

THE TROUBLE WITH MAGIC

MAGICAL MALCOLMS #3



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PROLOGUE



KENT, ENGLAND, 1743

"THE BOOK, MAMA, MAY I HAVE IT, PLEASE?" SIX-YEAR-OLD LADY FELICITY Malcolm Childe gazed longingly at the hand-painted folio of children's Bible verses lying open for patrons of the stationery shop to admire. It rested on a counter just out of reach of Lady Felicity's sticky fingers, but she reached for it anyway.

"Remember what I told you, dear." Hermione, Marchioness of Hampton, hurried to her daughter's side. Her hat ribbons blew in the breeze from the open door, and she caught the end of her scarf before it fluttered loose. "Do not touch until you've tested it."

"Yes, Mama." With her chubby bare fingers, Lady Felicity brushed the air above an open page depicting an angel with long golden hair hanging in silken ringlets that looked remarkably like hers. "Oh, it's filled with love, Mama. May I hold it, please?"

"Wouldn't the little girl prefer a candy instead?" The proprietor leaned over his counter with a tempting stick of horehound.

Before Hermione could intervene, Felicity accepted the offering with delight. "Thank you—" As her fingers wrapped around the treat she gasped, and with a flutter of dark gold eyelashes, collapsed in a puddle of silken skirts and petticoats upon the rough wooden floor.

Casting the startled proprietor an appalled glance, Hermione swept her daughter up in her arms and marched out of the shop, panniers swaying with indignation. Waving off footmen and nursemaids who rushed to her aid, she climbed into the waiting carriage, still cradling her frail daughter in her arms.

Within the private confines of the familiar coach, Felicity stirred and woke. With a sob, she clutched her mother and buried her face in the marchioness's ample bosom.

"Now, now, child, it's all right. You simply must learn to test before touching, as I've taught you."

"He's a *nasty* man," Felicity hiccupped. "He does *nasty* things to little girls and they cry. I don't want to go there anymore."

Her usually tender mouth firming into a tight line, the marchioness nodded her beribboned head vigorously. "I shall certainly see to that, dear. I will talk to your father, and Mr. Jones shall leave the village at once. You see, your gift is very useful. It will keep him from hurting any other little girls."

"I don't want to see bad things anymore," Felicity whispered. "I hate my gift. It hurts. Why can't I have another gift?"

Hermione sighed and rocked her daughter in her arms. "You are only given what you are capable of handling, my dear. I know you don't understand that yet, but your gift is precious and valuable. When you grow into it, you will learn to use it wisely."

"Christina's gift doesn't hurt," Felicity muttered with a rebellious pout. "She sees pretty things. Why can't I feel pretty things?"

"You felt love in the book," Hermione reminded her. "It's just that sometimes bad things feel stronger than gentle ones. It doesn't hurt when your family touches you, does it? Or Nanny?"

"Nanny has sad touches," Felicity murmured sleepily as her mother continued rocking her. "I don't want to touch any more bad things."

"Your family will always take care of you, dear. You'll be safe and happy around familiar vibrations until you're all grown up and know how to use your gift. Learning comes from experience, but we'll give you good ones."

"Can I stay in Papa's library? It's nice there."

Hermione laughed. "No, you cannot live in a library, dear, although your papa would let you try if you wanted."

"I want to. I don't want to see any more bad things." Setting her quivering lip in a firm manner reminiscent of her mother's, Felicity closed her eyes and slept.

ONE



SPRING, 1754

"I SAW HIM. PERCY WAS THERE WHEN HIS MOTHER DIED, NO MATTER WHAT anyone claims." Swaddled in a cloak, a scarf, and thick gloves, Lady Felicity clung to the rail of the family yacht as the ship lurched and slid into a trough between rough waves. She'd never seen the sea before. The salt spray stung her cheeks, and she cautiously licked her lips to taste the salty droplets.

She ought to be afraid of the wild waves and the crack of lightning, but those were things she couldn't touch, so they had no power over her. Or she over them. At any other time she would have exulted in this new experience. Instead, dread of things she had set in motion churned her stomach. Beneath the dread shimmered a sliver of hope that her efforts would not be in vain.

The incident with Sir Percy had been her breaking point. Even her father had agreed that a relaxing journey to visit her sister in Northumberland might settle her nerves. Leila and her husband were staying at his family's estate in Wistan. As much as she wanted to see them and the new baby, it was the proximity to Scotland that drew her on. Felicity prayed she could find some way to escape her family's solicitude and reach Edinburgh and the one frail hope of ever having a normal life.

She *must* reach Edinburgh. A lifetime of pain and loneliness, denied even the simplest of human pleasures, would be unbearable. *Was* unbearable. She

had broken her Papa's heart when she'd refused Sir Percy's proposal of marriage. And terrified herself.

"Quit saying that you saw Percy," Christina said. "If he really did murder his mother, he might murder you, too. How do you know he doesn't have spies following us?"

Exhausted by the constant tension and turmoil of touching unfamiliar objects these past days, Felicity still managed to cast her sister a look of incredulity. "Spies? Why in the name of the goddess would he do that? Nobody believes me. His servants swear his mother's death was an accident, that he wasn't at home the day she died. His steward swears they were together in London that day. I'm just an hysteric afraid of marriage."

"Well, you did become hysterical, and you *are* afraid of marriage," Christina countered. "That doesn't mean you aren't right, and if you are, you have made him very nervous."

"I have made *everyone* very nervous." Wrapping her mantle tighter, Felicity watched a seagull scream across the leaden sky.

"Come inside," Christina urged. "The wind is increasing and will blow you off your feet."

Her sister was scarcely two years her elder, yet ages older in terms of experience and courage. Christina sheltered Felicity from life's buffets much as the rest of their family did, but Christina did it with impatience. With a shrug acknowledging her sister's concern, Felicity returned her spectacles to her nose and descended the companionway into the cabin below.

"The captain does not think we'll reach Northumberland today." Entering their private cubbyhole, Felicity picked up her much-beloved and slightly bedraggled doll from the bunk and gingerly occupied the bed's edge. Her doll exuded the joy of a long-ago Christmas and the memory of all the happy hours of play in the hands of her innocent sisters. It provided a balance against the cabin's bleak vibrations. "Leila and Dunstan will be worried if we're late."

"Perhaps Dunstan will tire of waiting for us in port and go home."

Christina said this with such glee that Felicity couldn't prevent a smile. "He's an Ives. He's more likely to set the Navy searching for us. I think Ives have gained the reputation of causing Malcolm disasters simply because they are such interfering creatures. They cannot leave well enough alone."

Christina laughed. "If *anyone* knew what we intend, they'd interfere." Sitting cross-legged on the bunk in an unladylike billow of skirts and panniers, she propped her shoulders against the wall. "This will be great fun,

once we find some means of escaping interfering relations. I've never been to Edinburgh."

"I cannot see how we will go now." Felicity's dread roiled higher at the thought of such a reckless escapade. She was not an adventurer by nature. Only desperation drove her to this scheme.

"It will be marvelous fun," Christina reassured her. "We will see the sights and meet new people. It's a pity we cannot find you a husband while we're at it, one more to your liking than the stuffy ones Father prefers. Sir Percy would never have suited."

Felicity had thought bookish Sir Percy the ideal suitor—until she had seen murder in his touch. Half the reason for this journey was to hide her until her father could investigate her tale. She suspected the other half was his fear that this time her mind had taken leave of her senses, and a good long rest from the exigencies of London's social whirl was needed. Sir Percy was not at all the sort to make people think he could murder his mother.

"Well, Ewen Ives is still unmarried," Felicity offered in wry jest, naming the worst possible example of a suitor she could summon.

Christina laughed. "You'd spend the rest of your life chasing after his obnoxious family, attempting to prevent them from wreaking the havoc and ruin you'd discover on every object they touched."

"Well, it wouldn't be *boring*." But boring was what she wanted—needed. Safe and boring, no unpleasant surprises, no jolts of pain or anguish or visions of death and destruction.

"Besides, Ewen possesses nothing for which Father could trade your dowry, and Father lives for haggling with suitors." Christina giggled at the thought. "Although, you must admit, Ewen is the most handsome of the Ives. And charming, when he chooses to be. He would dangle you with all his other conquests like a watch fob on a chain."

Felicity sighed. One of her favorite objects was a mechanical bouquet of porcelain roses that twirled to tinkling music. Ewen Ives had given it to her for her come-out last year. It held only his fascination with the motor without any deep, dark secrets attached. But handsome, charming men were not for dowdy, invisible girls like her. She had only briefly seen Ewen at a family gathering or two since then. Besides, her father would have a spasm of the heart if he knew she dreamed of an Ives. She loved her father and wished him to be happy with her choice.

The only way that would happen is if she found *A Malcolm Journal of Infusions*, which she needed to rid herself of this wretched gift—if it would do as promised.

First she must find the Lord Nesbitt in Edinburgh who had last owned the book—a century ago.

“More’s the pity,” Felicity said, “but it’s best if we avoid interfering Ives if we can, although how we can avoid Dunstan when we are supposed to be staying with him and Leila is beyond my comprehension.”

“We simply must convince Leila that we are grown-up enough to visit Edinburgh on our own,” Christina declared.

Since Leila had married Dunstan Ives last year, she had become so engrossed in her studies of perfumes and scents that she’d scarcely traveled to London. Felicity couldn’t predict how Leila would react to her younger sisters’ dangerous mission.

“Perhaps she will be so busy dandling her new baby on her knee that she will not notice if we don’t arrive at all,” Christina suggested.

“She will more likely be pacing the dock with Dunstan. It’s not as if I leave London with any frequency. Mama will have written her with lists and lists of instructions.” Felicity clenched her fingers anxiously. “It’s a wonder Mama did not lock me in my room for my own safety or that Father did not banish me to the Outer Hebrides after I swooned at Sir Percy’s feet.”

“Percy,” Christina muttered with disgust. “A milksop like that could not so much as murder a bank ledger. I think your gift has gone awry.”

Felicity hunched over her doll, hugging its familiar vibrations of love. “If I cannot be rid of this wretched gift, I shall never marry. I will grow old living in Papa’s library.”

Christina brushed Felicity’s hair out of her face in sympathy. “I’m sorry. It’s just so very hard to believe that a fop like Percy could be dangerous. But you’re right. If you’re forever seeing a suitor’s mistress in his snuffbox or reading his lascivious dreams in his touch, you’ll never marry. Don’t worry. We’ll find your book.”

That was the ray of hope to which Felicity clung. She’d received too many unanticipated shocks upon touching seemingly innocent objects to ever be as courageous and trusting as Christina, but she was willing to brave more than stormy seas if at the end of the journey she could find the journal.

She knew her mother would be horrified if she was aware that Felicity was seeking the recipe that would rid her of her unwanted gift, but this latest incident had convinced her that she had no other choice if she wished to be normal and marry happily, as her family desired.

“I wish our great-grandfather had not been so spiteful as to sell off the Malcolm library,” Felicity said, mourning the loss of so much knowledge.

"There could be all manner of wisdom in those books, lost on people who understand nothing of their content."

"I cannot imagine why some Lord Nesbitt would buy a bunch of old journals." Standing, Christina stretched restlessly in the confines of the tiny cabin. "Perhaps he burned them. Scots have weird notions of witchcraft."

"It's not witchcraft," Felicity said crossly. "It is wisdom learned from experience. If I can find the recipe, I can be normal like everyone else. I can live a full life. I can dance and marry and have babies."

"If that isn't magic, what is?" Christina asked.

Buried beneath layers of protective clothing, untouched by any hand except her family's, Felicity peered at her sister with eyes glistening in wonder and anticipation. *Magic* was the world around her—the one she had never experienced.

The one she would never experience if she didn't find the journal.



THIS WASN'T THE PORT WHERE THEY WERE EXPECTED.

Felicity suppressed a shiver of fear as she stood at the rail, examining the huddle of unfamiliar stone dwellings built one on top of the other up the hillside.

Dunstan and Leila wouldn't be waiting for them here.

"There's an inn," Christina whispered excitedly. "Do you think we've landed north or south of our port?"

Tucking her gloved hands beneath her heavy mantle, Felicity glanced about for the captain. She wasn't inclined to speculate when she could ask. At her glance, the captain dismissed the sailor to whom he was speaking and strode briskly toward them.

He tugged respectfully on his cap. "Apologize, my ladies, but we must repair a loose spar before taking to sea again. The delay will be a short one."

"You handled the storm superbly." Christina rewarded the man with a dazzling smile.

"Could you tell us where we are?" Felicity inquired, gently slipping in their real concern while the man was distracted.

"We were blown off course just north of our destination, not far from Edinburgh as the crow flies. We'll be repaired by nightfall, if all goes well, and be back to Northumberland tomorrow e'en."

Gadzooks, the opportunity she'd been praying for! No Dunstan, no Leila, and her destination almost within reach. Anxiety and anticipation mixed

together until Felicity thought she might be sick of them, but she had to take this step, no matter how foolish it was.

"Might we go ashore while repairs are made?" she murmured, trepidation beating in her breast. Fate or fortune had brought them just short of her goal. Could they? *Dare* they?

Christina understood at once. With sparkling eyes she gazed adoringly at the gray-haired captain. "Oh, please, might we? I've never seen Scotland, and I need solid ground beneath my feet before we set forth on open water again."

Felicity watched as her sister charmed the sensible captain into doing her bidding. Few men could resist Christina's bewitching cornflower blue eyes, much less the provocative way she toyed with her silken tresses and offered just the right flash of pearly teeth and ruby lips.

Felicity tugged her hood closer around her own limp hair, hiding eyes she knew to be as gray-blue as the cold sea. She'd never had any desire to be charming and provocative.

"If we won't sail until dawn, might we take our bags and stay at that inn?" Felicity pointed at the ramshackle structure on the road leading into town.

More eyelash flapping and tearful pleas ensued. Felicity and Christina had partnered too often in these escapades to doubt their success now. Christina flirted and charmed while Felicity covertly solicited information and plotted. Together they could spin their father and half-brothers in circles. The sea captain didn't have a chance against their wiles.

Within the hour they were aboard a rowboat bound for town. With no maid to accompany them and the promise of a single evening ashore, they could carry only what fit in one bag apiece. Felicity struggled with her doubt and fear as they approached the dock, but it was now or never. One took what opportunity presented itself or regretted it forevermore. She'd just never grabbed an opportunity so huge and frightening before.

"The captain said as to how I must stay with you, m'ladies," declared the lad who clambered with them to the dock and assisted them up. "I'll see if there's room at the inn, and ask for a maid for ye, if ye please."

The daughters of a wealthy marquess could demand anything they liked. The price they paid for that privilege was that they could never be left alone. Felicity had never argued with that fact of life, although Christina fought against it frequently. With their need to escape undetected to Edinburgh, Felicity could understand Christina's restless rebellion.

"How thoughtful of you," Christina chirruped to the cabin boy while

tugging Felicity's elbow and surreptitiously pointing to a wagon hitched to two workhorses.

Felicity wrapped her fingers around the purse of coins in her pocket. *Now or never*, she repeated over and over as they walked toward the inn and freedom.

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