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opening extract from

A Most Improper Magick

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A Most Improper Magick – extract

Papa never talked about Mama. It wasn't until he'd married Stepmama, though, that I'd realised Mama had been a disgrace. It was the first time I'd ever felt a real connection with her. I was always in trouble, too.

Stepmama always said that it was a great trial to be the wife of a clergyman, especially one with such a poor income as Papa. She only hated it for the lack of money, though, which meant the lack of fashionable clothing, London town houses and scandalous gossip at close hand. It must have been even harder for Mama to be a clergyman's wife, since she was a witch.

Elissa wouldn't talk about Mama any more – she had been seven years old when Mama died, but the memories still made her too melancholy, she said. Angeline told me once, though, about the disaster that happened when Papa's patron, Squire Briggs, was invited to tea at the vicarage, two months before I was born. Angeline was only five at the time, but she said she had never forgotten it.

"Mama got distracted as she poured the tea," Angeline told me. A smirk pulled at her full lips as she remembered. "Papa and Elissa were both appalled, but I thought it was hilarious."

"What did she do? Did she spill the tea?"

"Oh, no. Nothing like that." Angeline leaned close to whisper the words in my ear, even though Papa and Stepmama were safely occupied with the accounting books in the next room. "Mama was trying so hard to concentrate on making polite conversation with Squire Briggs, because it was so important for Papa's future, that she forgot to use her hands to pour the tea!"

"You mean–"

"The teapot just rose up in the air all on its own and poured for everyone while she talked. You should have seen Squire Briggs's face! He turned purple and started to choke. And Mama still didn't realise..." Angeline bit her lip, holding back a laugh. She was meant to be tutoring me in French, as a punishment for both of us, so we couldn't let Stepmama hear us giggling together.

"Poor Mama," Angeline said. "She was trying so hard to help Squire Briggs stop choking, and Papa started stuttering hopelessly, he was so horrified, and that teapot just kept on pouring absolutely perfectly, without a single spill, until Papa lunged forward and grabbed it himself, and then the tea spilled all over his lap and the floor and... I laughed so hard, I thought I would die."

"And then what happened?"

Angeline's face hardened. "After that, Squire Briggs wouldn't come back to tea again as long as Mama was alive. He had already offered to give Papa a second living, but after that teatime, he changed his mind. And Mama..." Angeline looked away, setting her jaw. "Mama wept for a week."

I shivered in the oak tree now, remembering Angeline's story as I looked at my mother's lovely, looping handwriting.

There used to be a miniature portrait of Mama in the sitting room, when I was a little girl, but Stepmama had locked it away with the rest of Mama's things, magical or otherwise, in a cabinet none of us were allowed to open. There's no use in reminding the neighbours of old problems, she'd said. She had already cut down all of Mama's

roses from the back garden by then; they were a scandal too. Apparently, roses weren't supposed to be able to bloom red all year long. But I had loved them anyway. My sisters used to take me out to sit underneath the oak tree on fine days when I was little, and the rich, sweet fragrance of the roses had filled the air with magic.

I hadn't remembered Mama's roses for a long time.

I took a deep breath and turned the page.

I have decided to begin as I mean to go on, no matter how Ominous the Dangers, my mother had written. Tho' it must be kept Secret from my closest companions and even my own Colleagues, I cannot let Ignorance, Prejudice or Pride hold me back any longer from exercising all the Talents I have been given. I shall teach myself first how to enchant Inanimate Objects.

Well, I understood why she'd meant to keep her witchcraft a secret – if it hadn't been for the fact that she'd married a clergyman, she would have been completely cast out of Society for it, and as it was, she had still caused a scandal. Marrying her had ruined Papa's career. But that was because she hadn't kept the magic a secret after all. From all the stories I'd heard, she hadn't even tried very hard. Surely someone who really wanted to keep her witchcraft secret wouldn't have blatantly enchanted the roses in her garden, would she? And what on earth had she meant by "colleagues"? Mama's family might not have been wealthy, but she had definitely been a lady – and ladies, as Elissa was always ready to remind me, did not work for a living, no matter how dire their circumstances.

I let out a long breath and turned the page. I didn't have time to waste worrying about any of that, no matter how tempting it might be. I was after my sister's secrets right now, not my mother's – and enchanting inanimate objects, like Mama's self-pouring teapot, wouldn't get Angeline her dowry.

I skipped through the pages of Mama's first failures and final successes as she experimented with creating her own spells. She'd learned more and more difficult tricks as she'd progressed, but nothing practical like turning copper to gold. Half of Mama's spells were meant to make herself look prettier or to make her twice-turned, hand-me-down gowns look new. I even found a love spell – and next to it, circled and surrounded by tiny hearts, a name: George. My father's name.

I flicked quickly past that page, feeling my cheeks heat up.

It had been at least an hour since I had begun to read, and the sun had risen high in the sky above me. I couldn't see the gig in the distance yet, but I knew I didn't have much time left. I flipped faster and faster through the pages.

I was concentrating so hard, I didn't even notice the footsteps coming towards me from the graveyard.