



A Most Improper Magick

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*The ^ Ladylike
Adventures of
Kat Stephenson*



*Stephanie
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CHAPTER ONE

1803



I WAS TWELVE YEARS OF AGE WHEN I CHOPPED OFF MY HAIR, dressed as a boy and set off to save my family from impending ruin.

I made it almost to the end of my front garden.

“Katherine Ann Stephenson!” My oldest sister Elissa’s outraged voice pinned me like a dagger as she threw open her bedroom window. “What on earth do you think you’re doing?”

Curses. I froze, still holding my pack slung across my shoulder. I might be my family’s best chance of salvation, but there was no expecting either of my older sisters to understand that. If they’d trusted me in the first place, I wouldn’t have had to run away in the middle of the night, like a criminal.

The garden gate was only two feet ahead of me. If I hurried...

“I’m going to tell Papa!” Elissa hissed.

Behind her, I heard groggy, incoherent moans of outrage – my other sister, Angeline, waking up.

Elissa was the prissiest female ever to have been born. But Angeline was simply impossible. If they really did wake the whole household and Papa came after me in the gig...

I'd planned to walk to the closest coaching inn, six miles away, and catch the dawn stagecoach to London. If Papa caught up with me first, the sad, disappointed looks I'd have to endure from him for weeks afterwards would be unbearable. And the way Stepmama would gloat over my disgrace – *the second of our mother's children to be a disappointment to the family...*

I gritted my teeth together as I turned and trudged back towards the vicarage.

Angeline's voice floated lazily through the open window, "What were you shouting about?"

"I was not shouting!" Elissa snapped. "Ladies never shout."

"You could have fooled me," said Angeline. "I thought the house must have been burning down."

I pushed the side door open just in time to hear my brother, Charles, bellow, "Would everyone be quiet? Some of us are trying to sleep!"

"What? What?" My father's reedy voice sounded from his bedroom at the head of the stairs. "What's going on out there?"

My stepmother's voice overrode his, "For heaven's sake, make them be quiet, George! It's past midnight. You cannot let them constantly behave like hoydens. Be firm, for once!"

I groaned and closed the door behind me.

Like it or not, I was home.

I squeezed through the narrow kitchen and tiptoed up the

rickety staircase that led to the second floor. When I was a little girl and Mama's influence still lingered in the house, each of the stairs had whispered my name as I stepped onto them and they never let me trip. Now, the only sound they made was the telltale creak of straining wood.

The door to Papa and Stepmama's room swung open as I reached the head of the first flight of stairs. I stopped, resigned.

"Kat?" Papa blinked out at me, peering through the darkness. He held a candle in his hand. "What's amiss?"

"Nothing, Papa," I said. "I just went downstairs for some milk."

"Oh. Well." He coughed and ran a hand over his faded nightcap. "Er, your stepmother is quite right. You should all be in bed and quiet at this hour."

"Yes, Papa." I hoisted the heavy sack higher on my shoulder. "I'm just going back to bed now."

"Good, good. And the others?"

"I'll tell them to be quiet," I said. "Don't worry."

"Good girl." He reached out to pat my shoulder. A frown crept across his face. "Ah... is something wrong, my dear?"

"Papa?"

"I don't mean to be critical, er, but your clothing seems... it appears... well, it does look a trifle unorthodox."

I glanced down at the boy's breeches, shirt and coat that I wore. "I was too cold for a nightgown," I said.

"But..." He frowned harder. "There's something about your hair, I don't quite know what—"

My stepmother's voice cut him off. "Would you please stop talking and come back to bed, George? I cannot be expected to sleep with all this noise!"

"Ah. Right. Yes, of course." Papa gave a quick nod and turned away. "Sleep well, Kat."

“And you, sir.”

I tiptoed up the last five steps that led to the second-floor landing. The doors to Charles’s room and my sisters’ room were both closed. If I was very, very lucky...

I leaped towards the ladder that led up to the attic where I slept.

No such luck. The door to my sisters’ room jerked open.

“Come in here now!” Elissa said. I couldn’t make out her features in the darkness, but I could tell that she had her arms crossed.

Oh, Lord.

“Ladies don’t cross their arms like common fishwives,” I whispered, quoting one of Elissa’s own favourite maxims as I stalked past her into their room.

Elissa slammed the door behind her.

“Give us light, Angeline,” she said. “I want to see her face.”

Angeline was already lighting a candle. When the tinder finally caught and the candle lit, the sound of my sisters’ gasps filled the room.

I crossed my arms over my chest and glared right back at them.

“You – you–” Elissa couldn’t even speak. She collapsed onto her side of the bed, gasping and pressing one slender hand to her heart.

Angeline shook her head, smirking. “Well, that’s torn it.”

“Don’t use slang,” Elissa said. Being able to give one of her most common reproofs seemed to revive her spirits a little; the colour came flooding back into her face. With her fair hair and pale skin, I could always tell her mood from her face, and right now, she was as horrified as I’d ever seen her. She took a deep, deep breath. “Katherine,” she

said, in a voice that was nearly steady. “Would you care to explain yourself to us?”

“No,” I said. “I wouldn’t.” I lifted my chin, fighting for height. I was shorter than either of my sisters – a curse in situations like this.

“What is there to explain?” Angeline said. “It’s obvious. Kat’s finally decided to run off to the circus, where she belongs.”

“I do not!”

“No?” Angeline’s full lips twisted as she looked at me. “With that haircut, I don’t know where else you hoped to go. Perhaps if you hid behind all the other animals—”

“Shut up!” I lunged for her straight across the room.

Their bed was in the way. I hit my knees on it, then flung aside my sack and crawled across the bed to get to her. Angeline’s taunting laughter made my vision blur with rage. I landed on her, punching blindly, and kept on fighting even after she’d shoved me down onto the bed and wrapped her arm around my neck, half strangling me.

“Stop it!” Elissa shrieked.

Something heavy hit the other side of the wall: Charles had thrown something to signify his displeasure. Across the stairwell, a door opened. Footsteps approached. A firm knock sounded on the door.

We all froze. We knew that knock.

“You’ve done it now, haven’t you?” Angeline whispered into my ear.

“Cow,” I whispered back.

“What’s happening in there?” our stepmother demanded, through the door.

Angeline shoved me off the bed and onto the floor. When I tried to stand up, she put one hand on my newly short hair and pushed me straight back down. “Stay where

you are!” she hissed. “She mustn’t see you like this.” She looked across the bed at Elissa. “You try to fob her off.”

Elissa was already moving for the door, her face suddenly angelic and serene. “I’m coming, Stepmama,” she called. “Just a moment.” She stopped just short of the door and whispered, “Put that light out! Quick!”

Angeline blew the candle out and threw herself back into bed, pulling the covers up to her chin.

I huddled on the cold floor in the darkness while Elissa opened the door.

“What do you think—”

“We are so sorry for the noise, Stepmama,” Elissa murmured. “Angeline had a fright and fell out of bed.”

“All that screaming...” Stepmama’s voice drew nearer. I could imagine what was happening, even though I couldn’t see it: she was poking her sharp nose into the room, peering around in hopes of mischief. It was her never-ending quest: to prove to Papa how incorrigible we all were. Just like our mother had been.

“Angeline had a terrible nightmare,” Elissa said. I was amazed by how well my saintly sister could lie when she was properly motivated.

“Perhaps I should come in and look things over,” Stepmama said.

“Ohhh...” Angeline moaned from the bed. Angeline, unlike Elissa, never found any difficulty in lying. “Oh, my poor stomach...”

Stepmama sighed and started forward. “If you’re ill, I’d better—”

“I was ill,” Angeline said. “All over the floor.”

“Oh.” Stepmama came to an abrupt halt. “Where—?”

“Do watch where you step,” Elissa said sweetly. “I haven’t had a chance to clean it up quite yet, so—”

Stepmama's feet shuffled back hastily. "Well," she said, "I'm sure that you'll feel better after a good night's sleep, Angeline. But see that you girls take care of the mess first. And no more noise!"

The door closed and her footsteps moved away. I stayed frozen until her bedroom door had opened and closed again on the other side of the stairwell. Then I let out all my held breath in a sigh of pure relief. As I leaned back, my right hand brushed against something completely unexpected: two familiar, oddly shaped books hidden just beneath the bed.

I knew those books. They weren't supposed to be here. They were supposed to be locked away with the rest of our mother's keepsakes, where Papa and Stepmama hoped we would all forget that they had ever existed. Just like Mama herself.

I started to pick them up, then stopped. Now wasn't the time to ask either of my sisters provocative questions.

"Phew." I stood up and stretched to relieve my cramped muscles as Angeline relit the candle. "Well, I'd better go up to bed and sleep now, as Stepmama said, so—"

"Don't even think about it," said Angeline. Her arm shot out and grabbed the back of my jacket, pinning me to the side of the bed. "Open up her sack, Elissa. Let's see what Kat was planning to take away with her."

"I'm not a thief," I muttered.

Angeline threw me a look of amused contempt. "I never thought you were, ninny. I just wondered what sort of practical arrangements you'd made to prepare for your journey."

"Journey?" Elissa said. Her voice came out in a gasp. "What journey?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake," said Angeline. "What else did

you think she was doing, dressed up as a boy and heading out in the middle of the night? She was running away, weren't you, Kat?"

I gritted my teeth and stood silent under her grasp.

"You couldn't – why—" Elissa collapsed onto the bed. "Whatever would make you do such a thing? How could you even think—?"

"I didn't have a choice!" The words burst out between my gritted teeth. "It was the only way I could stop you from being an idiot!"

"Me?" Elissa stared at me.

"If you're trying to fool us with one of your wild stories—," Angeline began.

I glowered at her. "And you. You were going to let her do it!"

"Do what?" said Elissa. "What is she talking about?"

"I heard Stepmama!" I said to Elissa. "She was positively gloating about it to Papa. All about how she'd managed to save the whole family by selling you off to some horrible old man. And you hadn't even told me! You two never tell me anything! I knew if I tried to argue, you wouldn't pay any attention, so—"

"Oh, Lord," Angeline said. "I knew if you found out—"

"At least I was going to do something about it." I turned on Angeline, "You were just going to let her sacrifice herself."

"And what exactly was your plan?" Angeline asked. "Once you'd fitted yourself out like a monkey—"

"I was going to London," I said. "I knew if I ran away, there would be such a scandal that Stepmama wouldn't be able to sell Elissa off. And once I was there..." I half closed my eyes, to see my dream past my sister's sceptical face. "There are thousands of jobs a boy can get in London. I could sign on to a merchant ship and make my fortune in

the Indies, or I could be a typesetter at a newspaper and see every part of London. All I'd have to do is get work, real work, earning money, and then I could send part of it home to you two, so at least you could both have real dowries and then—

“Oh, you little fool,” Elissa said, the words coming out in a half sob. “Come here, Kat.” Angeline let go of me and I crawled over the bed to Elissa's warm embrace. She wrapped her arms around me and I felt her tears land on my short hair. “Promise me you won't ever do anything so rash and unnecessary ever again.”

“But—” My voice came out muffled against her nightgown.

Angeline spoke from behind me, “How long do you think you would have survived in London on your own, idiot? And who do you think would have hired you, coming from the countryside with no references, no one who knows you to give you a good word, no skills or experience—”

“I have skills!” I said.

“Not the sort that get young men hired,” Angeline said implacably. “And when they found out you weren't really a boy...”

Elissa shuddered and tightened her arms around me. “It isn't to be thought of,” she said. “The danger you would have been exposed to—”

“The danger she would have walked straight into, without even thinking twice,” Angeline corrected her.

“I could have taken care of myself,” I said. “Charles taught me how to box and fence last year when he was sent down from Oxford for bad behaviour.”

“Charles is a fool,” said Angeline, “and I wouldn't be surprised if he isn't half as good at boxing or fencing as he claims to be.”

The three of us sat for a moment in depressed silence, acknowledging the truth of that.

Elissa sighed. "But the point is, darling, it isn't necessary for you to save me."

"Who else is going to do it?" I struggled up out of her embrace. "I am not going to let you sell yourself off just so Stepmama can buy us all dozens of new gowns and seasons in London and—"

"And keep our brother from being sent to debtors' prison," Angeline said evenly.

I snorted. "You should know better than to listen to Stepmama's moans. She's just hysterical about—"

"It's true," said Elissa. "I saw the evidence myself. Papa borrowed everything he could to pay off Charles's dreadful gambling debts, but he couldn't cover all of them. If we can't come up with the money to pay the rest within two months, poor Charles will have to go to debtors' prison."

"Poor Charles', my foot," said Angeline. "Going to debtors' prison is exactly what Charles deserves."

I looked from Angeline to Elissa. "But surely—"

"If Charles goes to debtors' prison, we will all be ruined," Elissa said. "None of us would ever receive an eligible offer of marriage after that. You know our family is already considered... well..." She bit her lip.

"I know," I said. Stepmama was only too ready to remind us, whenever one of us forgot. There were plenty of people in Society who would always look at us askance just because of our mother, no matter how properly we behaved or what our dowries were. It was one reason why I had decided long ago not to bother behaving properly. "But that can't be enough to make you marry an old man! Whoever he is."

"Sir Neville Collingwood," Angeline said. "One of the

wealthiest men in England. You can see why Stepmama chose him, can't you?"

"He's not so very old, Kat," Elissa said. She clasped her hands together and looked down at them. "I don't think he can be above forty, and—"

"Forty!"

"And Stepmama says he is supposed to be quite handsome."

"Supposed to be? She hasn't even met him herself?"

"We've been very fortunate even to gain this one opportunity." Elissa's voice sounded strained. "Stepmama has good relations, you know."

"Ha," I said.

"Well, she has connections, at any rate," Elissa said. "It was through them that she found out that Sir Neville is coming to Yorkshire – and that she arranged for us to meet him."

"Sir Neville will be part of a month-long house party at Grantham Abbey, thirty miles from here," Angeline said briskly. "Stepmama has arranged for all of us to be guests there as well, because everyone knows that Sir Neville is looking for another wife."

"Another?" I repeated. "What happened to his first one?"

"That doesn't matter," Elissa said. She was knotting her fingers so tightly together now that her knuckles had turned white. "It's a wonderful opportunity for me. For all of us. Sir Neville is... he is..."

"He is so wealthy, he could pay off all of Charles's debts for the rest of his life, without even noticing," Angeline said. "And since Papa and Stepmama can't keep Charles locked up in the house forever, it makes a great deal of sense for at least one of us to have a husband like that."

"I don't mind, Kat. Truly," Elissa said. "I always wanted

to marry a man who could help my family. Sir Neville is a great man in Society.”

I frowned at her. “Then why do you look so miserable?”

“Never mind that.” Angeline put one hand on Elissa’s knotted fingers and for a moment I felt completely shut out as they looked at each other with sympathetic understanding.

“What is it?” I said. “What aren’t you telling me this time?”

“Nothing, darling,” Elissa said. “Just go up to bed now. We’re all too tired to talk properly. Come back in the morning before breakfast and I’ll tidy up your hair. And please, don’t worry about me any more. I am perfectly happy. Truly.”

“But...” I stood up slowly, still frowning at my two sisters and trying to guess the secret I could feel hanging between them. “If you marry Sir Neville, do you think he’ll give Angeline a dowry?”

“I hope so,” said Elissa.

“It doesn’t matter whether he does or not,” Angeline said, and flashed me a dangerous smile. “I have my own plans for that.”

Ha. At least that gave me one clue.

Perhaps Angeline and Elissa wanted to play at keeping more secrets from me, but I would wager anything that there was one secret Angeline hadn’t dared to share with our sweet, proper oldest sister.

I’d recognised the books hidden underneath Angeline’s side of the bed. They were Mama’s old magic books.

Now all I had to do was work out what Angeline was planning to do with them.