not that he'd told any of them of his connection. He'd been almost thirty by then, a trifle old to romp with younger brothers. But they'd accepted him as a friend, and their Malcolm wives had been thrilled to learn that the moldering old books Mairead had gathered were part of their long lost library.

Now, at thirty-seven, Aidan had harbored hopes of developing a deeper relationship with his Ives family—until the letter in his vest pocket had arrived. It might as well have been a sword point.

In the letter, his haughty neighbor maintained that she was the legal heir to his land. It seemed the viscountess was his mother's closest living relative, the only *legitimate* offspring who could claim the title. And she wanted to mine the coal seam that ran through the hills between their properties.

His mother's paper collection had taken on an ominous new meaning. She'd known of this threat, and had been searching for a *legitimate* heir. Why

hadn't she *told* him? Even though he had scorned the family stone pile that had brought such grief, it was home. He had no desire to sacrifice it to a rich woman's greed.

Attacked by a sudden itch, Aidan rubbed his nose with the back of his coat sleeve and cursed the untimely interruption. His nose never failed to tell him when one of his family was about, and they were never about unless there was trouble.

"Go away, devil blame ye!" he shouted at the heavens before aiming another blow at the wall.

"If you insist," a polite masculine voice replied from the tower doorway.

His focus shattered, Aidan hit the stone off center, rocketing two blocks to the yard, missing the pile, and striking his cook's turnip bed.

"Aye, and apologize to Margaret on the way doon or I'll be havin' stale oatcakes and raw tatties for me supper," Aidan grumbled in response. He leaned on his hammer and glared at Drogo, fifth Earl of Ives and Wystan, his half-brother—although Drogo was unaware of this blood connection.

"I don't suppose you've come to bring me a valentine. The only reason you'd leave your toasty hearth in London to visit these icy climes is the women." Aidan dropped the hammer and brushed off his callused hand on his leather breeches. "Which of them is in the family way this time?"

Once Drogo had married a Malcolm female, the Ives family had been overrun with his wife's many relations—most of them blond, blue-eyed temptresses. His brothers had fallen like toy soldiers, one by one marrying into the eccentric family. And the Malcolm women refused to bring forth their babes anywhere but at their ancestral home in Wystan, a little over a day's journey south of here.

The silver accents in the thick black hair at Drogo's temples gave the earl the air of an aristocratic gentleman. Although Aidan sported the same black hair, large nose, and brown complexion of his father's younger offspring, he towered head and shoulders over most of his half siblings. Possessed with the build of an ox, Aidan was impatient with the small rooms, elegant manners, and delicate ladies of English society. Scotland was his home by choice as well as birth.

Drogo held his reply until Aidan gestured for him to return to the tower stairs, and both men stepped out of the frigid wind.

"Both Felicity and Leila are with child," Drogo acknowledged, "and Ninian will not hear of them staying in Wystan without her. They've even charmed the vicar's daughter into accompanying them."

"The vicar's daughter?"

"From Somerset, a friend of Christina's. If Christina's complaints are of any validity, you managed to avoid Mora as well as all her other acquaintances when you were there."

Aidan grunted. "Christina's friends are too likely to be flibbertigibbets just like her. You are a glutton for punishment."

Drogo shrugged. "Mora seems sensible enough. I have to go to Edinburgh on some legal matters, so I thought to stop here on my way to enlist you in my defense. Ewen and Dunstan insist I must stay to keep them company. I would prefer a more sensible head to balance their addled ones."

Aidan snorted and descended the worn steps with the ease of familiarity. "Do not ask me to play to the whims of your Malcolm wives. They are the most illogical, interfering lot of females placed upon this earth. They'd have my hair shorn, my clothes darned, and my manners polished before I slept a night under your roof."

To Drogo's credit, he did not mention that Aidan's shaggy mane resembled that of a Shetland pony, his clothes had too many holes to hold a darn, and he had no manners to polish.

"Actually, it's my stepsister, Sarah, who is more inclined to those pursuits, and I left her in London," the earl corrected. "The women are all nesting, which means they've turned every room inside out and upside down until I fear I'll be placed upon the library mantel as an adornment should I fall asleep in the wrong chair."

Aidan snickered. "And you expect me to act as beast of burden for them? Does my home look as if I know anything of refurbishing?"

In truth, the old castle had undergone extensive improvements thanks to Aidan's inventive half -brother Ewen. Although Aidan hadn't repaired the ancient parapet or the crumbling tower, the keep now had a sound roof as well as the heat and running water he'd wanted his mother to have.

He had briefly entertained the fancy of finding some good, fearless, *normal* woman to feather his nest. Only, he'd not discovered such a rational creature among the assorted friends and siblings of his half -brothers' eccentric wives, or anywhere else for that matter.

"The women claim you are sulking up here because Lucinda painted a black cloud over your keep," Drogo offered casually as they descended the last of the stairs and emerged in the great hall. He acted as if he didn't realize he was throwing fuel on smoldering fires by mentioning the eccentric Malcolm who was said to predict the future with her paintings.

"I don't believe in foolish superstition and I am not sulking!" With

outraged strides, Aidan crossed the echoing stone hall to a table near the fire where a tray of whisky waited.

Pouring a stiff drink for his guest and another for himself, Aidan was painfully aware of the letter crackling in his pocket that had driven him to vent his rage on the parapet. Perhaps he ought to leave his home, if only to avoid the black cloud approaching in the form of a neighboring viscountess.

Too late. The old church bell rigged to resound throughout the castle clattered the ancient rafters.

Aidan ignored the peal. Drogo raised a black eyebrow in inquiry.

Margaret, his maid of all work, hurried to the door. Seeing her employer standing idly by the fire, she shot him a glare that no well-trained servant ought. She dragged open the heavy oak portal and fell into a curtsy. "Lady Gabriel."

The crone swept past Margaret into the great hall and found Aidan at once. The viscountess had two daughters of marriageable age, but her blond hair bore no hint of gray, and her complacent features showed no lines. Aidan assumed the lady never laughed or frowned for fear of wrinkling.

She gave the elegant Earl of Ives little notice, preferring to turn up her haughty nose so she might look down it on a man who stood a full foot and a half taller than she. "I have not had your reply, sir."

As if the pressure of his temper strained the air, the stones of the old keep shook, and the tapestries billowed. The lady nervously crushed her gown with her hands, but she refused to be the first to look away from their glaring contest.

"You'll have my reply in court, madam," Aidan responded, curbing his temper with enormous restraint.

When the candlesticks no longer rocked, and the castle didn't fall upon her head, she straightened her gray-cloaked shoulders to reply. "So be it, then. I had hoped we could achieve an amicable settlement, but you have inherited your mother's obstinacy."

"You thought I would simply hand over my mother's home because you have some idiot need to turn it into a mud quarry?" All on its own, the library door swung open and slammed against a wall.

Focused on his nemesis, Aidan didn't even look up, but Drogo and the viscountess jumped in startlement. Obviously rattled, the lady recovered through sheer strength of will.

"We are not asking you to move, although the land is clearly mine," she continued with arrogant presumption. "You may live here as before. It's not as if you do anything with the property."

"It's my home!" Aidan roared. "You would mine the foundation right out from under it, poison the water that feeds my tenants, bring down the barns and homes their forefathers built, then let the whole of it sink into the great pits you create with your blasting! I'll see ye in court, my lady, and not afore!"

Even Drogo glanced up at the ceiling as dust filtered from the trembling rafters.

The viscountess fearfully followed his gaze, then jumped as a pewter pitcher tumbled from the shaky mantel. The cobweb-infested iron chandelier swayed over their heads. The crash of an ancient suit of armor was the final blow. Wide-eyed, the viscountess picked up her satin skirts and raced for the door, shrieking, "I refuse to let you frighten me! You'll hear from my attorneys!" The wind slammed the door closed behind her.

"Diplomacy is not your strong point," Drogo observed wryly. With interest, he examined the solid—no longer shaking—rafters. "Has the mining damaged the foundations perchance?"

"The place is falling down around my ears. She simply hastens it." Unable to fight the inevitable any longer, Aidan jerked the letter from his vest. "The harridan claims she's a second or third cousin. She was a thorn in my mother's paw for as long as I can remember. It seems the lady has been searching the Land Register and has found a codicil in some ancient document giving her claim to my home and lands. The estate is entailed through the female line. I am allowed to hold it for any daughters I might have. But with the codicil, it seems only *legitimate*"—he emphasized the word sarcastically—"heirs of the female line are allowed to inherit, and she claims to be the last of the same."

Drogo frowned as he scanned the solicitor's letter. "I am sorry. I have never questioned—"

Aidan didn't want him to question. He didn't even want to ask for the favor, except Drogo was an earl and knew more men of authority than he did. "I am willing to give it all up to any legal candidate who promises not to destroy the lands or the homes of my tenants."

Drogo tucked the letter into his inside pocket. "The viscountess. . .?"

"Is mining her side of the mountain and wants to tunnel through mine," Aidan admitted grimly.

"I'll have my attorney look into the legitimacy of the codicil. Perhaps a bill can be passed to override it." Drogo gave Aidan a considering look. "Should I have the attorneys search your family tree for a legal heir as well?"

Aidan shuddered at the notion of Drogo discovering that they may have

shared a father. What man would wish to know that his father had played loosely with another man's mother? "No, that I'll be doing myself. I thank you for anything you might find on the other, though."

"You will go to Wystan to see to the ladies?"

Knowing he was trapped by obligation, Aidan grudgingly nodded acquiescence to being beset upon by a tribe of meddlesome females. "Later," he agreed.

Only after Drogo had departed did Aidan ponder the oddity of his itching nose when no trouble was about. The earl had not mentioned any urgent difficulty in the family that required his attention. It seemed the women were quietly breeding, with the vicar's daughter and Lady Ninian to attend them. He needn't rush to the rescue for a change.

Idly, he scratched his nose and said thanks that he was not the vicar's daughter. Her life would never be the same after the Malcolms finished refurbishing it.

Magic Man
Patricia Rice

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