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Emma Miller
Denison University

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A Certain Charm, preface

by Emma Miller

Amelia Weatherwax was on a mission. She had successfully avoided knocking over both the quartet in the corner and a German diplomat as she zeroed in on the dessert table in the corner dragging her reluctant brother, Ezekiel, by his wrist. She could almost taste the cream puff that was prominently displayed on the top of a pastry pyramid. Mrs. Tibbs had drizzled her special sauce over the top which she still refused to share with Amelia whenever she burst into the kitchen unannounced. Mrs. Tibbs had warned her not to go near the table while the party was going on. The weathered witch had frowned as she had given this warning:

"Now Miss. This party is important to your father so don't be getting yourself into trouble. Just avoid the sweets. Promise me." Mrs. Tibbs waggled her crooked finger while the other wrinkled hand, glistening with the sugary concoction that was still simmering in the pot over the fire, wiped itself on her pink apron.

"Tibbs. It's like you don't know me at all." This smart response, which might have provoked a harsher response from an older woman, just caused Mrs. Tibbs to frown and shake her head causing the frilly bit around her bonnet to shake. Even though Mrs. Tibbs seemed to be done with the small dark child in her kitchen, Amelia had seen a small plate with a singular cream puff in the cupboard as Mrs. Tibbs hurried her out of the kitchen. Amelia loved the kitchen. Not only was it airy and bright in a way that the rest of the house wasn't, it was the only place in the house where she could practice.

However, Amelia had to focus on the matter at hand. In fact, she probably should give a second thought to the boy who was at the end of her hand. Even though Ezekiel was the older sibling, he often kowtowed to his ten year old sister. Ezekiel was a shy child of twelve plagued by nerves and fear. He preferred the company of books to outdoor activities and actively avoided his fencing instructor, Mr. Flint, when the lanky and sharp teacher showed up for lessons. He was the perfect partner in crime for a bundle of energy and wit like Amelia. He refused her nothing, said no to nothing and seemed to need nothing in return except for his younger sister's attention. Amelia had given him strict instructions to keep an ear out for their parents while she snuck away with the goods. It wouldn't be hard for Ezekiel. He had larger ears than were probably necessary or normal on a twelve year old. That along with his unusually large nose made for a rather awkward child which probably contributed to his overall timidity.

"Are you sure we should be doing this, Meli?" His squeaky voice garnered the attention of a haughty woman holding her opera glasses a little too close to her nose causing her eyes to look a bit cross eyed. Or perhaps she was cross-eyed.

"We'll be fine, Zeke. As long as you're quiet." She thought for a second, "And look out for father." Amelia continued to pull her brother through the thickening crowd coming off the dance floor. Whereas Amelia could dart gracefully between the young lovers and conversing lords, Ezekiel managed to collide with his fair share of ankles and petticoats.

Each person looked at the young boy with a kind of disdain, but after figuring out whose child he was the glare was usually dimmed to a faint look of amusement or disgust. It was while they were making their way through the dance floor that Ezekiel actually bumped into someone who genuinely smiled. Their mother.

"What are you two up to?" She bent so that she was closer to their own height. Lady Marianne Weatherwax was one of the most beautiful women in that particular or any room. Not necessarily in her looks. Amelia often became distracted when she was talking to her mother because of her splotchy complexion and slightly uneven nose which her mother explained was the result of a childhood playtime gone awry. However, Marianne Weatherwax had one of the most radiant smiles and most pleasing eyes that her daughter had ever seen. It was apparently an opinion that was shared by many. For a couple of years, however, people looked pretty disdainfully at Marianne's smile and eyes. After an unfortunate incident with an unnamed gentleman who accosted the young Marianne, Marianne found herself an unwed mother to Ezekiel. She was fortunate that the Reaves' were a truly loving family who continued to provide for both her and the small baby at their estate. They even continued to present Marianne in society. This was an act that was not looked on with a kind eye by the community. However, through this and perhaps a dash of fate, Marianne met Amelia's father Mr. Ignatius Weatherwax and the two fell madly in love. That was a whole other issue for the community. Amelia smiled innocently at her mother who did not look fooled but did not look bothered either.

"Nothing, mama. We're just looking." Her brother was shaking beside her. Ezekiel was a terrible liar and was even worse when it came to their mother.

"Ezekiel?" Marianne couldn't help the small huff of laugh as she turned her attention to the shivering boy clutching his sister's hand.

"N-N-Nothing. C-C-Cross my heart." He did a small gesture of crossing his heart but crossed the whole side. Amelia rolled her eyes. A parakeet would be more convincing. However, she wasn't particularly worried. Marianne found her children's antics amusing. She was more worried about her father finding them.

"Well, toddle on then." She caressed both of their cheeks as she leaned in a little closer to Amelia. "I think your father's talking to Lord Huffington in the library." She winked and returned to the circle of ladies surrounding her. Amelia loved her mother. Lord Huffington could talk the ears off a donkey.

With that Amelia returned her attention to her prize and gleefully noted that the table had been abandoned as the quartet started to play a more spirited melody which spurred even the seated parties to stand. It was as if the red sea had been parted and freedom was merely across the ocean floor. The pair inched closer to the dessert table set in the sitting room next to the dance hall.

"Meli?" Amelia elected to ignore her brother, imagining the delicious burst of flavor that only came from a Mrs. Tibbs' cream puff. She supposed she would have to give some to Ezekiel but he probably wouldn't notice if Amelia divided it more in her favor. "Meli?" Even

if he did, he probably wouldn't say anything. The perfect partner. Suddenly, she was jerked into a rather large linen cupboard by her brother's hand. Perhaps not the perfect partner.

"Zeke?! You ruined a perfectly good opportunity. I was almost in reach." Her brother didn't respond choosing instead to point a small hand towards the crack he left in the door with the dessert table in view. Mr. Ignatius Weatherwax had apparently escaped the complaining of Lord Huffington and was now standing close to the dessert table. Amelia cursed under her breath. This caused a squeak of protest from her brother but she cursed once more as her father grabbed a puff pastry from the far end of the table.

Mr. Ignatius Weatherwax was quite a success story in his community and England. Originally from Jamaica, Ignatius worked tirelessly to get himself over to the mainland. He had a dream of being successful and comfortable in his later life. He read every piece of literature he could get his hands on and found that he has both a passion and talent for legal matters. He was able to scrape together enough money to afford law school with a hefty scholarship and after completing the program he once again set out to increase his wealth and standing. Once settled in the seaside town of Sidmouth, the hulking six foot seven colored man found work when he began to bother the local attorney, Remus Pwinnings. Ignatius began to follow Pwinnings from his home to work for approximately two weeks begging for any kind of work. Apparently, Ignatius so impressed the older gentleman with his creative problem solving and knowledge of English law, that after fourteen days of daily conversations Pwinnings offered Ignatius a clerk position that had recently opened. Ignatius became an invaluable member of the firm, eventually taking over for Pwinnings when the man went into retirement. At the beginning of his work with Pwinnings, not everyone in the community was ecstatic. However, when Ignatius was able to bring the murderer of the beloved town librarian to justice through his tireless effort and dedication, the community welcomed him with open arms. It was after this tide shift that Ignatius caught sight of Marianne while at the local market. Marianne was unaware of the tall man watching her as she milled about with the local farmers. She was greeted with a fair share of cold glances from various high society members as her tale was known by most of the community. Ignatius, not knowing anything of her tragedy, saw only the beauty of her smile and the kindness she bestowed on each soul she talked too. It was three weeks before he gathered the nerve to actually approach Marianne learning of the gossip along the way when he subtly brought up the young woman to his boss. Pwinnings had giggled in his high backed chair,

"Marianne Reaves. She's had a bit of trouble lately. Not her fault really. You remember that man we put in jail for sexual deviancy about ten months back?" Ignatius had thought back and nodded. A rat faced man named Squall had been charged for accosting a young lady and impregnating her. Ignatius was very upset that he wasn't able to take a swing at the bastard before he had gone to prison. It all connected.

"That's the lady?" Pwinnings had nodded looking amused.

"The Reaves have been good to her. The boy and her still reside in the estate. Mr. Reaves was of course upset but he was more angry at Squalls than at Marianne. Does that

change your mind, Ignatius?" Ignatius thought of the bright eyes and secret smile Marianne had for when a high society member said something less than intelligent.

"On the contrary. If anything this only strengthens my resolve." Pwinnings looked confused.

"Your resolve to do what man?"

"To marry her, of course."

It still took a week for Ignatius to talk to the woman he had pledged to marry in front of Pwinnings. Whenever Ignatius excused himself to head to the market, Pwinnings giggled a little harder.

It was at a ball like the one the Weatherwaxes were currently hosting that Ignatius actually approached Marianne. After Ignatius bowed low and asked for the next dance, he was greeted with a twinkling that he hadn't seen in the last couple weeks. Her lilting voice was stitched with amusement.

"So, you are the man who has been following me for the past weeks. If you're painting a portrait, I can point you in the direction of a young lady who looks just like the Mona Lisa. However, I must warn you. She tends to frown." Ignatius fell in love in that moment. Marianne decided she loved Ignatius when she watched the giant stoop down to pick up her one year old and tickled his stomach until the little boy was squealing with a wide toothless smile. They were married within the year and after another few months, they had Amelia and the family was complete. Her parents were well suited to each other. Where Amelia's father was stubborn, his wife was relaxed and where Amelia's mother was fickle, Amelia's father was decisive.

Amelia thanked her lucky stars that her brother had noticed their father before she had stolen the dessert. Although her mother found amusement in her antics, Amelia's father was constantly exasperated with his youngest daughter.

"That was a close one. Thank you Ezekiel." Ezekiel smiled at his younger sister's gratitude with all his teeth but let out a small squeak as he noticed that their father was looking towards the linen closet. Amelia grabbed her brother and shut the door so the crack was only a sliver. Her father looked directly at the closet squinting a bit. He refused to wear his lens when company was over. However, finding nothing in sight, Ignatius Weatherwax returned to his conversation with a drunk Remus Pwinnings.

It was here that Amelia decided what she needed to do. She rolled up the restrictive sleeves of her pale yellow dress and shook her hands in front of her. Her brother did not look pleased by this action.

"I do not think that is a good idea, Meli." He was of course referring to Amelia's less than thought through plan to levitate the cream puff to the closet while her father's back was turned.

"Oh, don't be such a worrywart, Zeke. It's only a small bit." Her mother had tried to explain at one point it was in part because of their similar personalities (apparently her father had been a troublemaker in his youth). However, it was also because of Amelia's magic.

It had started when Amelia turned four. Amelia was a precocious child who was able to accomplish a great deal at a very early age. However, she was also smart enough to manipulate circumstances to go her way. As a three year old she was able to get an extra helping of mashed potatoes for every meal (even if mashed potatoes were not necessarily being served). She was able to trick the lady's maids into giving Ezekiel two baths instead of forcing her to take one. She was even able to figure out how to distract her father from his work long enough to get both a sweet from his desk and at least five minutes of uninterrupted cuddling. Her parents were simultaneously exasperated by her antics and vaguely impressed. The magic only made things worse.

On her fourth birthday, Amelia was confronted with a situation that she couldn't figure out how to get around. She wanted the little girl who was currently playing with her toys to go away. However, all of her usual ploys weren't working. She had tried crying, pushing, and even had stooped to having Ezekiel sneeze on the girl. Nothing was working. She was so upset at the curly blonde monster who was pulling the small wooden duck that her mother had given her and her emotion stirred something deep within her. As she thought about how it would be great if the little girl tripped and got so upset she had to go home, the blonde munchkin tripped over a snag in the hardwood and smashed to the ground. Amelia was shocked at first but was pleased as the girl was carried out by her nanny. It was then that she noticed her father's stone face staring at her in something akin to panic. Later that night while putting her in her bed, her parents sat at the end of her bed and explained that Ignatius' side of the family had some quirks. One of those being magical abilities, another being a strange obsession with Irish drinking mugs, but that was beside the point. This was also the first time that her father explained his rules for magic which would become a staple for her life:

1. Magic is not to be used in public. It could cause ladies to faint and men to shoot.
2. Do not use big magic. It's just asking for trouble.
3. Most importantly, do not bring people back from the dead.

Her father explained that he was unsure if anyone actually could bring someone back to the dead with magic but you shouldn't be messing around with that anyway. Her father also explained that it was hard to master magic. People who were naturally gifted could only do small things in strong emotional states but most people with magic couldn't do more than make their soup a little bit hotter. Although these rules were consistently related to Amelia by her father, her mother, Ezekiel and even Mrs. Tibbs, Amelia wasn't very good at following the first two rules. She also wanted nothing more than to be better than heating soup slightly.

Amelia shook her hands to generate some heat so that she would be warm for her incantation as Ezekiel moved out of the way. He wanted to be clear of any stray magic that might leak. Amelia concentrated on the crack in the door. She concentrated on the table itself and the delicious pastries on that table. She concentrated on the delicious taste that

would burst in her mouth as she took the first bite of the cream puff. The cream puff on top started to wobble on top of its pyramid.

Suddenly, a person came through the door in a flurry of fabric and perfume. Amelia's concentration was broken and the cream puff stayed stationary on top of the pyramid. She cursed both the cream puff and the tall woman who was now peeking out of the closet. Amelia looked over at Ezekiel to ask what just happened but he looked completely baffled by the woman.

The woman was covered in a deep red silk gown from head to toe and her shiny red hair was piled high on her the top of her head. She had a hooked nose which was balancing a pair of fancy opera glasses which her blue eyes were peering out of, scanning the horizon. She looked like a bird of some eccentric nature that was scanning for predators. Finally, relieved that she had not been seen by whatever was hunting her, the woman breathed a sigh of relief and backed away from the small crack in the door. It is only at this moment that she noted the small children in the back of the linen closet.

"Oh! I'm terribly sorry for invading your hiding place. I'll just be a minute." Her voice was lilting but there was a harsh undertone that matched the deep red dress she was wearing better. She smiled like she was amused by something but her eyebrows slanted like she was irritated. "Hiding from an undissuaded suitor, unfortunately. Refuses to take a hint. What are you doing?" She was staring directly at Amelia particularly Amelia's hands which were still lifted in front of her. Amelia quickly lowered her arms and Ezekiel moved a fraction closer to his sister.

"Nothing. Just playing hide and seek. You found me, Ezekiel. Now I'll count." Amelia tried to keep her voice level as her brother shook in nerves next to her. The woman did not look like she believed her but her smile widened a little bit.

"Oh. Well, that's good because I thought perhaps I had interrupted a tiny bit of magic." On the word magic, the bird woman moved her hand in front of her face and a small array of sparkles sprang from her palm. Ezekiel nearly had a heart attack but Amelia looked on it complete spellbound wonder.

"You're a witch!" The woman's smile was now a grin as she bent down so she was on level with the two kids.

"I don't like that word. I prefer magician. But yes. Selina Ratcliff." Miss Ratcliff stuck out her gloved hand to shake Amelia's. Amelia grasped the hand and shook it with vigor. She knew she had heard the name but she didn't know how. "Now, what exactly were you trying to do?" Amelia looked towards Ezekiel who was shaking his head behind Miss Ratcliff.

"I was trying to get a cream puff. Please don't tell Papa." It all came out in a rush which made Miss Ratcliff chuckle under her breath. She then looked at them like she was seeing them for the first time.

"Of course. Are you Ezekiel?" Ezekiel looked a little overwhelmed to be under Miss Ratcliff's attention. He blushed and scuffed his shoe on the floor. However, he did nod once to answer Miss Ratcliff's question. "So, that makes you little Amelia?"

"I'm not little." Amelia stamped her feet a bit when she said it. She hated that term. The stamping did not quite intimidate Miss Ratcliff in the way that Amelia had wanted.

"Of course not. I apologize Miss Weatherwax." Selina Ratcliff curtsied low and Ezekiel giggled from the side. "I'll tell you what. I promise not to tell your papa, if you promise not to tell him that I did this." With that she snapped her fingers and two large cream puffs appeared in her hands. Ezekiel clapped in surprise. Amelia was in a state of complete wonder. She had never seen that kind of magic before. Amelia was going to basically pick the cream puff up in the air and transport it over the dance hall to the closet. Miss Ratcliff had snapped it into reality. She had a thought that perhaps Miss Ratcliff was one of the few magicians that her father had mentioned who were truly powerful. She held out the cream puffs to the siblings and each child took them quickly from her hands. Ezekiel held his in reverence but Amelia bit into hers as soon as it was in her hand. It was just as delicious as she had imagined. Still bent, Miss Ratcliff smiled gently at the pair. There was no harsh undertone to her smile now. She reached out her hand and wiped the area right next to Amelia's mouth where a large amount of cream had taken residence. "Now, do you promise?"

"Of course!" Ezekiel enthused as he bit into his cream puff. She nodded her thanks and her attention once again returned to Amelia. There was a twinkle in her eye that Amelia knew was reflected in her own.

"Promise?" Amelia nodded and stuck out her cream covered finger to pinky promise. Miss Ratcliff entwined her finger with Amelia's and Amelia felt the heat from her hand. With that Miss Ratcliff stood and brushed off her silk dress. "It was a pleasure meeting the both of you." She checked out of the crack in the doorway, probably looking for the ill-regarded suitor. On her way out, however, she paused and turned back towards Amelia. "Oh. Keep practicing, little Amelia." With that she winked (Amelia swore a bit of spark flew off her eyelashes) and she was gone leaving the children with cream puffs and curiosity.

It was on this day at the age of ten that Amelia swore that she would one day be a magician on par with Miss Selina Ratcliff. It was the last thing she did.