

THIS MAGIC MOMENT

MAGICAL MALCOLMS #4



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PROLOGUE



NORTHUMBERLAND, 1743

"BEWARE OF THE DEEP HOLE UNDER THE BOARDS, CHRISTINA! IT'S COLD AND dark."

Christina Malcolm Childe, nine-year-old daughter of the Marquess of Hampton, hesitated on the verge of leaping to the top of a stack of old bricks and boards. She could hear her sisters and cousins running through the woods near her grandmother's home in a game of hide-and-seek—a game she fully intended to win by climbing into the oak tree above the old boards.

Seeking the source of the warning cry, she located an aura forming over the stack of bricks. Though she'd seen them often enough, auras had never spoken to her before. "Who are you?" she called in fascination, before feeling a trifle foolish talking to an indistinct rainbow of color.

To her utter amazement, the aura did what no other had ever done—brightened into visibility. She stared at the simply-dressed little girl sitting upon the old boards. She could see the outline of trees through the girl's transparent clothing.

"Who are you?" Christina repeated softly, more afraid she'd scare the apparition away than fearing her manifestation.

"Beware!" the girl cried anxiously before fading away.

Stunned, Christina stood there a while longer, watching the colors disappear.

Game forgotten, she raced back down the wooded path with a shriek of exhilaration, shouting "Mama!" at the top of her lungs.

Hermione, marchioness of Hampton, appeared immediately. Plump from the birth of her latest daughter, she still glided with speed across the grass at any call from her children, trailing scarves and hat ribbons in her wake.

Her straw hat flew off her head and tumbled into the bushes as Christina ran into her arms. "There now, child, what's the matter? Have you skinned your knee again?"

"I saw a ghost, Mama!" Christina shouted excitedly. "Come see. Maybe she'll return. She says there is a big hole in the woods!"

Unquestioningly, Hermione shouted at the bevy of nursemaids attempting to keep up with the running, laughing children. Ordering them to gather the girls out of harm's way, she took Christina's hand. "Show me where, dear."

Several of the girls escaped the maids to run after Christina, but Hermione shooed them off.

Worried at that action from her laughing mother who always had time to hug a child, Christina clung to her hand. "It's just a ghost, Mama," she tried to reassure her. "I know they're there. I see their auras all the time. I've just never seen a whole ghost before. Or *talked* to one," she added with the irrepressible excitement of discovery.

"Spirits appear for a reason, dear. Show me where you saw her."

Puzzled that her mother seemed afraid when she'd always taught them that spirits were harmless, Christina tried to remember the path she'd taken. Old rabbit paths weren't easy to follow, but she'd crashed through the shrubbery just recently, so she could find the broken twigs. She liked playing in the woods and never got lost.

"In here, Mama. See, that's where I wiggled between the tree trunks." She popped between the two slender trees and past the thicket of briars to stand in the overgrown clearing she'd roamed earlier. The bricks and boards really were the only place where a tree wasn't. She hadn't explored her grandmother's woods since she was a little girl. She hated to reveal her new hiding place and hoped the others hadn't followed.

Christina turned expectantly to her mother, then realized the marchioness couldn't pop between tree trunks and briars as she could. "It's all right, Mama. The ghost isn't here anymore."

"That's an old well, Christina," Hermione called worriedly from behind

the thicket of brush. "The boards could fall in, and we would never see you again. Come along out of there. I'll have someone fill it up before you get hurt."

"I want to stay and see if the ghost returns, Mama. May I, please? She's just about my age, and she knew my name. I've never seen a ghost before. Maybe she wants to play."

Hermione set her plump mouth in a grim line that Christina recognized much too well. Her antics tended to bring them to her mother's lips far more often than that of any of her sisters.

"Come along out of there, dear. That was most likely your great-great-great aunt Iona. She's given her warning, so you won't be seeing her again. You may read about her in the library, if you wish."

Christina didn't wish. She'd rather talk to a ghost than read about one. "Why can't I see her again?" she asked, digging in her heels. She was dying to know about an Aunt Iona who appeared as a ghost, but more than that, she wanted to talk to an apparition again.

"She was the last Malcolm to see spirits," Hermione answered. "And she was lost in these woods when she was about your age. It's quite possible that old well is where she died. If so, she has stayed here to warn you, and now that she's completed her task, she'll return to where she belongs. It's up to you to act on her warning. Come away now."

Eyes widening as she comprehended that ghosts were *real* dead people, Christina followed her mother out of the woods, casting glances over her shoulder in hopes of seeing her Aunt Iona again. Poor little girl, dying here all alone.

Christina wanted to weep at the thought that Iona had no one to play with while waiting so carefully to warn others. She hoped the little girl had gone home to her mother now that she'd done her duty, but Christina really wished she could have talked to her longer.

Just think of all the fascinating things a ghost could tell her! Her imagination could scarcely take in all the possibilities. Had it hurt to fall down the well? Had Iona been scared? Wouldn't she like to hear about her family? Did she have other secret hiding places like Christina did?

"Why can't I see more ghosts, Mama?" she asked, desperate to know how she could speak to the other auras she often saw about their home.

Hermione hesitated, threw a glance back at the woods, then shook her head. "I don't know, dear. Perhaps they come out only when you need them. Study the auras you see, and heed their warnings when they speak."

Christina didn't see the danger of a bunch of old bricks and boards. But

talking to ghosts would be exciting. She would always have friends then, and that would be a lovely gift indeed.

ONE



LONDON, MARCH, 1755

"IT'S ALL WRITTEN 'ERE IN THE MORTGAGE, YOUR GRACE, SIGNED BY YOUR LATE father—may his soul rest in peace—in his own hand." Heavily bewigged, garbed in an opulent blue satin coat with gold braiding and a waistcoat that could not button over his rich belly, Carthage waved a thick document like a sword.

The document was more dangerous than a sword if the merchant did not lie. Harrison Winston Somerset Beaufort Winchester, Duke of Sommersville, until recently styled Lord Harry, gripped his elegant walking stick behind the tails of his London-tailored coat and gritted his teeth as Carthage continued his speech.

"Yer father said I'm to take the estate in trade for the money 'e owes if 'e don't come up with the blunt by Michaelmas next," Carthage proclaimed.

Aristocratically handsome in the English manner of fair coloring, square jaw, and sturdy though not excessive height, the new duke gazed out at the soot-covered stones of the town house across the square, impatiently listening to the spiel of a man he scarcely knew. To all present the duke looked a man of leisure, a city gentleman of taste and refinement without a care in the world.

Inside, he boiled with fury, like Vesuvius prepared to erupt.

"Sommersville is *entailed*," he said coldly, not bothering to engage the eye of the merchant rattling his tarradiddle behind him. He knew Carthage owned an estate in the neighborhood of Sommersville. He could not imagine why the man thought to take advantage of the newness of Harry's role as duke to perpetrate this preposterous fraud. "The estate cannot be sold. You have no legal right to make this claim."

In truth, he knew nothing about law or rights. He simply knew that his father's estate had passed through generations of Winchesters dating back to the Conqueror's time, growing from an inconsequential barony to fifteen thousand acres of imposing ducal estates. He might not be the son raised to estate duties, but by Jove, he wouldn't be the son who lost the whole damned property his ancestors had spent generations accumulating.

Could dukes keep their title if they had no estate? he wondered irrelevantly. He'd never possessed any inclination for the title, given that it would mean losing his father, older brother, and his brother's progeny to gain it.

But that was exactly what had happened. At least, his brother had no progeny to lose. Harry almost wished Edward had an infant son to inherit. He would fare far better as legal executor than as owner of fifteen thousand prime acres of Sussex. Mortgaged acres, evidently.

The late duke might have been eccentric, but Harry had loved his father and knew he wasn't a wastrel who would gamble away his livelihood. Or hadn't been, last he'd seen of him. Maybe he should have visited Sussex more often. His father refused to come to London, and Harry kept promising to visit yet seldom did. They had their differences, as any family had, but he refused to believe his father had gone completely mad.

He stifled a yawning pit of regret beneath anger.

He wished the old man could be here now to explain this tomfoolery. And if his older brother could just walk through that wall and punch Carthage in the beak for his presumptuousness, he'd never taunt Edward again for his mulish preference for rural life.

As it was, he'd never taunt his brother again, unless he talked to his grave. Given the family predilections, he might be reduced to that soon. Losing brother and father in the same fatal accident was enough to drive a man to seeking lost souls.

But Harry had an image to uphold if he meant to keep his position in politics, so he wouldn't be talking to graves anytime soon.

"Your Grace."

Harry ignored the unctuous voice of the solicitor Carthage had brought with him in favor of gazing at the house across the square.

He was finally rewarded with the familiar sight of a golden-haired sylph dashing down the front steps, lifting her full skirt to reveal slim legs garbed in men's boots and what looked suspiciously like the glitter of a buckle below the knee of a pair of breeches. Knowing the wretch, he supposed she did it a'purpose to mock him. Instead of waving at his window, she checked over her shoulder to be certain no one followed—as someone certainly should have—then danced down the street to where a cart and horse waited.

His betrothed, Lady Christina Malcolm Childe—beautiful and cheerful as a sunny day, undisciplined as the worst-mannered street urchin. He couldn't help smiling every time he looked at her.

He allowed the smile to play on his face as he turned to face Carthage, his solicitor, and Jack—his estate steward, distant cousin, and the closest he had to a father now. "I have other business to see to, gentlemen. Jack, have the family solicitor look into this, will you? I'm certain he'll be able to straighten out these good fellows."

As the younger son raised for politics, Harry was very good at polished diplomacy. He simply wasn't familiar with his father's holdings. He didn't even know the name of the family solicitor, unless it was the fellow who sent his allowance.

Despite his unparalleled ignorance, Harry quirked his eyebrows imperiously at his company and waited for them to depart.

Instead of leaving, Carthage crossed his arms, and his black-clad solicitor dared to approach the desk. Jack nervously crushed his battered leather tricorne, not speaking a word to gainsay them. Of middling height, wiry build, and balding pate, Jack was a veritable encyclopedia of all things rural, but he was out of his element in the city.

"Your Grace," the solicitor continued. "If you will but hear us out, we can make this matter plain. Your brother never signed the entailment."

What? Harry wanted to shout, but of course, he couldn't. Dukes didn't shout. They couldn't have temper tantrums either. They raised cool eyebrows, nodded regally at those below them—which was almost everyone—and went about their business. As he should go about his. Not that he had a clue what business to go about since he'd never had any.

"I beg your pardon," Harry said with the aristocratic hauteur of his betters. "The estates have been entailed since the twelfth century. I doubt that my brother had much to do with it."

"That's just it, my. . . Your Grace," the solicitor said eagerly. "Each heir accepts the entailment with his signature upon attaining his majority. Your brother didn't sign it."

Cold sweat slid down Harry's spine, but he smiled negligently and swung his walking stick with the cool aplomb of a man without a worry in the world. Politics taught a fellow that. "Edward would have done nothing to endanger Sommersville," he said confidently. "If you will only consult with my solicitor, you will see that all is in proper order."

"It ain't, Your Grace," Carthage intruded. "Me and your brother talked it over. He didn't sign it a'purpose. He knew the old man was bankruptin' the place and that he'd need the blunt to live on. We had an agreement, me and him. We would build homes for toffs like me. It's an ideal situation. . . "

"Jack!" Harry roared, finally losing his patience at the enormous folly and presumption of the man. "Show these gentlemen out at once, and don't dare to let them in my presence again."

A lifetime of being schooled in his family's consequence allowed Harry to express his ducal disapproval. He threw open the door, prepared to call for his butler and footmen if necessary.

Apologetically, Jack bowed and gestured for their guests to depart. A footman magically appeared to escort them away. Harry knew the servants had been listening at the door again, but he could scarce blame them. Since his father never used it, he had always occupied his father's London town home. The place had been hell and chaos since the news of the double deaths of the duke and the marquess.

Jack closed the door behind their uninvited guests. Despite his kinship to one of the great families of the kingdom, Harry's cousin wore his gray hair clubbed in a black ribbon and sported the coarse cloth of country clothes. With solemn expression, he forced Harry into staying instead of running off to follow Christina. "It's time you face facts, lad."

Jack had called him "lad" since he'd been in short coats. Harry couldn't pull rank on him now. In truth, he was desperate for Jack's sage advice. His cousin had handled the family estates since before Edward's birth. Jack would never have come up to London if it hadn't been a matter of dire emergency.

With a sigh, Harry sank into his desk chair and swiveled it back and forth. "Can't you face them for me, Jack? I know nothing of tenant rent or pence per acre or what crop we should seed this spring. Tell me what agricultural bill would most likely help us, and I'll stand up before all Parliament and argue them into it, but don't make me count sheep."

"You're bankrupt, Harry. You won't have sheep to count if something isn't done soon. Carthage has it right. If you can't pay off that piece of paper of his, you'll lose everything."

The bleakness that had come over Harry ever since the first creditor had appeared on his doorstep replaced the moment of hope he'd experienced at sight of Christina. He'd never owed a farthing he couldn't pay the next day. He didn't know how it had come to this.

"My father had an income of over fifty thousand pounds per annum, Jack," he protested. "He could have built Rome and London and had blunt left to spend. Where did it all go?"

Jack held out his big palms in a helpless gesture. "He frittered it away building that monstrosity he called home. He didn't care much about the land after your mother died. You know that."

"But Edward did! He lived for counting sheep. Couldn't he have taken things in hand?"

"Lately, he caught the building bug just like your father. He wanted to build fancy new cottages and move the village out of sight. He spent more time talking to architects and landscapers than to his own tenants. Money has to be managed to grow, and no one's managed yours in many a year. We haven't seen fifty thousand in a long time."

To Harry, even half of fifty thousand was a sum so enormous that he couldn't imagine spending it in a lifetime, much less a year. Even living in the expensive town house, he'd carefully managed his two thousand pound allowance to cover his living expenses with sufficient left over to invest. His parliamentary duties for his father's pocket borough were light but offered opportunities for investment and earning a little extra. He lived quite comfortably on his income.

He didn't see how his father and brother could have spent fifty thousand in the entire course of their lives. They didn't come up to London or have wives or daughters to eat up the income with gowns and new furniture and entertaining. Harry couldn't remember the last time his father had entertained.

"I'll go to Sommersville and take a look at the books," Harry agreed wearily. "They must have snugged it away somewhere."

"I keep the books, Harry," Jack reminded him. "There's nothing to snug away and debts higher than a mountain waiting to be paid. We need cash just to buy seed and plant the fields this spring. There's none will lend us a tuppence until your father's debts have been paid."

"I'll talk to our creditors," Harry said desperately. "Maybe they can be made to wait another year. Surely, once the rents are paid in the fall—"

Jack shook his head. "We need to show them cash up front. The dowry

your betrothed brings will hold them off until the fall. You need to set a date and marry, Harry."

Marry! The new duke collapsed in his chair and swung around to gaze out the floor-length window. Christina was nowhere in sight: happy Christina, blithe Christina, addleheaded, mischievous witch Christina.

A duchess?



APRIL, 1755

"LORD HARRY HAS MADE AN APPOINTMENT TO SEE YOUR FATHER THIS afternoon," Cousin Lucinda announced excitedly, entering Christina's bedchamber without knocking.

"The Most Noble the Duke of Sommersville, you mean." Christina plopped down on the edge of the bed and began to pry off her boots. "Or His Grace, the Duke of Sommersville." She dropped the boot on the faded carpet and pried off the other. Then she shimmied out of her half-brother's breeches and stockings. "I expect he's come to cry off."

"Christina!" Shocked—not by her cousin's breeches but by her assertion—Lucinda tucked the outlandish clothes into their usual place in the bottom of the armoire. "He cannot do that. You have been betrothed for *ages*."

With the ease of expertise, Christina untied the old skirt that hid her breeches. She'd spent these past weeks exploring inside London's inner city walls looking for the ghost of Hans Holbein, the artist Lucinda most admired. It was much easier—and less conspicuous—to skulk about disguised in boy's clothing.

"Sinda, my dear, do you remember when all London whispered in astonishment after you painted the portrait of the earl's daughter in her casket—before the child died?"

Lucinda clasped her fingers and looked nervous. "I thought they'd ride me out of town on a rail. I want my work to be recognized, but not in such a fashion. I don't mean to do these things," she murmured, "but if anyone notices this latest. . . "

"You really should quit doing portraits and work anonymously," Christina chided her. "One of these days, there will be no one about to rescue you from these muddles. I'm sure I can get you out of this one if I could only

speaking with Holbein's ghost. He persuaded society that his artistic fantasies were fashionable and not dangerous."

"I'm not *dangerous*," Sinda insisted. "I didn't even know Lord Pelham. I couldn't know he would die. I just painted what I saw in my head."

"You see people die before they do. That's dangerous. I found Holbein's grave in St. Andrews, but his ghost doesn't haunt it," Christina offered. "If I only knew which house he died in, it might help. If he could draw all those macabre pictures of people dying and be celebrated for it, I don't know why you can't."

"Because he was a man and not a Malcolm," Lucinda said with a touch more acid than was her usual habit. "Besides, even if you found Holbein's ghost, he'd speak German. You have too much imagination for your own good. I thank you for your efforts, but what has any of this to do with Harry?"

"The reason you weren't run out of town last time was because Harry laughed at the gossips," Christina said matter-of-factly, unhooking her too-large bodice to slip out of the man's shirt she'd worn under it. "Harry told everyone he met that Malcolms were always good for a little amusement, and he poked fun at their 'superstition.' He is such a popular fellow that everyone was too embarrassed to condemn you after he belittled their fears."

"Oh, how thoughtful of him! I had no idea." Sinda watched Christina with curiosity. "But that means he's perfect for you."

"Sinda, you aren't *listening*. He doesn't believe in our Malcolm gifts. He takes nothing seriously. When I tell him about my ghost hunts, he calls me his 'imaginative little creature.' I vow, he asked for my hand because it kept us both from having to seriously engage anyone else. He never intended to marry me."

"But he's a *duke* now," Lucinda protested. "He must marry and raise heirs, and he's betrothed to you. He must take that seriously."

Christina dropped a lacy chemise over her head and reached for a white silk stomacher, ignoring the corset Lucinda held out. "And raise *heirs*, Sinda. Just listen to yourself and think for a change, will you?"

"Oh." Lucinda dropped to a tapestried chair seat and looked pained. "Malcolm women don't marry dukes who don't already have heirs."

"Right. Malcolms always have daughters, never sons. That's why there are dozens of girls and no little boys running around."

"Ninian had a boy," Lucinda pointed out.

"To an Ives, who are a race of demons of their own. Harry isn't an Ives. If both our mamas had nothing but girls, what are the chances I'll be any

different?" Christina stepped into her rose silk skirt and pulled the bodice sleeves over her arms.

Lucinda leapt up to fasten the hooks in back. "But he can't call off a betrothal," she wailed. "It just isn't done."

"He's a duke worth thousands of pounds a year. He can pay my father off and buy any woman who catches his fancy. Can you imagine me as a duchess? His ancestors would fall out of their noble picture frames."

Although she did her best to sound pragmatic, Christina's romantic nature wished it could be otherwise. She probably didn't love Harry, but he was the only man she'd ever met who didn't scold her for her antics. Since her favorite pastime was chasing ghosts and other creatures invisible to the normal eye, this required a degree of open-mindedness that the rest of mankind did not possess.

She and Harry didn't spend much time in each other's pockets, but they saw each other regularly at London's entertainments. One of her favorite memories was of the night at the Grosvenor's ball when she'd grown weary of the overheated, smelly ballroom and had wandered out to the garden, certain she'd seen a brownie under a tulip leaf. She didn't know if Harry had been conducting a liaison or if he'd followed her, but he'd found her sitting on a tree branch in her ball gown, waiting for the brownie to reappear.

He'd looked quite refined in his embroidered vest and plain ruffled cravat, when all others wore lace frothing from neck and cuff. Harry had a knack for dressing simply and looking richer than any other man in the vicinity. He'd leaned his elegant shoulders against the tree trunk, propped one polished shoe against the bark to display a splendidly sculpted leg in evening breeches, and twirled a rose in his fingers while he located her amid the leaves.

"I hadn't realized nightingales wore silk plumage," he said, as if he came across maidens in ball gowns sitting in trees all the time. "The yellow suits you."

"Thank you," she answered a trifle crossly. "If you came out here just to tell me that, your mission has been accomplished. You may leave now."

"And return to that noxious ballroom? Do you despise me that much to banish me there?"

She could never be cross with Harry for long. Kicking her feet so that her petticoats bobbed, she gave up her pursuit of brownies in favor of dallying with a charming man. Just looking at Harry gave her pleasure. Out of respect for the occasion he'd powdered his hair and tied it in black silk to accent the white lawn of his jabot. Since he normally wore his thick blond hair in the

same manner, it did not seem pretentious to see him so now. But it was his laughing eyes that always held her captivated.

"I cannot despise you," she replied saucily, "but you have chased off all the brownies in the garden for the evening. They know they cannot compare to your magnificence."

His deep rich laugh warmed her because she knew he wasn't laughing at her but at her description of him. Harry did not suffer from an ounce of vanity.

"I apologize, my fairy lady. I did not know I surpassed brownies in elegance. Shall I attempt to be more shabby next time we meet?"

Enchanted by his romantic gallantry, she forgot brownies and auras and any of the other things with which she entertained herself. Instead, when he stepped up on the bench to help her down, she held out her arms to him and allowed him to swing her from her perch.

Standing there on the bench beside him, she probably whispered something unutterably foolish in reply, but Harry wasn't listening anymore than she was. He kept his hands on her waist, and she kept her hands on his shoulders, and it had seemed the most natural thing in the world for her to lift her face and for him to tilt his head down and for their mouths to come together.

It had been bliss, pure bliss. His lips had been soft and warm and respectful, but she'd opened her eyes and seen the red aura of his passion heating when she returned his kiss with all the fervency she possessed. He'd stepped away then, just at the moment when she thought to learn more. Always cautious was Harry.

She'd spent many a night reliving that kiss, wondering where it might have taken them had they been anyone else but two people who preferred independence to the marital state.

"Christina! You haven't heard a word I said."

Jolted back from her lovely daydream, Christina ran her hands over her face and into her hair, spinning to find the looking glass. Her lamentably light hair flew every which way, and she hastened to pin it into a respectable coiffure.

"If you'd wear a corset, you'd have a smaller waist than any lady in town," Lucinda observed with her critical artist's eye.

"In other words, I'm skinny and you'd have me skinnier. Isn't it enough that I'm tall enough to be a boy?"

"A short boy," her cousin scoffed. "What will you do if Harry calls off the betrothal?"

"Congratulate him on his intelligence, of course." Having spent the better part of her life stumbling into one adventure after another, Christina had learned how to put on a brave face for all occasions. She just didn't think she'd ever faced such a sudden and crushing pain in her heart before.

Harry was hers. He'd always been hers. Even as youngsters, he used to take her on pony rides in the park. She'd thought when they grew old and tired of playing, they'd eventually marry and settle down into old age together. She couldn't imagine doing the same with anyone else. She was twenty-two years old and well beyond looking for another mate. Her rosy picture of the future had been knocked cock-a-hoop, and insecurity crushed her usual optimism. What would become of her?

Putting on a brave face, she dismissed her foolish fears with a cocky smile. "I shall tell him I'll dance at his wedding and ask who the lucky duchess might be."

Christina's father was a marquess, and Lucinda's father was a duke—both men having taken Malcolm women as their second wives after their first wives gave them heirs. She and Lucinda and their sisters and cousins traveled in noble circles and were not mightily impressed by titles.

But they were expected to marry well and wisely. As a respectable second son of a duke, Harry had not been a grand match, but a sensible one as far as everyone was concerned. Christina's boyishness didn't "take" with most gentlemen, no matter how her would-be suitors had pretended otherwise. She could see it in their auras that they thought her foolish or sought her dowry out of avarice. Harry was the only man who adored her for herself.

And for his own sake, she would have to let him go.

Defiantly fighting the hot moisture of tears, she powdered her nose and faced the looking glass. She might disparage her appearance, but the rose silk over pocket panniers gave her confidence that she didn't come off too badly. She teased a little curl down her neck from her hairpins and pronounced herself satisfied.

"I think if I painted you now, it would be in full battle regalia," Lucinda whispered. "Would you prefer broadsword or longbow?"

Christina had no need for reply. A knock on the door warned she had been summoned. She hugged Lucinda for courage. "Don't paint anything dangerous until I return."

Back straight, chin up, she sailed out of her chamber before the footman could even ask for her presence.

The servant raced down the stairs ahead of her and opened the door to

her father's study, announcing her to the occupants as if this were a grand ball and she the lady of the hour. Christina winked at him as she swept past.

Inside the shadowed study, two men waited. Her father sat at his desk, his fingertips pressed together in a steeple across his lips, disguising his expression. Christina read an odd uncertainty in his aura. Her father was never uncertain.

Her wayward gaze flew to Harry.

He stood silhouetted against the partially opened drapery. Until that stolen kiss, she'd been more aware of Harry's laughter and voice and eyes than the hard body beneath his elegant clothes. But now she was aware of his long, muscular legs, and the wide-shouldered strength of him. He wasn't overly tall or bulky, but in her eyes, he was the epitome of an elegant, idle gentleman. A perfect match for her. Until now.

"Christina, the duke would like a word with you. Since you've been betrothed these last five years and have behaved with all due respect, I'll trust the two of you alone."

She hardly saw her father depart. A ray of sun slipping past the heavy drapery revealed a Harry she had never seen before. His normally amiable features seemed etched in harshness today. His laughing lips pressed together in a thin line. She'd never noticed the squareness of his jaw or the determination in the lift of his chin. His eyes no longer danced but appeared shadowed and cold.

"It's time we marry, Christina."

She blinked. That wasn't Harry's voice. That was some stranger's. Harry's voice was chocolatey warm or laughingly charming. This man sounded cold and distant and—commanding?

She searched his aura, finding the familiar hues of passion and sincerity but grayer somehow than she remembered. She couldn't always identify the patterns, but given the sound of his voice, she'd say his aura was currently colored with icy resolve. Definitely not a Harry color.

"We must do no such thing, Harry," she scoffed, speaking to him as she had always done and not as the duke he was. "You are a wealthy duke now, and you'll need a regal duchess to bear you heirs. I was sorry to hear about your father and brother. Such a dreadful accident!"

She had longed to go to him when she'd heard the news, but his family had been safely interred and his door wreathed in black before she'd known of the deaths. She'd been given no opportunity to offer condolences beyond sending a formal note of sympathy.

"That damned monstrosity of a house my father worked on ought to be pulled down," Harry growled. "It isn't safe."

"Walking on parapets is seldom safe," Christina said. "It is unfortunate that they were together when the stones gave way."

The black of his mourning flickered darker, but Harry dismissed her comment with a wave of his gloved hand. "We cannot undo what's done. We're betrothed, Christina, and I find I need a wife. I've obtained the license. It can be done on the morrow."

Blinking, not certain she had heard him right, Christina dropped abruptly to the wing chair beside the door. "Tomorrow? That's not possible." Her startled heart beat against her chest like a trapped bird. She had been prepared for anything but this.

"Of course it is," he said angrily. "It's just a matter of standing before an altar and repeating our vows. All the rest was done years ago."

She didn't like the sound of his voice or the dark colors ruling his aura. Had some demon possessed him? The Harry she knew would have gone down on bended knee and pressed kisses to her hand and said sweet words just to tease her.

This one was ordering her about as if she were his horse, dismissing the importance of marriage vows as if they were an agreement to buy a new coat. "We agreed," she whispered. "We did not wish to wed until we were old and gray. What has changed, Harry?"

"That's rather obvious, isn't it?" he asked with an edge of desperation. "I'm the last of my father's line. I need an heir to carry on the title and to inherit the estates."

"But I can't give you that." She hated the wretched sound of her voice, but she wasn't accustomed to this pain eating up her insides. She had never thought to marry as a brood mare. She'd hoped for romance and love and happiness. Or at least a good friend.

This Harry wasn't even the friend she knew. At her refusal, he looked almost dangerous, a golden blade prepared to strike, although she wasn't certain of the direction he would take if he did.

"It's not impossible." He dismissed her objection with scorn. "Your cousin had a son. We'll simply keep trying until it happens, that's all. We've wasted too much time as it is."

Oh no, this wasn't right. This wasn't right at all. Panic fluttered about in her chest, replacing the pain. She wasn't fond of babies. She'd never thought much about having them because she'd thought they'd wait until they were

very old to marry. How naïve of her. But even then, there were ways of preventing too many babies—

But this stranger who inhabited Harry's body didn't seem to care if she wanted them or not. Without his cooperation—

Oh dear. That could be ugly. She might be a maiden, but she knew all about lovemaking and babies. She had married sisters and cousins after all. And an entire Malcolm library to peruse when she was curious. And she was always curious.

There was lovemaking, and there was animal mating. She wanted a husband who respected her and made glorious love to her. She didn't want a husband who rutted to make screaming infants whether she wanted them or not. Her soul filled with horror at the thought.

"I think we need time to consider this," she said placatingly. "This is very sudden."

"We've been betrothed for years, Christina," he said impatiently. "That's time enough. Your father has agreed to a ceremony in the morning. I know your mother will want her frills and whatnot, but I've been assured that can be accomplished easily. All you need do is show up."

Her romantic vision of wearing a trailing medieval wedding gown, walking up a grassy aisle with doves fluttering beneath a canopy of trees, shattered into crumbling bits. She blinked away a tear and sought for some way out.

She didn't want out. She wanted her old Harry back.

"I won't show up," she said defiantly, standing again. "You know that if I decide to disappear, I can."

"Dammit, Christina, grow up! This is neither the time nor place to play games." Pushing back his long coat, he shoved his hands into his pockets and glared at her. "I'll have you locked in your room and post a guard outside your window if I must, but we will be married on the morrow. I'm holding you to your promise."

Only that flicker of uncertainty in his grim aura gave her courage to stand up to him. "Then we will marry tomorrow and you can court me after."

"What?"

Hurriedly, before he could throttle her, Christina added, "I want a husband who loves me. You've spent these last years dabbling with politics, making the rounds of clubs and gaming halls, dancing with every beautiful female in the kingdom. You've never courted *me*. How can you expect me to be a wife when I'm not even certain you know I exist? You don't even

believe in ghosts," she added for good measure. "Or that I can see them. A man who loved me would believe in me."

"That is the most ridiculous. . . ." Harry paced in front of the window, his heels smacking loudly against the parquet floor. He drove his hand into his thick gold hair as if he'd grab his head to be certain it stayed on. He halted and swung to face her. "What blackmail is this?"

"It isn't blackmail. It's common sense," she said indignantly. "I want you to make love to me, not make babies. Until you can do that, I suggest we forget about marriage."

"Make love. . . ." His voice trailed off as he stepped closer. "One can't do one without the other."

His greater breadth loomed menacingly, and Christina knew it was now or never. She had to be very persuasive or he'd ignore her wishes and ruin everything. "One can, but I'll not ask it of you if you'll only give me time to make you love me."

She thought it must be shock that held him silent for a full minute. He stood half a head taller than she, and she was intimately aware of his strength to her weakness. He was a duke. She was promised to him. He could do anything he liked.

"What makes you think I don't love you?" he finally asked in a voice somewhat less than a low roar.

"Instead of yellow and purple, your aura is all muddy blue and green right now. I don't see one iota of love in it." She crossed her hands across the front of her skirt and waited.

He growled. He walked away. He pounded the desk.

She didn't flinch.

He swung around, glared, and radiated outrage and frustration. "Two weeks," he said. "I give you two weeks to make me love you, and then you'll be my wife in all the ways a wife should be."

He strode for the door. "I'll see you in church tomorrow."

Christina expelled her pent-up breath as the door slammed. She had two weeks to find the real Harry—the only man she could ever love. What happened if he was truly lost?

Could she call the marriage off once the vows were said?

Would she want to?

This Magic Moment
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