

MUCH ADO ABOUT MAGIC

MAGICAL MALCOLMS #5



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PROLOGUE



LONDON, *SPRING* 1740

"LUCINDA HAS SUCH A LOVELY ARTISTIC TALENT. WHYEVER DID SHE CHOOSE TO draw a *casket*?" Hermione Malcolm Childe, Marchioness of Hampton, leaned closer to study her niece's chalk sketch on the easel. "That isn't. . ."

She raised up abruptly to glance at her sister Stella. They were in the nursery, dressed for the ball they would attend later. Surrounded by the innocent toys of childhood while garbed in the security of wealthy society, Hermione didn't fully comprehend the dire subject of the painting. "Is that the young prince?" she whispered in horror.

Stella Malcolm Pembroke, Duchess of Mainwaring, nodded her regally powdered head, concealing an expression of concern. A plume from her headdress bobbed and brushed her nose, but she was watching the children romping and didn't seem to notice the feather. "Lucinda saw him in the park yesterday."

Both women turned to watch their offspring. Hermione's eldest daughter Leila was ordering her younger siblings and cousins into line. Leila's sister Christina was climbing across dressers rather than following orders. Stella's eldest daughters weren't nursery age any longer, but her younger children willingly joined in the romp—all except Lucinda.

Seven-year-old Lady Lucinda sat quietly in a corner sketching with a

charcoal pencil, unobserved by the rest of the nursery occupants. Every so often she looked up at a laugh or a protest, then returned to laboring over her work. Her long, slender fingers flew over the artist's pad. She'd tied her wavy silver-blond hair back with a discarded string to prevent it from falling in her face and distracting her. Her porcelain features reflected sheer pleasure as the picture appeared beneath her pencil. She'd smeared her blue silk gown with chalk, and the lace at her wrists was dirty with charcoal smudges, but she seemed oblivious to her disarray.

"She is such a happy, quiet child," Stella explained with love and fear in her voice. "She never asks for anything except for someone to look at her drawings. How can I tell her not to show them to outsiders?"

As the younger of the two Malcolms, Hermione was unaccustomed to being consulted by her far more powerful and talented sister, but as a family they were familiar with these perplexing questions of dealing with their gifted daughters. Sometimes, it took the entire clan to chart the course of a single child. Or to shield her.

"She'll want an art teacher," Hermione predicted gloomily. "He'll gossip. Everything she does will become public. Can you imagine what would happen if the prince dies after she's drawn him in a casket?"

Stella nodded. "She would be publicly pilloried and ostracized. Her father would be removed from his royal post for fear he caused the prince's death. And then people would start sneaking around the back door, asking to have their fortunes told." She sighed. "I've asked the duke to find a teacher who only speaks French. Lucinda is adept with languages, and France has the most skilled artists."

Hermione brightened. "Even if the teacher tells others of what she draws, he'll be dismissed as just another foolish Frenchman. Excellent." As another thought occurred, her pretty, round face fell. "She doesn't really have your second sight, does she? It's a terrible burden to bear."

Stella sighed, and powder gathered in the wrinkles that were deep before her time. "Only in her drawings, and she isn't aware of what she does."

Hermione caught the scarf floating from her shoulders and idly tucked it into her bodice, then looked around for the fan she'd left lying on a child's desk. "She will understand soon enough, I fear."

As if to prove her prediction, the artist in the corner gave a cry of dismay, stared at her drawing with loathing, and crumpled it into a ball. When she threw it away from her, the other children raced to retrieve the paper as if it were a new game.

Before they could open the wrinkled drawing, the duchess swept across

the nursery, her full brocade gown swirling with authority. Appropriating the paper, she gestured toward the exit. "Go give your fathers a kiss before we leave for the ball."

Lucinda dragged herself unhappily from her corner to follow her sisters and cousins. The duchess let her go without a word or a hug, although her powdered and rouged features hid a world of sorrow.

When the children were gone, the two women opened the drawing.

A charming depiction of dancing, laughing little girls filled the page.

"It's lovely," Hermione exclaimed. "I've not seen better in the royal art gallery." Then, taking a closer look, she gasped.

Stella nodded as if she'd expected it. "I thought she'd quit drawing her own image some time ago. I suppose she lost herself in the moment."

Hermione gazed at the pencil drawing in bewilderment. "But whatever does it mean?"

Stella traced the outline of the ominous shadow hovering in the corner just behind the image of a little girl sketching. "I am hoping it means her future is uncertain. Otherwise. . ."

Hermione briskly removed the sketch from her sister's hand. "It doesn't show anyone in a casket, does it? It's just a shadow. Children have strange imaginations."

Stella rearranged her momentarily vulnerable features into her usual dignified expression. "Of course. We will see that she marries well when the time comes, and we will all be there to cast light on any shadows. That is what families are for."

And that was why Malcolms stuck together.

ONE



LONDON, SEPTEMBER 1755

LADY LUCINDA MALCOLM PEMBROKE PULLED THE HOOD OF HER GRAY MANTLE around her face and hurried down the nearly empty halls of the art gallery ahead of the morning crowd. She didn't halt until she reached a full-length portrait of a laughing gentleman on a galloping white stallion.

Not precisely a gentleman, she supposed, trying to be honest with herself. Romantic fantasies needn't be gentlemen. Looking up, she fell under the spell of the subject's mysterious dark eyes all over again. It was as if he looked just at her and that they shared a wonderful secret. She'd painted the portrait, so she knew its secret: the dashing gentleman didn't exist anywhere except in her imagination.

But that wasn't how rumor had it.

With a sigh, she admired the gentleman's exotically dark complexion, rakish smile, and unsettling eyes. She loved the contrast between his scarred, piratical features and his elegant clothes. She'd deliberately given him a romantic white stallion and painted the innocent background of a festival to contrast with his aura of danger. Amazingly, the playful setting seemed to suit him.

The man didn't exist. If he had, she would never have embarrassed herself and the subject by entering the oil in the exhibition. She had even signed the

painting with just her initials, to avoid any potential harm, except that there were enough people familiar with her style to set rumor rolling. She would never understand why people saw more in her art than she intended.

She couldn't imagine why the Earl of Lansdowne would want to ruin her triumph and this magnificent painting with his scandalous accusation. If he hadn't suffered an apoplexy immediately after seeing the portrait and making his furious allegations, she would demand an apology. She would never paint a *murderer*.

The sound of footsteps warned that the first arrivals at the gallery were approaching more quickly than she'd expected, probably heading directly for the scandal of the moment rather than examining the better-known works in the front hall. She had no intention of making a spectacle of herself by appearing in public with the portrait. Looking around, she located a small niche across the hall where she could sit, unobserved.

Her fingers itched for the sketchbook and pencil in her pocket. She'd like to have a drawing of the exhibition for posterity. After this episode, her father wasn't likely to let her enter another oil, and she couldn't blame him. She'd never meant to achieve notoriety. She'd only wanted others to admire the portrait into which she'd poured her heart and soul.

She peered around the corner of the niche as a tall man strode determinedly in her direction, the skirt of his elegant coat rippling about his legs with the strength of his stride. The coat was tailored to fit shoulders and a chest wider than that of most gentlemen. The lapels and cut were of precisely this year's fashion, except that the coat was *black*. No gentleman wore black in London, not even for mourning. How very odd.

His neckcloth was a pristine white with just the right amount of starch for crispness without an inch of foppery. His breeches were of a tawny silk that matched the elaborate embroidery on the coat's lapels and pockets. His long vest matched his breeches and was embroidered with black in a simplicity that caused her to sigh in admiration. More gentlemen should accent their masculinity in this way instead of dressing as peacocks.

But when he was close enough for her to see his face, she gasped in horror and drew back as far into the niche as she could go.



CROSSING HIS ARMS OVER HIS NEW, CORRECTLY TAILORED AND DAMNED EXPENSIVE clothes, Sir Trevelyan Rochester studied the ridiculous portrait hanging in the Royal Art Gallery for the entire world to see. Fury bubbled at the outrage

perpetrated on a perfectly respectable piece of canvas that would have been better used in making sails. He dropped his gaze to the artist's signature, *LMP*, and his ire flared anew. The coward hid behind initials.

He'd spent twenty years working his way up from impressed sailor to owner of his own ship, and not one man in those twenty years had dared insult him in such a flagrant manner—not and lived to tell about it, anyway. He'd defeated bloodthirsty pirates, captured French privateers, gained his own letter of marque from the King of England himself, only to be humiliated by an unknown artist on the other side of the world who could not possibly know more than rumors of his exploits.

Had it not been for his desire for peace and a home of his own rather than preparing for yet another senseless war with France over the colonies, he would never have walked the streets of London again. Had the artist counted on his not returning to England?

He would make the damned man walk the plank at sword point and dispense with the gossipmongering, scandal-provoking scoundrel as a favor to society. It was the duty of any self-respecting privateer to rid the world of enemies to king and country.

Except he wasn't a privateer any longer, and Mr. *LMP* had provoked only him and not king or country.

A deep scowl drew his eyebrows together as he studied the details. It was his likeness, all right, unless he had a twin somewhere he didn't know about. Given the propensities of his noble family, that was possible but not likely.

The painting depicted *him*—Sir Trevelyan Rochester, knighted by His Majesty for action beyond the call of duty—riding a prissy white horse adorned with red ribbons on a beach in the midst of what appeared to be a summer fair. Trev assumed Mr. *LMP* had intended to poke fun by decking out him, a feared privateer, in macaroni attire of fluffy jabot and useless cuffs that spilled lace past his fingers. The artist had given him boots instead of clocked stockings, but the boots had floppy cuffs and were shiny and foolish for riding.

The subject of the portrait was defiantly hatless and wigless. A deep blue riband tied his hair back, and one black strand blew loose to fall across his battle-scarred cheek. Trev had to admit the artist had captured his olive complexion and sharp features with painful accuracy. His mother's mixed Jamaican heritage could not be denied. Brushed with tar, his noble grandfather had called his coloring, just before the old man had let the Navy take Trev to do with as they would.

Still, the painting was hopelessly silly. The man in it managed to look

romantically dashing despite a touch of savagery behind his flashing dark eyes. Trev didn't mind that so much, but the contrast between the man and the frivolous white horse was laughable.

No wonder people were talking. Still, he did not see what had sent his cousin's widow into such fits when he'd arrived at her door. He'd spent all his adult years on the other side of the world, and she couldn't know him from Adam, but she had barely given him a minute to introduce himself before slamming the door in his face.

It was James, their old butler, who had sneaked out to explain about the portrait all London was talking about. The preposterous painting was so well known that word of it had spread even to the rural village in the south of England where his late cousin's family resided. James hadn't had time to explain *why* the portrait was so scandalous. Or perhaps he hadn't known.

If he didn't know better, Trev would think his grandfather had planned this humiliation.

He studied the portrait, but he could see no reason for alarm, except for the smirch on his masculinity. That could cause difficulty in his search for a wife, but he doubted any sensible woman in his presence would question his virility.

He was about to spin around and stalk away when a whisper from the crowd gathering behind him caught his ear. He eavesdropped unabashedly.

"They say the earl had an apoplexy right on this spot." The whisper was distinctly feminine and horrified.

Trev crossed his arms and pretended to study the portrait.

"It's a Malcolm prediction, of a certainty," another voice said in awe. "See that boat sinking in the corner? It's the viscount's. The red is quite recognizable. They say he's been missing at sea for months."

Trev ground his molars and waited. *Malcolm*? The M in LMP stood for Malcolm? He would know the full name of the blackguard who'd put his face upon a wall without permission.

"There could be other red yachts," a male voice said scornfully. "But the man certainly looks a pirate. No wonder the earl recognized him."

"But Rochester hasn't been in England since childhood," the first female voice protested. "How could the artist have painted him so accurately that the earl could recognize him, without having seen him?"

"They don't hold fairs on the shore in Sussex," a bored male voice drawled. "It's a hoax."

Trev couldn't agree more. The silly little boat in the painting was hardly noticeable. The grieving widow standing on the rocky shoreline was buried

in veils and could be anyone. An artist's ploy, contrasting laughter with grief or some such flummery. His cousin had gone down at sea months ago, so to add his yacht to the background was the artist's deliberate scandal-mongering, not foretelling.

Now he understood why his cousin's widow had slammed the door in his face—the portrait showed him laughing as his cousin's yacht sank. He'd have to wring the artist's neck after all. Laurence had been a good, decent man, and his death was no laughing matter.

"The shire held a fair this year," a timid voice countered. "The new Duke of Sommersville sponsored one. That is when the yacht went down."

The crowd murmured more loudly as the conversation picked up in several places at once. "He looks dangerous enough to have murdered his cousin," someone said in response to a comment about his scar.

Trev snorted. No self-respecting murderer would wear that much lace, he wagered. It would get all bloody. Just try using a sword with lace wrapped around the fingers!

"Now that the viscount's gone, if the earl dies, Rochester could claim the title," said a female, followed by a horrified, "The man should hang!"

Trev figured neither spectator knew what she was talking about since Laurence had left an infant son as heir and his grandfather had declared Trev illegitimate. Truth never fazed good gossip, though.

Both comments overrode the more sensible voice that said, "But the man just arrived in England, and the viscount died months ago."

"I know Lady Lucinda," a timid female interjected. "She always paints one of her kittens into the landscape. See the orange tabby in the tree? It died of old age in April. That oil was painted last winter, well before the viscount's yacht went down. I saw her working on it."

A gasp of awe escaped the fascinated crowd, and Trev gritted his teeth at this nonsense.

"If the Prophetess painted it, then it must be true," said another woman. "She painted Pelham in his grave before he died."

"She painted my mother walking across Westminster Bridge before it was finished."

"Lady Roxbury fainted when she saw the Prophetess in the park—working on a painting of Roxbury with a woman that wasn't her and children that weren't theirs."

"You know his mistress is bearing his child," someone else murmured.

The whispers grew riper and louder, but Trev disregarded all the gossip except the relevant—a woman artist! Rocked by the enormity of such perfidi-

ousness, he had only one thought in mind—to locate this attention-seeking, kitten-drawing *Prophetess* who had depicted him as his cousin's murderer and throttle her until she admitted to all London that the painting was a hoax. Furious, he swirled around to cut a path through the crowd.

Confronted with the man in the portrait come to life before their eyes, the crowd recoiled in horror.

Feeling as murderous as they believed him, Trev stalked off without looking right or left.



LUCINDA SLID DEEPER INTO THE SHADOWS OF THE ALCOVE AND HELD HER BREATH until Sir Trevelyan swept past, bronzed features scowling, Spanish eyes flashing, and manly muscles rippling.

Her gaze dropped to the lethal rapier emerging from his coattails, and she trembled.

Foolishly, her traitorous fingers itched for her paintbrushes. This time, she wanted to paint him as a thundercloud in the form of a man. She could see now that her first attempt was sadly lacking in comparison with the reality.

The man actually existed! The Earl of Lansdowne had been right. She couldn't believe it. How could she have painted a man in her head, only to see him walk out of a crowd like that? Could the other gossip be true then? Had that man, that *pirate*, been in England during the fair as she'd painted him? Could she have actually seen him last winter, when he'd filled her dreams?

She didn't think she wanted to be around to find out. He looked angry enough to commit murder, but oddly enough, she'd been drawn to the sadness in his dark eyes. There was something in the way he held himself. . . She couldn't put her finger on why he fascinated her.

That's what she deserved for listening to romantic tales of heroes and villains told by silly women with nothing better to do. The tales they'd told of commanders at sea and warriors on land and knights of old had given her dreams until she'd had to capture them on canvas.

She supposed they had talked of privateers like Sir Trevelyan, who had captured a renegade French warship that had blocked a British harbor a year or so ago. She remembered the story anyway, but she'd not been thinking of it when she'd painted the portrait. At the time, she'd thought the painting

showed a fantasy hero with a romantic, fun loving nature. She'd thoroughly enjoyed the contradictions of character she'd conveyed.

She could dash that foolery right now. She couldn't imagine anyone less romantic or more dangerous than the man who'd just left the gallery. Perhaps there was some truth behind the rumor of his being a murderer after all. After all, privateers were licensed to kill.

She shivered, and, tucking the hood of her mantle more securely over her distinctive white-blond hair, hastened to a back exit.

If rumor were true, Sir Trevelyan Rochester had murdered his cousin to claim the title and estates his grandfather had denied him.

If rumor were true, her painting provided evidence that Rochester had been in England when he had said he was not, destroying his credibility and alibi.

She knew the last rumor was based on false assumptions, but how would she ever explain the coincidence of the resemblance? She couldn't. And now a dangerous privateer knew her name.

She'd caused scandals enough in the past but none of this magnitude. It was past time she left London before the privateer stormed the walls of her home to murder *her*.



LUCINDA PUSHED A QUILTED PETTICOAT INTO HER BROCADE VALISE AND LOOKED around at the clothes scattered across her bedroom, trying to decide if she could squeeze in anything else. It had taken her the better part of the afternoon to carry out all the details of her plan to run away from home.

Without warning, her younger sister Cecily burst into the room. At seeing the disorder in her sister's chamber, she halted abruptly. "I thought you told Mama you had the megrims and could not attend the ball."

Lucinda winced at being caught in the first of what might become many lies. "I'm feeling better."

"You cannot go, Sinda," Cecily whispered in horror, finally making the connection between luggage and gossip. "Mama will think of a solution."

Mentally berating herself for not having bolted the door, Lucinda tugged the valise buckle closed. "No," she said simply.

"What do you mean, *no*? Mama always thinks of something. Remember when you were twelve and you painted the pretty lady on her new silk sofa? And over the mantel you sketched in a portrait of the Stewart prince, only he

had blood on his hands? Mama warned Papa, who told the king, who called the troops home in time to prevent a bloody war."

Lucinda shook her head and a tear crawled down her cheek. "She prevented a bloody war in *England*, but not in Scotland. If I hadn't painted that picture, would all those brave young men have died at Culloden?"

Too young to remember that period in history, Cecily shrugged carelessly. "If not there, somewhere else. What matters is that Mama can make this right, too. She and Papa can do anything. Papa is a *duke*."

"Papa could not prevent all London from believing my painting means Sir Trevelyan murdered his cousin." Bitterly, Lucinda flung her box of oils on the bed with her valise.

"It is a very good painting," Cecily said. "Everyone says so."

It was an *excellent* painting; in all respects, an oil as fine as any that hung in the royal galleries. She had simply chosen the wrong subject. Again.

Just seeing innocent Cecily, with her blond curls and anxious expression, sealed her decision. At sixteen, Cecily had come out only this year. She already had a dozen brilliant beaux who had been conspicuously absent these past weeks of controversy. The portrait had forcibly reminded them that a man had to be strong and brave—or desperate—to marry a Malcolm.

Lucinda must leave town to give her three younger sisters a chance to marry. At twenty-two, her own time on the marriage mart had passed. Six years was long enough to show she had tried. Malcolms with dangerous gifts had been known to disappear from public sight from time to time. It wasn't as if she would be setting any precedents. There was freedom in anonymity.

"I won't go far," Lucinda promised. "Cousin Felicity has said I can stay with her and Ewen until I decide how to proceed. I'll travel to Scotland incognito and live under an assumed name. I can make my living by painting landscapes. I can't harm anyone by drawing trees. I think I'll be much happier away from London."

She'd repeated those lines to herself enough times that she managed to sound cheerful while she said them. They did sound good, even if she was lying about her destination to throw Cecily off her trail. She had never lived without her family and had almost no idea how to go on by herself, so she wasn't foolish enough to think she could completely run away. It was just that she'd been quiet and obedient for so long, she needed to establish her new self and her new life before her family could talk her out of it.

It wasn't as if she didn't have a marketable talent. Landscape paintings were all the rage. And surely it would be safe to paint grass and trees.

"How will you go?" Cecily asked in an awed whisper. "Scotland is a very long way and the roads are bad."

"It's better that you don't know so you won't have to lie if asked. Go and forget you saw me this evening. In a few days, your beaus will be back on the doorstep, and all will be well."

Cecily looked even more stricken. "There are thieves all over St. James these days! I heard Papa say it is not safe to walk the streets. You cannot go without a footman and a linkboy."

"I've made arrangements, I promise," Lucinda swore, and this time, she was completely honest. She wasn't a brave person.

She hugged Cecily to reassure her. Still unhappy, her sister tiptoed out the door with a gentle shove.

After her sister was safely gone, Lucinda glanced around for anything she'd forgotten, then slipped to the balcony window with valise and paint box in hand. She must be gone before Cecily started feeling guilty. Their parents had left for a dinner and ball, but that didn't mean they couldn't be found before she made her escape.

She'd planned everything to the last minute. She had a chair waiting to take her to the inn where the Sussex coach would leave within the hour. She no intention of running off to chilly Scotland.

Taking one last look at the pretty room that had been hers all her life, trying not to imagine what would happen in the morning when her younger sisters discovered she was gone, Lucinda swept away a tear. Mouth set in determination, she dropped her valise and paint box off the balcony into the shrubbery below, then pulled her concealing mantle over her face and hurried from her room toward the servants' stairs. She'd traded a fine muslin morning dress for a maid's coarse wool gown so she wouldn't appear out of place at a common inn. She would look a mess when she arrived, but that was the whole point, wasn't it—not to look like herself?

A high wall surrounded the yard, so there was no one to see when she retrieved her bags. Dusk fell early this time of year. An owl hooted from the old oak, but owls didn't scare her. From here, it would be easy. She knew where to find the gate key.

The gate creaked a little as she stepped into the mews, but the servants were all in the hall having their supper. She could scream bloody murder and they wouldn't hear.

She almost did scream when her first step into the alley brought her up against a tall, cloaked figure that materialized out of the darkness. *Thieves!*

A strong hand caught her shoulder, and her heart nearly leaped from her chest.

Her accoster released her, and she hastily backed toward the gate and safety. In the dusky light, she recognized the powerful form and black coat of the man who had made such an impression on her in the gallery. Not a thief then—a *murderer*.

Sir Trevelyan had come to kill her.

"Steady on now, lass." His voice was like deep velvet. "What's your hurry?"

Not soothed by his tone, she shrank into the shadows of the vines spilling over the walls. Behind her, she fumbled for the gate latch while feigning ignorance for as long as she might.

"Who are you?" she demanded in a manner totally unlike her, hoping her voice didn't shake. "There should be none back here but the duke's men." That seemed the thing a spirited maid might say.

Feeble illumination from the stable lantern at the end of the mews cast shadows on the pirate's striking features. He was taller than her father and even wider of shoulder than she remembered. His black tricorne tilted rakishly, concealing his expression.

"I'm just a visitor seeking a shortcut." He swept off his hat and made a deep bow. When he stood upright again, the light fell on the sharp blade of his nose and his deeply set eyes.

She'd painted that face, knew it intimately. He was far more imposing and dangerous close up than she had dreamed. The heart-pounding, knee-weakening sensation returned. This time, she recognized it as abject fear.

"And who might you be?" he inquired. "Not many stroll these alleys at night."

Trying not to stutter, she kept her voice low. "'Tis none of your concern, sir. Be off about your business, if you please." She'd never said a saucy word in her life. What had possessed her to say such a thing now? She dropped her gaze in fear to seek the hilt of his sword. He'd left it off, thank the goddess.

He didn't seem offended so much as amused by her reply. "It seems I've stumbled on a little hedgehog. Tell me, if you will, is the duke about this evening? I have business with him."

Oh dear, oh dreadful dear. Would he challenge her father to a duel over the painting's insult to his reputation?

Now that she had set about a career of anonymity, she supposed she

must become accustomed to storytelling. "He is not, sir. The family is away for the season."

"But the stable lanterns are lit as if someone is expected," he contradicted with a knowing grin. He produced a gold piece from his pocket and let it gleam in the light. "I've a coin for you if you can tell me when the family will return."

Shocked at his audacity, she sank deeper into the shadows and prayed her cloak concealed her features. The gold between his gloved fingers twinkled, and she thought of her meager purse. She'd never been one to save her allowance when it could be spent on a new oil paint.

What would it hurt to tell when her father was expected home? It was not as if a carriage with four horses could arrive surreptitiously. All Rochester had to do was linger, and he'd eventually see her parents.

She needed to be rid of him so she could make her escape before they returned. The sedan chair she'd hired wouldn't wait much longer.

"The duke has been at Whitehall all day," she lied, "and is past due home. His family has gone to the Beresfords' ball without him." Just enough detail for plausibility, she hoped. Her father never left her mother waiting, and it would be the wee hours before they returned.

"Very good," he said, sounding pleased. "And your name, should I call again?"

What would the name of a servant avail him? Trembling, she shook her head. "The master doesn't know I'm out. I'll not tell you that."

He laughed. "And where are you off to, then? Shall I escort you? It is not safe for a fair maid to walk the streets alone at night. There is danger in the dark."

His whole face altered when he smiled. He looked like a laughing pirate, a man who took life to excess and reveled in it. Sinda admired the flash of his white teeth against his dark coloring and wished she could know him better. A man like this was rare in society.

Dangerous, she reminded herself. She was the dreamer and certainly not the smartest of her family, but she knew better than to dally with an acknowledged privateer. "I daresay I'll be far safer alone than with you, sir. Pray, let me pass."

His dark eyes narrowed and he hesitated. Then he chuckled and held out the coin, which she snatched quickly, trying not to notice the heat of his hand.

"I thank you, then." Bowing, he returned his hat to his head and strode off as if they'd just exchanged a pleasantries.

He disappeared around the far side of the carriage house. She gave him a moment or two to get ahead of her.

He was devilishly attractive. His velvet voice alone could make a woman swoon. And no doubt he would strangle her had he known who she was.

Gulping in relief at the near miss, grateful she'd chosen to leave London, she hastened down the alley to peek into the street. She wanted to be certain Rochester did not linger at their door. She saw no sign of the man.

She hadn't realized how very *dark* the streets were without a linkboy to carry a lantern. Or how lonely they were without one of her sisters laughing and talking at her side.

To her relief, the sedan chair waited. Dragging her valise and paint box, she hastened to take her seat, proffering the coin Rochester had given her and speaking her direction. She felt no guilt at using his money to make her escape. It was his fault that she must do so.



STANDING IN A DOORWAY NEAR THE WAITING SEDAN CHAIR, TREV LISTENED TO the girl give her direction. He wasn't the kind of man to laugh off an insult or let grass grow under his feet. And sometimes, he had the devil's own luck.

He'd wager everything he owned—and that was currently a considerable sum—that the chit with the paint box he'd just helped run away was the *Prophetess* whose neck he'd come to wring. She'd raised his curiosity several levels upon this mischance meeting. She certainly hadn't been seeking attention this evening.

He'd spent these last hours investigating Lady Lucinda Malcolm Pembroke, learning she was a well-known troublemaker and the haughty daughter of a powerful duke. All thought of the peace and civilization he'd come home to find fled his head. Twenty years at sea had taught him to attack first and ask questions later.

But he'd never attacked a woman. Trev's temper faltered under a wave of bitter anguish. Seeing the artist in person reminded him that the lady hadn't caused his cousin's death.

Laurence had been the only decent Rochester he'd ever known. He'd been looking forward to their reunion after all these years. A few months younger than Trev, Laurence had been as purely aristocratic English as Trev was not—golden-haired, rosy-cheeked, and jolly-humored when he'd last seen him. Granted, that had been when they were both fourteen. Time could

have wrought changes, but Trev would have preferred to judge that for himself.

Scowling blackly, he went in search of his carriage.

He'd stormed his grandfather's house an hour ago to see for himself that the Earl of Lansdowne was truly comatose from the apoplexy that had stricken him at the art gallery. He wouldn't have put it past the old man to have instigated the whole nefarious plot to discredit him, but beyond proving the earl was bedridden, he'd learned nothing else. Believing Trev to be the murderer the earl had accused him of being, the earl's servants had risen up against him in fear. He'd been fortunate to escape without broken bones.

If he was to find out why he'd been framed for a murder he hadn't committed and regain any chance of courting a lady and having a family, Lady Lucinda Pembroke was his only lead. He'd have to follow her, then force her to admit his innocence.

Planning by what means one might force a lady into anything, Trev grinned, swung his walking stick, and signaled the carriage waiting for him around the corner.

Much Ado About Magic
Patricia Rice

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First Publication: 2005 New American Library, Penguin USA

Second Edition: Book View Café 2013

Reprint: Sourcebooks Nov 2013

ISBN 978 1 61138 017 0

Published by Rice Enterprises, Dana Point, CA, an affiliate of Book View Café Publishing Cooperative.

Cover design by Kim Killion

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