

MUST BE MAGIC

MAGICAL MALCOLMS #2



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PROLOGUE



LONDON, 1735

"PICK LITTLE CHRISTINA IF YOU MUST, BUT DON'T PICK LEILA FOR OUR TEAM," A fair-haired adolescent warned her equally fair younger sister. "She has no powers. She's *useless*."

"But Uncle Rowland favors her," the younger girl replied. "He says Leila's just like him."

"That's because she's not like the rest of *us*," Diana, the elder, said with an arrogant toss of her blond curls. "Leila's hair is *black*, and she has no gifts. She's not a Malcolm. Even her baby sisters are better than she is. Let her play on the babies' side. They won't know the difference."

On the staircase above, ten-year-old Leila cringed and backed up the way she'd come, her heart breaking with every step. She'd anticipated the joyous romp of the scavenger hunt her aunt had arranged. She'd been thrilled to have the company of her beautiful older cousins with their fascinating abilities to find lost objects and to paint pictures of what wasn't there.

She hadn't anticipated scorn at her own lack of such gifts.

She'd known her sister could see odd colors around people that she couldn't, but Christina was a *baby*. No one cared what babies saw, and what good were colors anyway? Leila was the eldest, and her mama said she was

the best little helper she could have. Her papa called her beautiful. The little ones clamored for her company.

But her cousins thought her *useless*. Wide-eyed with shock, Leila quivered at the top of the stairs, not fully comprehending her cousin's antipathy.

They thought she wasn't a *Malcolm*. She might be adopted. She didn't want to be thrown out in the snow and left to die because she didn't belong here.

Panicking, Leila grabbed her black curls and threw a glance over her shoulder to see if the portly butler might already be bearing down on her, prepared to heave her out the door. Relieved to see no immediate danger, Leila raced for the only comfort she knew—her very blond, very *Malcolm* mother.

Tears forming at her cousin's cruel dismissal, Leila rushed into the workshop and dived into Hermione's welcoming arms.

"I *am* a *Malcolm*, aren't I?" she wailed against her mother's plump bosom. "My hair will be just like yours someday, won't it?"

Sitting down on a bench beside a cluster of candle molds and jars of herbs and fragrances, Hermione wrapped her beautiful firstborn in a hug. "Of course you're a *Malcolm*, dear. You're just *different*. You should be proud of your lovely black hair. Someday men will swoon over you."

"I don't want men to swoon," Leila declared, tears still in her eyes. "I want to make people smile like you do with candles that smell like happiness. I want to find lost things like Diana can. I can do anything I want, can't I? I'm a *Malcolm*." The last came out almost as a plea.

Hermione stroked Leila's long curls. "It's up to us to make the most of what we're given, dear. You have beauty and grace and intelligence, and someday you will make some man very happy. Just don't let that man be an *Ives*," she added with a wry chuckle. "Your ancestors would rise from their graves."

Momentarily distracted from her grief, Leila gazed at her mother's serene features. "What's an *Ives*?"

"Only the downfall of all *Malcolms*, dear. We are creatures of nature, and they are creatures of science. Disaster results when the two come together. But you are much too young to worry about that now."

Disinterested in future disasters, more concerned about the current one, Leila eyed the glittering array of equipment on her mother's workbench. Inhaling the bouquet of scents exuded by the mood-enhancing wax candles and soaps her mother made, she bit her quivering lip and straightened her shoulders.

She had better things to do than play at a stupid scavenger hunt. Heart bruised but pride intact, Leila lifted her chin. "I shall go down and see if Papa wishes to hear me play. I'm much too big for baby games."

"And take the chess set to the boys. They always behave better when you smile at them."

Racing to do as she'd been told, Leila vowed to smile and sing and make everyone happy and prove she was better than her cousins so her mama would love her.

As the laughter of her sisters and cousins rose from the entrance hall, Leila stopped at the top of the stairs, scrubbed at a wayward tear, and sniffed back the sob in her throat. It didn't matter if they wouldn't play with her. She didn't *need* them.

But she needed to be a *Malcolm*. She didn't want to be left out and all alone.

ONE



LONDON, APRIL 1752

"HE'S MINE," LADY LEILA STAINES ANNOUNCED, STUDYING THE IMPOSING MAN at the entrance to the ballroom who scowled at her guests as if he were deciding whose head he might sever first.

Her sister, Christina, followed Leila's gaze and drew in a sharp breath. "*Dunstan Ives?* Don't be absurd. He's an Ives and a murderer."

Fascinated, Leila watched the formidable gentleman dressed entirely in black except for the immaculate white cravat at his throat. This Ives possessed the power to put her world back on course. She had to have him. "He's not a murderer. Ninian says so."

"He could snap your neck with a flick of his wrist," Christina whispered, watching with fascinated horror as Dunstan's companions were announced. "Look, his aura is black as night!"

Ignoring her younger sister, Leila observed the entrance of angelic Ninian beside her handsome husband, Drogo, Earl of Ives and Wystan. Then her gaze followed the towering man who was dissociating himself from his companions by lingering behind them. Both Ives men exhibited their scorn of society with their sun-darkened visages and lack of powdered wigs.

The lean earl possessed an air of intellect and refinement, but his broader

brother glowered with hostility as he scanned the glittering throng. In his tailored coat, with shoulders strong as an ox, Dunstan Ives diminished the rest of the lace-and-silk bedecked company to effeminacy.

"I don't know about his aura, but his clothes are certainly unfashionably black," Leila observed as she studied the brooding looks and powerful physique of the man she meant to proposition. He was definitely not the usual sort of London gentleman. But then, Ives men never were.

"He must still wear black for his wife," Christina murmured. "I suppose if he did not murder her, that would be tragically romantic."

"If he ever loved her, he fell out of it," their cousin Lucinda said, hearing this last as she joined them. "Of course, one shouldn't assume his lack of love means he intended harm."

Since Celia Ives had been murdered most violently more than a year ago, Leila knew her cousin hastened to correct any impression that Dunstan might have had something to do with his wife's death. Lucinda possessed a gift for revealing true character through her paintings, and people tended to pay particular attention to even her most casual comments. She was careful, therefore, not to misstate her opinion. Like all Malcolms, she had acquired a keen sense of responsibility along with her gifts.

Gifts that Leila didn't possess. All her life, Leila had searched for a similar gift in herself, but she had never discovered the magic that would prove her to be a true Malcolm. Still, even with her limited perception, she could see that the arrogant man standing in the doorway despised the parrot colors of fashion and wore black out of disdain for the society over which she prevailed. Love and grief had nothing to do with it.

He was an Ives, after all—cold and unfeeling.

Fanning herself as she admired his stature, Leila thought of her own dark attire and smiled. They were soul mates in matters of dress at least. Black gave her an authority her age did not, and it set her apart from the common herd so she might better wield that authority. She was smart, as her mother had always said. She'd focused her intelligence on understanding society and had applied what she learned to make a place for herself and her late husband in fashionable circles.

At least she'd made her husband happy.

What her intelligence couldn't master was what her family did without effort: see beyond the obvious, dabble in the supernatural, and help those around them through those gifts. All her life, Leila had been excluded from the whispered consultations of her younger siblings and cousins, simply

because she did not see or hear what they could. Behind her, she heard Christina and Lucinda whispering about their insights into Dunstan's character, excluding her as usual.

Despite knowing everyone in this room, she still stood alone, the solitary cuckoo in her family's nest.

Until she discovered some special ability in herself and proved she was a Malcolm, she would always feel like an ostracized child—alone, unloved, and a failure.

She'd spent her entire life meeting her family's expectations of her. She'd married well, raised her husband's social and political standing, acquired wealth, made others happy, if not herself. Widowed now, and finally free of all expectations, she stood on the brink of opportunity, if she possessed the courage to take the risk. With the help of an Ives, she might discover who she really was and of what she was capable.

Leila allowed a tendril of hope to creep through her usual restraint as she watched the commanding presence of the tall man in the doorway. Nervously, she waved her fan, bouncing a loose pin curl in the breeze. After a year of planning and dreaming, she'd made her choice. All she need do now was approach Dunstan Ives and state her proposal. Even if he was immune to her charm, he should succumb to her monetary largesse, and then she would have England's most learned agronomist at her disposal.

"He's an Ives," Lucinda whispered in warning. "Don't forget what happened to cousin Ninian."

Leila was aware of the danger Ives men posed to women, and to Malcolm women in particular. The attraction between them must be as powerful as legend said if even Ninian had risked disaster to fall for one of the logical, passionless men. But Leila was prepared to take her chances with the fire of physical attraction. Although men habitually flocked around her, she had never felt passion for them in return.

Her only dilemma lay in whether she dared retire to the country in the company of a man whose adulterous wife had been found with her neck snapped. No evidence confirmed Dunstan's guilt. None confirmed his innocence, either.

Leila offered a practiced trill of laughter at her cousin's warning. "I seduce men, not the other way around. An Ives is no match for me."

"Leila, you cannot tell what he's feeling as Ninian can," Christina warned. "He looks incredibly dangerous."

"Shall I go closer and see what I can learn?" Leila snapped her fan closed

and, forgetting everyone else in the room besides Ives, left her sister and cousin.

Progressing through the crowd of London's wealthy and powerful, she stopped often to meet and greet her guests, never losing sight of the man she intended to trap in her net. *Mother of goddesses*, but he was built like a mountain, a smoldering one. She chattered and exchanged mindless gossip, but she couldn't look away as Dunstan Ives glowered at a footman and ended up with two glasses of champagne in his huge fists.

"Isn't that the Ives who murdered his wife?" one countess whispered. "Honestly, Leila, even *you* can't expect us to acknowledge a murderer!"

"Dear, dear Betsy." Leila patted the woman's gloved hand. "I invited your current lover, the father of your son, and your husband, and I'm still speaking to all four of you. Be a good girl and don't spoil my fun."

She left the rouged and powdered countess with her mouth open.

"He looks as if he might murder someone any minute," her mother, Hermione, Marchioness of Hampton, murmured worriedly, sidling up to Leila and fiddling with the gossamer scarf about her throat. "I cannot think why you invited him."

"Because he is the best agronomist in all of England," Leila assured her. "Even Father says so. Since Dunstan has come to work for him, the estate has improved tremendously. Is that not so?"

"Yes, but your father is a *man*, dear. It is not at all the same thing. I do wish you would reconsider offering him a position."

"But the opportunity is perfect," Leila explained. "You know Father means to put Rolly in charge of the Gloucestershire estate. Rolly loathes Dunstan, says he does not take orders well. Why should I let Rolly drive him away when I can have him?" Leila did not slow her progress across the drawing room. Tugging at shawls and scarves, her mother trailed in her wake.

"Leila, you know nothing of these things—"

"Ninian does, and she says he's innocent." Ninian was years younger than Leila, but she possessed a gift of empathy and a talent for healing that had saved lives and fortunes—including Drogo's. Ninian was the one her whole family turned to because she *understood* things without being told. Leila bowed to her greater gifts, even as envy devoured her.

"You know perfectly well that Ninian is not herself when she's in town with so many people around to disturb her gift," Hermione whispered. "She could be wrong about Dunstan—"

"I'm not changing my mind, Maman," Leila said. "He's mine."

A sensual shiver rippled down her spine as she repeated those words at the same moment that Dunstan turned his brooding gaze on her, and the implication of her arrogant declaration raised its serpent head.

She wanted an agricultural expert, not a lover, but Dunstan's hooded dark eyes and prominent nose stirred long dormant feelings. Uneasy with the sensation, she reminded herself that no man had ever wielded the power to tempt her.

Safe behind a shield of indifference, Leila brushed a kiss on Ninian's cheek. "How good of you to come." Murmuring polite nonsense, she flirted with the impervious Drogo, then turned the full brunt of her attention on the imposing man standing distant from his family.

Oh, my. His presence hit her with all the force of her mother's lust-scented candles.

"Black becomes you, sir," she murmured, drawing her black-gloved finger down Dunstan's lapel, resorting to her practiced role of flirt to hide the sensual impact of this man. Was it her imagination, or did his air of disdain conceal a whiff of loneliness? Perhaps his lack of artificial scent distorted her perceptions. Fascinating.

"Black's not fashionable," he replied, staring past her powdered curls.

"So flattering of you to mention that." She immediately retracted any sympathy she might have mistakenly offered. "Shall I run upstairs and slip into something more to your liking? In red, perhaps?"

Dunstan glanced down at her wide black skirts, then focused his gaze on the expanse of bosom exposed by her low-cut gown. "Scarlet seems appropriate."

The lady's sensual perfume of roses and jasmine wafted around him, and Dunstan stiffened. He didn't want to notice her at all, but she stood taller than most women, reaching past his chin in her heeled shoes. His gaze fell in direct contact with her lacy black cap, forcing him to notice how her tight, powdered curls accentuated her rouged lips and darkened lashes. Despite the white powder, he knew she was a Malcolm, and she'd have sun-kissed blond hair like all the rest of her kind, along with eyes that could ensnare and bewitch. He refused to look down and fall into the trap.

Nodding curtly in dismissal, ignoring Ninian and Drogo, Dunstan spun on his heel and strode blindly for what he hoped was the card room.

The lady's exotic perfume clung to his senses as he departed, and raw hunger clawed at his insides.

It had been that way with Celia.

Never again. He would put a bullet through his ear before he became enthralled with another aristocratic, conniving female.

Especially a *Malcolm*. He had enough disaster in his life without courting more.

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