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Opening extract from

# A Tangle of Magicks

Written by

## Stephanie Burgis

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*The UNLadylike Adventures of Kat Stephenson*

Book Two:

# A Tangle of Magicks

Stephanie Burgis



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FOR MY GRANDMA, SANDRA BURGIS, WHO HAS ALWAYS UNDERSTOOD THE IMPORTANCE OF CIRCULATING LIBRARIES AND EXCITING NOVELS; AND FOR MY SON, WHO TEACHES ME ABOUT WILD MAGIC EVERY DAY.



# CHAPTER ONE



MY BROTHER CHARLES WAS A HOPELESS GAMESTER, A RIDICULOUS over-sleeper and the one sibling too lazy to take part in any family arguments, no matter how exasperating our sisters might have been (and usually were).

But he had one shining virtue as an older brother: he was infinitely persuadable.

"You do know, Kat," he whispered, "Stepmama will murder you for this if she finds out." He was yawning so hard that most people wouldn't have been able to decipher his words, but I had long experience. Ever since Charles had been sent home from Oxford in disgrace, he'd resorted to sleep as his safest escape from family obligations. Even as he yawned and complained, though, he was obediently following me down the creaking wooden stairs to the ground floor of our family's vicarage.

It was simply too much trouble for Charles to hold out against anyone who didn't give up the first time he said "no".

And I – as all three of my siblings could testify – was definitely stubborn enough for the task.

It was still dark outside and the candle in my hand was the only light in the stairwell. I held it up high for Charles's sake and carefully stepped over the spots on the stairs where the ancient wood was beginning to rot.

"Stepmama won't murder me," I whispered back, "because she won't find out. Anyway, she'll be too busy preparing for the wedding to bother with either of us when she wakes up."

"Huh." As usual, he didn't bother to pursue the argument… which was just as well, since nothing could have changed my mind.

In three hours, my oldest sister was going to be married. In four hours – five at the most, if the wedding breakfast took longer than expected – Elissa would be gone, and all our lives would change forever. Even when she came back for visits, from now on, she would always bring her husband with her – and as much as I liked her sweet-tempered fiancé, Mr Collingwood, it could never be the same. They would be sharing a bedroom, for one thing. That meant I wouldn't be free to slip into Elissa's room any time in the day or night to get comfort or advice or help against Stepmama… or even just to let Elissa fuss over me, the way she had ever since I had been born and our mother had died, leaving my two older sisters to raise me.

For all that I'd complained over the years about Elissa's prissiness and high-handedness, her lectures on propriety, and the fact that she never seemed to realise I was twelve years old and not a baby anymore… well, somehow, none of that seemed to matter now.

I'd woken up this morning at four o'clock and lain staring into the darkness of my attic bedroom for a full

hour before I'd given up and come down to pull Charles out of bed. What we were about to do would have horrified Elissa to the depths of her ladylike soul – but if I didn't do it, I just might explode.

I stepped off the last stair and breathed a sigh of relief. We hadn't woken anyone else. "Come on," I whispered. "Mrs Watkins won't be in the kitchen yet. No one will hear us there."

Shrugging, Charles padded after me. He was still wearing his dressing gown, nightcap and slippers. His blonde hair, the same buttery shade as Elissa's and (before it greyed) Papa's, stuck out in wild tufts from beneath the cap – he'd been sleeping face down when I'd shaken him awake. I didn't understand how he'd even been able to breathe in that position. Then again, I hadn't understood much at all about Charles ever since Stepmama had first arrived in our lives five years ago and sent him off to Harrow to become a gentleman.

He might have come back from boarding school a different person, but at least one good thing had come of it: he had developed some very useful skills.

The kitchen fire was banked and the big room was chilly. I built up the fire, lit two more tallow candles against the darkness that pressed in from the narrow windows and got Charles to help me push the heavy wooden table to one side.

"Excellent." I stepped into the space we'd cleared and raised my fists in the way he'd taught me over a year ago, the first time he was sent home from Oxford for bad behaviour. Above me, bunches of herbs and meat dangled from the ceiling, waiting to be used in the grand wedding breakfast later this morning, along with the covered dishes already sitting on the kitchen table. I tried not to think about any of them, or what they meant.

*Elissa*... My throat wanted to choke up. I didn't let it. Instead, I kicked off my slippers and bounced on the pads of my feet on the cold floor. "Come on, then!"

"If I must." Charles rolled out his shoulders and started to raise his own fists into position. Then he dropped them. "You know, it's too early for fisticuffs. And if either of us has a bruise at the wedding service, Stepmama really will pitch a fit."

"Charles..." I fixed him with my most imperious glare. I'd learned it from Angeline, our other sister, who was an expert. "You gave me your word of honour."

"And I'm not backing out," he said hastily. "If you insist on fisticuffs, that's what we'll do. But what about wrestling this time instead?"

"Wrestling?" I lowered my fists, thinking.

Charles had taught me fisticuffs and fencing last year, and Frederick Carlyle – officially Papa's latest Classics student, but unofficially the only man in England who could match and measure up to Angeline – had taught me how to play billiards two weeks ago. Somehow, though, I'd never even considered adding wrestling to my list of useful and illicit skills.

"No bruises," Charles said, "and no arguments."

"Fine." I dropped my arms to my sides. "Show me."

"You'd better be the one to do it, not me." He was frowning. "If anything goes wrong... erm. Look here, I'll tell you what to do. Come at me... yes, like that... grab me, here and here" – he put my hands in place – "and then twist with your hips. No, wait! I mean..." He turned bright red. "Dash it. If Stepmama had heard me say that– "

"I know I have hips, Charles." I rolled my eyes. "Just because ladies aren't supposed to use the word—"

"Ladies aren't even supposed to understand the word,"

Charles muttered. "Not that you'd care about that, obviously."

"Obviously," I agreed. "So I twist, like this—"

"No, no, you aren't doing it right. Like this..." We changed positions, and he showed me, moving slowly. "If you do it with enough force, you can throw your opponent over your hip. See, first you shift them off balance, and then—"

"What on earth is going on here?"

Angeline spoke from the doorway. I slipped as I turned in Charles's arms. And Charles, caught in mid-demonstration, panicked.

He twisted with his hips – and I launched through the air.

"Oh, dash it!"

Sometimes I forgot how strong my hapless older brother really was. I flew across the kitchen, heading straight for the big wooden table. I gritted my teeth, preparing to hit it...

But instead, my body froze in mid-air as Angeline whispered something under her breath and the scent of fresh lilacs filled the room. I hung, unmoving, three feet from the ground and a full ten inches from the table.

Sometimes it was useful to have a practising witch in the family.

"Brilliant," Angeline said. "Simply brilliant, both of you. Just what Elissa would have wanted on her wedding day."

And sometimes it was only irritating.

"Oh, give over." I stuck out my tongue at her. "Elissa wasn't going to find out."

"Not even when Charles threw you straight onto the dough for all of Mrs Watkins's pastries?" She nodded at the covered dishes on the table.

Charles, of course, was already sidling towards the door, trying to avoid eye contact with either of us.

"It wouldn't have happened if you hadn't startled him," I said. "Anyway, Elissa would be just as shocked to see you use magic. Remember how you told her and Stepmama that you wouldn't cast any more spells, in case someone else found out? Witchcraft is much more improper than a bit of wrestling."

"Is that so?" Angeline crossed her arms and raised one eyebrow. "Fine. I won't cast any more spells, then. Not a single one." She looked pointedly at me as I hung, horizontal in mid-air. "After all, I wouldn't want to shock your delicate sensibilities."

"Look here, Angeline, really, you know I couldn't care less about any of that magical nonsense, but..." Looking desperate, Charles edged closer to the doorway that Angeline was blocking. "If a fellow could only be allowed to get some sleep, for once, in this madhouse..."

Angeline didn't spare him so much as a glance as she stepped aside. "Well, Kat?"

I sighed. "Fine. Don't put me down. I don't need your help anyway."

Angeline had been the one to find our real mother's old magic books, with all of Mama's spells inside, the magic that had made Mama such a scandal to Society. The talent for witchcraft might pass to every one of a witch's children, but Elissa was far too proper to ever even consider making use of it, Charles probably didn't even know he had it and Angeline wasn't about to share Mama's magic books with me. A witch without any spells to cast was as powerless as any proper lady; and with Angeline hogging both of Mama's books, I didn't know a single spell that could help me now.

But Mama hadn't only been a witch. She had also been something much rarer, something most people had never even heard of: a secret Guardian, with the natural power and responsibility to protect Society from malevolent magic-users. Only one of a Guardian's children ever inherited their parent's powers. Unfortunately for my sister, that child was me.

And a Guardian didn't need spells to work magic.

I closed my eyes and summoned up the familiar, tingling pressure. It rose through my chest and into my head, until it was all I could feel. Electricity crackled in my ears. With my eyes closed, I *looked* for Angeline's spell and found it.

*"NO!"* I hissed, using all my Guardian strength.

Angeline's spell snapped.

I fell three feet onto the ground, twisting as I fell, and landed hard on my back.

"Ouch! Ouch, ouch, ouch..." I sat up, massaging my shoulders. "There has to be a better way to do that."

"And I'm sure you'll learn one in time." Angeline sighed and crossed the kitchen to me. Her voice was as acerbic as ever, but she knelt down beside me and rubbed my back exactly where I needed it. "Haven't you started lessons with that Order of yours yet?"

"Not yet." I leaned back into her warmth, luxuriating in the feeling of her strong fingers working out the knots. "Mr Gregson says it should all be sorted out soon. I just need to be initiated first. For some reason it's taking longer than expected."

Well, the truth was, I knew exactly why it was taking so long. But I had never told Angeline the whole story.

Mama had been a Guardian, it was true. But when she had met and fallen in love with Papa, she'd been so desperate

that she'd turned to witchcraft to help win him. If there was anyone who disapproved of witchcraft more than the propriety-obsessed leaders of Society, it was the Order of the Guardians, who blamed witches for Society's hatred of all magic. Mama had been expelled from the Order for her spell-casting, and it had nearly broken her heart.

As soon as I was a full member of the Order, I was determined to restore her reputation and knock aside their stupid prejudices… but that meant being initiated into the Order in the first place, which was turning out to be harder than I had expected. Mama had died young, but her enemies within the Order hadn't.

"Oh well." Angeline gave my back one last firm pat and stood up. "Come along, Kat. As long as you're awake, you can help me get the church ready."

"Ugh." All the dread-filled weight I'd been trying to ignore descended straight back onto my shoulders with her reminder. "Do we have to?" I looked around the room for distraction, anything to put off the inevitable. "Couldn't we make some toast first? Or—"

"There's no time for any of that," Angeline said, and brushed off her skirts. She was already wearing a morning dress of rose-coloured muslin, and she looked as cool and collected as if it were any ordinary day, not one of the most important days of our sister's life. "Why do you think I came down so early? You want Elissa's wedding to be perfect, don't you?"

"Of course I do." Sighing, I pushed myself up off the floor. "But if you mean we have to spend hours hanging up ribbons and lace and… Wait." I frowned as I caught sight of the kitchen windows. "It's still dark outside. You hate early mornings. Even Stepmama isn't out of bed yet. It can't be time for wedding preparations."

"And that's exactly why I'm up." Angeline filched a pair of apples from the bushel on one of the sideboards and tossed one to me. "You wouldn't want me casting any spells where other people might see them, would you? Since you're such a slave to propriety?"

"Well, if you put it that way..." I bit a chunk out of my apple and grinned at my older sister. "I suppose I'd better come along and keep an eye on you, after all. Just to keep everything proper."