

MERELY MAGIC

MAGICAL MALCOLMS #1



PATRICIA RICE



PROLOGUE



"MAMA DIED."

"Because she did not listen to me, love." Smelling of rich evergreen and roses, the old woman pulled her ten-year-old granddaughter into her plump arms.

"Papa doesn't want me." Ninian tried not to snivel as she curled into the first welcoming embrace she could remember receiving.

"Because you are a Malcolm, and men fear what they do not understand. You'll see when you are older."

"Papa says I am a witch, Grandmama. I'm not a witch, am I?"

"You're a Malcolm, dear, and that's nearly the same. Witches can accomplish great good if they listen to their elders and do as they're told." The old woman set her away and straightened Ninian's shoulders. "Sit up here beside me, and I'll read you a story." She patted an ancient leather-bound book in her lap.

"My mama didn't want me to be a witch," Ninian whispered, suddenly frightened as she climbed onto the chair and sensed her grandmother's determination.

"Your mama denied what she was, love, and she died of it. Never deny who you are, and you'll live a long and happy life."

"Who I am?" she inquired, snuggling into her grandmother's powdery embrace, momentarily reassured by her promises.

"A Malcolm, my dear," the old lady repeated. "Be proud and grateful for

your heritage. We can have anything we want, if we want it hard enough. We must never deny who we are, as the story tells us. An Ives once tried to force his Malcolm lady to deny her heritage, and it nearly destroyed the village."

Ninian loved stories. Happily, she settled down to listen.

ONE



NORTHUMBERLAND, MAY, 1750

ALONE ON THE EDGE OF THE CLEARING, NINIAN MALCOLM SIDDONS SAT ON AN overturned stone from the circle that had once dominated this hill, and contemplated the bonfire and dancing couples laughing below. It was a very lonely business being a Malcolm. Tonight, she'd much rather dance and sing and shout for joy in the firelight like everyone else.

She wanted to scream and yell, "I'm here! Here! It's just me!"

But there was danger in achieving that kind of attention. She could not indulge her volatile nature and throw tantrums at the unfairness of life; it would only enhance the village's fear of her. As her grandmother had taught her, she must remember who she was, what she was, and be proud of it. She had a gift and a talent no other had been granted, and she must use them wisely. Making the villagers fear her was not wise.

She sighed and rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Gifts" and "talents" weren't quite as valuable or exciting as the magic in fairy tales. If only she possessed *real* magic, she could summon a lover to dance with her. She smiled as the fantasy formed in her mind. What kind of lover would she summon? Dark and passionate? Fair and loving? One who would give her fat, jolly babies?

One who would dance with her.

She'd never even considered sharing her life with anyone until Granny died last winter. Given her circumstances, it didn't pay to consider it now. She must dedicate her life to the people of Wystan just as Granny had done—or deny her heritage and forfeit everything as her mother had.

The bonfire leapt higher into the starry May night as someone added new brush to the flames. With the aid of the moon above, the glade sparkled with the silvery glow of a thousand candles, filling the night with enchantment.

Beltane was a night to celebrate the earth's richness, to throw off the dark of winter's cold. She should exult in the promise of spring, not fret over what she could never have. It was time to shrug off her grief over her grandmother's death and go on with the business of living.

If only she knew precisely what that was. Tending her herbs, healing the sick, and delivering babies did not hold quite the promise she'd hoped now that she faced those tasks alone.

Eagerly, she sat up as an excess of hilarity and high spirits buffeted her with the approach of the dancers.

"Have you heard? Lord Ives is repairing the castle!" Tom, the wheelmaker's son, crowed as he and several others gathered to catch their breaths.

"We'll all be rich," Alice, a farmer's daughter, expressed her excitement with glee.

"This time next year, we'll have fat pigs in our pens and geese on our tables." Son of a sheep farmer, Nate passed his cup of ale to the next person.

The return of an Ives to Wystan after all these years worried Ninian. She'd thought the legend in her grandmother's storybook little more than a fairy tale and had never feared it, until now, with the recent return of the mysterious nobleman.

According to the story, long, long ago, Ives and Malcolms had been the nobility of this land, building castles and protecting their people. But according to the legend, disaster destroyed their happy holdings upon the marriage of an Ives lord and a Malcolm lady. Prosperity had fled, the Ives lords moved away, and only Malcolms remained to care for the people as best as they could. As others left to seek riches elsewhere, the village shrank, and there was no need for more than one Malcolm here. So even the Malcolms left. Ninian's aunts had followed their aristocratic husbands and moved on to better things. Ninian's particular gift fared better in the isolation of the village, so she had chosen to stay behind.

Why had a legend walked out of her storybook as soon as her grandmother died? And if this Lord Ives could make the village wealthy, would

they need Ninian at all? Or would he bring the tragedy the storybook predicted?

Clamping down a frisson of fear and blocking out such silly superstition, Ninian watched the unaccompanied bachelors expectantly as the musicians struck up a new song.

Nate grabbed his companion's hand, and Gertrude giggled and ran off with him to join the dancers. As the other young men chose partners and laughing couples dashed toward the revelry, leaving Ninian behind—again—her dimples disappeared and her shoulders sagged with the weight of loneliness.

It shouldn't matter that they didn't ask her to dance. They were simple, uneducated village boys, and she was a Malcolm. Malcolms were not only witches, but nobility, educated far beyond the means of simple farmers. She understood. She really did. But the music was so lively and the moon so beautiful. . .

An old lady laughed as Gertrude slapped Nate's face and flounced off. "That one has aught but one thing on his mind," the old one said to her companion.

All the village girls knew about Nate's hot hands and sweet words. Still, even well plied with ale, he danced a fair step, and Ninian wouldn't have minded one whirl about the fire. Just one.

It wasn't as if she expected love.



A PAGAN FERTILITY RITE, HOW APPROPRIATE.

Standing in the deepest shadows of the forest's edge, Drogo Ives, Earl of Ives and Wystan, crossed his arms and watched as the bonfire in the clearing blazed skyward. The hypnotic notes of flute and fiddle carried on the wind along with the sounds of laughter.

He'd come to this deserted outpost of northern England in hopes of studying the stars, not human behavior. Heaven only knew, he had sufficient specimens for study in London should he wish to take up the science of people, but he preferred the distance and mathematical precision of stars. At least stars were predictable.

The bonfire had aroused his curiosity when he'd seen it from his windows. He'd spent a long and grueling day over the estate accounts, correspondence, and decisions regarding his brothers' latest escapades, and inexplicably, he'd been drawn to the sight of the leaping flames.

A lone figure lurking in the half-shadow between him and the convivial couples in the clearing captured his curiosity. He might not be from these parts, but he had sufficient knowledge of folklore to recognize the village's celebration of Beltane. As spring fertility rites went, this one was fairly tame. He even recognized the primitive urge within himself to procreate. The warmth of a new May eve, the hum of nature's nocturnal creatures seeking mates, the gravid fowls and burgeoning plant life of spring stirred even the most stoic of mankind into desiring to create replicas of themselves within a woman's womb.

Drogo clanged a steel door shut on that thought as he watched the solitary figure in the clearing.

Her pale hair glimmered with moonlight, curling in wild ringlets over her shoulders and half way down her back, uncovered by cap or cloth. He had caught a glimpse of her face earlier as she exchanged words with some of the couples. She had a round face of ivory purity with mysterious light-colored eyes he could barely discern in the silver swath of moonlight.

And she had a figure men would kill for. He surveyed her ample bosom and trim waist with jaundiced gaze. Country beautiful, built for breeding. Why then, was she not a part of one of the amorous couples cavorting around the fire? She should have men dancing attendance at her fingertips.

He had no intention of becoming so involved in village affairs that he might ask. He craved a solitude he couldn't achieve in London, and he didn't need another woman mucking up his life or his mind. He'd do better to return to his studies in the tower or to the tedious stacks of frantic messages from London.

The silver goddess turned just enough for him to perceive the yearning in her expression, a yearning that so matched his own, the loneliness of it nearly crippled him.

He *wouldn't* feel this way. He had no right. He had far more on his table than he could possibly consume as it was. Asking for the delicacy that wasn't his was obnoxious selfishness.

As if sensing his tumult, the moon maiden turned and gazed into the forest where he stood. His sudden fierce arousal at the sight of her starlit features decided the matter. He would not become his father, dancing heedlessly to temptation's call, following his cock like a tail.

Let her find another partner for this night of amour. He had nothing to offer.



THINKING SHE SAW A SHADOW SLIP INTO THE DARKNESS, NINIAN SHIVERED. Perhaps Satan walked on a night like this, as her grandmother warned, for only a soulless devil could escape her notice. Her gift for sensing human emotion might not include understanding what she felt, but it gave her the ability to discern someone's presence.

Granny had taught her how to deal with external devils, like dangerous men. Ninian wished she'd taught her how to deal with internal devils, like doubt and loneliness. Granny had thought everything easily cured by herbs and amulets, but as far as Ninian was concerned, amulets couldn't cure anything. Still, she would respect her grandmother's memory and keep an open mind. Granny had known a great deal more than Ninian could ever hope to learn.

The music changed and laughing couples drifted from the fire. Instead of leaving as she ought, she lingered, hoping against foolish hope that at least one of the men would dare ask her to dance, now that they had more ale in them. She tried her best to smile naively as the other maids did.

"They say the earl has three wives." Nate laughed as he approached, his arm once more wrapped firmly around Gertrude's shoulders.

"They say all Ives are devils who only walk the night." Tom grinned as Alice shrieked in horror and cuddled closer under his arm.

Perhaps Ninian wasn't the only one who'd noticed a presence at the forest's edge. She glanced over her shoulder again, but the shadow had disappeared.

"You know what they say happened the last time an Ives walked this land," Nate whispered in the ominous tone of a man relating a ghost story. "He mated with a witch and the entire valley flooded."

All heads turned in in Ninian's direction.

Ninian's stomach soured at the attention. No matter how hard she tried to be one of them, the curse of her heritage always erected barriers. She didn't know why she had joined them tonight, except that sometimes, the cottage echoed with loneliness.

Harry, the shoemaker, shifted attention back to himself. "Since this Ives already has three wives, he's not likely to need more, is he?"

The lads guffawed. The women tittered.

Grateful for Harry's diversion, Ninian clung to her dimpled smile and watched the dancing as the conversation swirled on without her.

Even Harry, who'd defended her verbally since she'd set his broken finger, would never do more than nod his head in her direction. It would

take a brave man, indeed, to court a Malcolm witch. She should be used to rejection by now.

The villagers' superstitions about her origins didn't cause her undue concern. England hadn't burned a witch in—oh, a hundred years or more. They hadn't hanged one in twenty or thirty. They had more civilized methods of destroying witches these days. A wrong word or look, and she'd see nothing but their cold backs. And with the poor harvest of these last years and after the bad winter—she couldn't blame them. Unlike Granny, she couldn't convince people to do what was good for them with amulets and promises. She could only heal the sick with her knowledge of herbs. Her gift for empathy was singularly useless, and more nuisance than help.

She wished things could be different. Just once, she would like someone to accept her as she was, to hold her close and dance with her in the firelight, like normal people.

And she *was* normal, she told herself fiercely. She just knew a little more about herbs than most, had an unpredictable ability to sense what others felt, and the intelligence to apply both. She wasn't a witch. She was a Malcolm.

Yet in the minds of many, there was no difference.

With a wistful sigh, Ninian drifted from the glade into the forest, away from the celebrations, away from the sight of the others slipping pair by pair into the shadows of the grass and trees, there to create the bumper crop of babies she would deliver come winter. Babies she would never have. The ache at that thought was best excised with work.

Strolling among the trees, putting the bonfire and the amorous crowd far behind, Ninian sought the babbling burn where the herb she required dwelled. In the full light of the moon, the agrimony should contain all the power she needed for the morrow's work. She wished the stream ran through her grandmother's property so she needn't stray so far to obtain it, but no one had ever complained of her trespass on Ives' land. Of course, until recently, there had been none to do the complaining.

Lord Ives had certainly stirred a controversy by returning after generations of neglect, but Ninian didn't indulge in gossip. Surely, no man could legally have three wives. She knew enough of human temperament to doubt even his ability to have three mistresses under one roof, although contemplating the nature of such a man aroused dangerous fantasies.

Deliberately turning her thoughts to the herb and the best means of persuading Mary's little boy to drink an infusion of it to soothe his aching throat, Ninian didn't catch the presence following her until it was too late to hide.

She knew at once who it was and why. Nate. Even as she sensed the strength of his arrogance, coupled with his muddled anger and a whiff of fear, he staggered into view from around a bend in the road.

Caught in the open with nowhere to run, she donned her best defense, the one she used to make children giggle. Blinking innocently, she wrapped a curl around her finger. Her dimpled features, blond ringlets, and blue eyes could deceive any man into doubting legends. Weren't all witches dark and dangerous? "Why Nate, whatever are you doing here? Gertrude will be most disappointed without your company."

"Gertrude went off with that oaf, Harry. You're much prettier than she is. You shouldn't have left so soon." He sidled closer, eyeing her bosom.

She could smell the ale on him and sensed his reckless determination. Despite her short stature, Ninian knew she was strong, but Nate not only stood taller, he outweighed her by several stone.

"Why, Nate, how thoughtful of you to see me home," she replied airily, "but you needn't, really. Go back to the fun."

"Ives land is the long way around to your cottage," Nate said with suspicion.

"Oh, but I so wanted the watercress in the burn!" Ninian slipped away as he reached for her. If she wasn't good enough to dance with in front of one and all, she certainly didn't intend to dally with him in private. Lonely she might be, but crazy she was not. "I'll be fine. Do go."

"You know there's no other man in the village for you but me." He tried a cajoling tone as he stepped toward her. "My father has the most sheep and the most land. I'm strong. I can do the work of three men."

Ninian knew the kind of "work" he had in mind and suppressed a wry grimace at his vanity. "Why, Nate! You flatter me." She couldn't run fast enough to elude him, but she had five times the wit he possessed, especially when he was muddled with drink.

"I'll show you how good I can be." Apparently encouraged by her lack of coyness and a good dose of grog, Nate threw aside his fears and grabbed for her.

Prepared, Ninian sidestepped, thrust out her ill-shod foot, and let him trip over it. In his alcohol-induced haze, he slipped in the mud, threw his arms up to steady himself, and splatted nicely in the icy stream. That should drown his over-heated ardor.

With behavior like this, Ninian supposed, she deserved the epithets he spewed as he sat up, gasping.

"I'll get you for this, witch!" he howled, shaking his fist at her while water rivulets trickled down his forehead.

Well, so much for warding off ill will. She might as well throw sticks and stones while she was at it. "If I were truly a witch, I'd rot your balls, you silly fool!" she shouted back. Granny would not have been happy with her. After all these years of taking the safe and narrow path, she was throwing it all away in a fit of spite. She knew better.

Cursing, Nate righted himself on the slippery rocks, splashed to his feet, and lunged for the bank and Ninian. Well, perhaps she hadn't completely forfeited her innocuous facade. He didn't fear her enough to run.

As he grabbed for her, a cool voice intruded from the darkness of the trees.

"Is there some problem?"

Startled by a voice from nowhere, Nate slid back down the bank and hit the water again. In the act of retreat, Ninian froze.

She hadn't *felt* any presence. How could that be? No one *ever* walked up on her like that without her extra sense picking up some warning. Wide-eyed, she swerved to stare in the direction from which the voice emerged.

Swiping water from his eyes, Nate shakily climbed to his feet again. "Who's out there?"

Ninian suspected he was shivering with more than cold. Despite his boasts, Nate possessed the same ignorant superstitions as most of the villagers. Right now, at the sound of that eerie disembodied voice, Ninian understood his fear of the unknown.

"We are having a disagreement over my ability to see myself home," she replied, willing the stranger to show himself. The absence of any human emotion from the direction of the voice scared her as much as the absence of a physical presence.

To her relief, a solid shadow separated from the trees. Male, taller than Nate, with wide shoulders and a disturbingly graceful physique, the mysterious intruder hid his features by remaining out of the moon's light. "You're trespassing," he stated with the same lack of inflection as when he'd first spoken.

"Lord Ives!" Nate hastily backed out of the burn, scrambling up the bank on the far side. He cast Ninian a terrified glance. "He *is* the devil, and you're in league with him!"

Sighing at this inevitable conclusion, Ninian raised her arms, waved the ruffles of her long sleeves, and threw an eerie "Boo!" in Nate's direction. She laughed as Nate fled, screaming, into the forest.

"I'm glad that amused you," Lord Ives said from behind her, with what might have been a hint of dryness. "Would you care to explain what it meant?"

Of course, his lordship was new to the area. He didn't know the local folklore about Malcolm witches and Ives devils. Turning to judge his reaction, she had to look up much farther than she liked. Through slivers of moonlight, his silhouette was breathtakingly impressive and much too close.

Her grandmother had taught her about the temptations of dark forces to which witches were drawn. She should be wary.

"Welcome to Wystan, my lord." She curtsied as she'd been taught long ago. Straightening, she added wickedly, "I'm Ninian Malcolm Siddons, resident witch." Her grandmother had also sworn an imp lived inside her instead of sorcery.

Instead of laughing or stepping away in fear as would any normal man, Lord Ives cocked his head with interest. "Ninian? A saint's name?"

Not only fearless, but with a knowledge of ancient history. Interesting. Grandmother had said men didn't take well to learning. "My mother had a strange sense of humor," she admitted. How odd that he queried her name, but not her reputation.

"I see." The hint of dryness disappeared into cool tones again. "I don't think it safe for a young woman in these woods at night. I'll escort you home."

"Please pardon my trespass, my lord," she said belatedly, "but there are herbs I need along this stream. Do you mind?"

"Would it matter if I said 'yes'?"

Observant, also. She shook her head. "I might be very sorry to go against your wishes, but I would not leave young Matthew with a sore throat."

"Quite." He seemed to withdraw within himself, or perhaps the moon shifted behind a cloud. "Then let us be on with it. I take it you are an herbalist and not a witch?"

"I see you are a natural philosopher," she commented evasively as she scanned the burnside where the agrimony grew.

Many men were tall and physically graceful, with voices that could command attention with just a whisper. Granny had told her the Devil possessed such charms, while promising much and producing evil. If she pretended the earl was Satan, she could safely ignore the unusual pattering of her heart at his proximity. Just because she had wished for a lover didn't mean she would fall for the charms of any man who came along—and certainly not an Ives.

Frowning, she crouched down to better study the streambed. Perhaps the darkness concealed what she knew to be there.

He must have heard her muttered curse of frustration. He stepped closer, his long boot-clad legs halting near her hand. "What is it?"

"It's gone. It used to grow thick. . ." She pushed past the undergrowth, searching closer to the water. "The watercress is gone too, but that could be. . ." She prodded the moist soil at the edge with a stick. "Nothing kills violets," she muttered in puzzlement. "The sweet rushes are dead!" she exclaimed a moment later. "That's not possible!"

He crouched beside her and prodded his walking stick along the embankment. "I don't see much of anything but rocks. Are you sure you have the right place?"

The fine hairs on the back of her neck rose as his hand brushed near hers, but faced with a disaster of this proportion, she had no patience with her odd reaction. The burn provided a goodly portion of her remedies. If she couldn't heal, she had no place here at all. A cold chill iced her blood. Surely the legend of Malcolm and Ives bringing disaster couldn't already be coming true. Maybe it was Ives men alone who caused it.

Refusing to panic, she pushed further upstream. "I *know* this is right," she muttered, mostly to herself. She wasn't accustomed to anyone accompanying her, and the black void that was her companion registered very strangely, enabling her to ignore him on a comfortable level. "Here's the path I made. This is where I added ashes and manure to sweeten the soil. I *know*. . ." She stopped and broke a branch of willow hanging over the embankment. "Dead," she whispered as the branch snapped.

"Trees die," he said from behind her. "In this cold damp, it's a wonder they live."

"No. No, it's not right. . ." Stepping carefully through the darkness, she broke a branch here, crouched to examine a tree root there. "I'll have to come back in daylight, follow the stream. . ." But fear licked along her veins. Without her remedies, she was less than nothing. She must discover—

"You'll do no such thing," he informed her. "In fact, it's time I saw you home."

Muttering to herself, she tucked the dried leaves and branches she'd gathered into her apron pocket and strode back to the path. According to her grandmother, in the scheme of things, men had only one purpose—the same services as the devil offered Eve. But the earl owned this property, and she had to at least pretend to listen to him.

Striding down the path, analyzing all the reasons the plants might have

died, refusing to believe all was lost, Ninian jumped as strong fingers caught her elbow.

"You will break a leg walking so heedlessly."

Prickles crept along her skin where his fingers pressed her through her shift sleeve. The sensation unnerved her. Had her idle wishes for a lover summoned this man? She should have paid heed when Granny warned her about wishing for what she could not have, especially on a night of power, like Beltane.

"Witches see in the dark," she said blithely, giving his grasp a not-too-subtle tug.

The long fingers only clenched her tighter. "Unlike that lout, I'm not inclined to superstition and I mean you no harm. I will see you safely home."

Wisely, Ninian surrendered the fight, lest he grasp her tighter still. His touch unsettled her as much as his lack of emotional presence. Never had her awareness been centered only on the physical. And never had the physical been so deeply felt as with this man. She could not sense if he lied or laughed at her, but perversely, she trusted what he said. A wealthy aristocrat would have no interest in a village wench, or if he did, he would have offered her coin by now.

"Have you studied natural philosophy, my lord?" She would make the best of this enforced detour by picking his brain. Perhaps he would have a suggestion to chase away her fear about the absence of growth along the burn.

He hesitated before answering. "Somewhat," he reluctantly agreed.

"Do you know aught of the ways of water?"

"It's wet."

This time, she was certain she heard the dryness of his tone. He thought her a lackwit. So be it. She spoke aloud to hold back her uneasy awareness.

"I know more of plants than water," she admitted. "I wonder if it's possible for water to become bad for plants as soil does when it goes sour."

Silence. Ninian fumed at this lack of response. She really needed someone who could discuss these things. Without Granny, she had no one with her level of knowledge.

"I have never noticed a stream without plant life at this time of year," he said reflectively.

She sighed in relief. "Not even after an unusually harsh winter?"

Again, the long thoughtful silence before his deep voice broke the night. "I am not overly familiar with these climes, but even in the Highlands, I have seen plant life along streams in May."

"That's what I thought." Satisfied at having a part of her theory confirmed, she mulled over the next hypothesis.

"Is your home very far from here?" he asked, breaking the lengthening silence.

Startled anew at thus being awakened from her reverie, Ninian blinked and glanced around. While she'd fretted, they had left the forest and now traversed the road from the village. "Not far."

She listened to the night around her, the soft hoot of an owl in a nearby field, the cheerful cries carried by the wind from those around the bonfire, and shivered at an all-too-familiar drunken anger she sensed nearby.

"Nate's hiding in the bushes outside my gate," she said, nodding toward a picket fence covered in a thicket of overgrown roses. "By morning, he'll be convinced he saw you with horns and tail, riding the sky on my broomstick. You might wish to have a talk with him."

He shot her a sharp look and glanced at the bushes rustling outside the fence. "Talk seldom penetrates thick skulls," he replied.

Releasing her elbow, he strode determinedly toward the gate and jerked Nate from his hiding place.

In fascination, Ninian watched Lord Ives stride off, effortlessly hauling a struggling, protesting Nate without a single by-your-leave.

She thought she had every right to be afraid of a man like that.

Merely Magic
Patricia Rice

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Book View Café
304 S. Jones Blvd. Suite #2906
Las Vegas NV 89107



