

## THE MAGIC TOKEN

by Susanne Marie Knight

### PROLOGUE

Swinbrook, Oxfordshire 1802

Nature seemed especially gleeful tonight. And why not? It was Midsummer Eve.

Twelve-year-old Amanda Barclay slipped out the back door of the stone and thatch cottage. She shifted her basket to pull her worn handkerchief shawl tighter around her slender shoulders. The thin muslin gave little warmth against the late evening Cotswold breeze fragrant with wild honeysuckle. An almost full moon lit her way as if in approval.

The lonely hoot of an owl warned her that time was fleeting; she'd best not tarry. Gathering up the skirt of her nightgown, she hurried on her midnight quest past the row of cottages, each one identical to the next, and hoped no villager would be about. At this hour, all the townsfolk were usually tucked in their beds. If, perchance, anyone spotted her, she would be in a devil of a coil. Mama would likely have an attack of the vapors, and Papa....

Well, what Papa would do she could not bear to think about.

Midnight almost upon her, Amanda quickened her steps and raced through the thicket of juniper trees, heedless of the wicker basket swinging madly against her side. At last she reached the River Windrush. Out of breath, she sat on a large flat rock at the water's edge.

Her hands trembled as she removed supplies from her basket: some herbs, a tallow candle, a tinderbox, and a small, tart crab apple. Her greatest friend, Lydia Griffith, had insisted the spell required a real apple to eat—a golden-orange Pippin, at the very least. But in June apples were hard to come by, and money even scarcer. Amanda counted herself fortunate to have found a crab apple this early in the season.

The gentle lapping sounds of water soothed her girlish nerves.

"Well, Lyddie, here goes," Amanda murmured to herself. "Let's just see if your precious spell works. As if my future husband's reflection can appear in the water below! Magic, what bosh!"

Not that Amanda could conceive of getting married at the tender age of twelve, but she could admit being curious. According to Lydia, by following this ritual on June 23, Midsummer Eve, a maiden could catch a glimpse of her future husband. Moonshine, of course. But even if the spell did not come true, and all she got for her troubles was a stomachache from the crab apple, the adventure was well worth it. Her brother, Francis, five years her elder, often stayed out as late as he wanted. Since *she* was a girl, she never had any fun.

The river gurgled in its age-old way, recalling her to her purpose. Time to begin. Scooping out some dirt, she placed the candle on the ground in front of her, then opened the tinderbox. She struck a piece of steel against the flint repeatedly, and after several tense minutes, her efforts were rewarded with fire sparks. The candlewick now lit, she drew a circle with a sprig of red sage clockwise around the crab apple seven

times—no more, no less.

“This is foolish,” Amanda muttered, but she completed the instructions anyway. Lifting the flickering candle in one hand, she bit into the apple.

Her heart pounded with such intensity she feared it would escape from her body. Inhaling sharply, she leaned over the edge of the rock and peered into the pool of calm water trapped by the larger boulders.

Loose brown hair and dark, soulful eyes stared back at her. And that was all.

“Drat!” Amanda made a face to hide her disappointment. Ignoring the apple’s sour taste, she took another bite.

Nothing. She saw nothing but quiet ripples marring the smooth surface of the river.

“Gammon!” Patience was never one of her virtues, so she plunked the apple into the water, sending waves of confusion over her reflection. “Lydia Griffith, you’ll be sorry for making up this Banbury tale! Future husband, indeed! I’ll—”

“Just what the devil do you think you are doing?”

At the sound of the deep-timbred male voice coming from behind her, Amanda froze. Who interrupted her solitude? And how long had he been watching her? Embarrassment burned her cheeks.

Not daring to turn around to look at the intruder, instead she glanced down at the river’s surface. An image wavered, then steadied. There, hovering over her shoulder, stood a young man with unruly hair as dark as the night sky.

She had never seen this comely man before, but rather than being scared, she was intrigued. A strange sadness seemed to resonate from his pale blue eyes.

She turned around to face him. He must have come through the woods and now made himself comfortable by sprawling his lanky form out on the high thatch of weeds near her. The stranger looked about the same age as her brother, almost a man, and yet not quite.

He plucked a yellow dandelion, then crumpled it in his large hand. “Well?” he prodded.

His half-opened white shirt revealed the intimate view of his upper chest. The sight of his dishabille disturbed her in a peculiar way and made her flush at the thought of her own state of undress. She hugged her thin shawl against her chest. “I—I do not know you.”

He smiled a humorless smile. “No one knows me, my fine little filly. Excepting Pritchard, of course.”

On hearing that name, her eyes widened. “You are acquainted with Squire Pritchard?” The Pritchards had the finest manor house in Oxfordshire.

She studied the aristocratic set of the young man’s determined jaw and the noble lines of his high forehead. The delicate muslin of his shirt was finer than her best Sunday dress. He must be one of the gentry, too.

His lip curled upwards. “Even at your young age position and wealth impress you. Females!” He spat on the grass.

What a disagreeable man! Gentry or no, she did not have to listen to him. Turning her back, she gathered the supplies from her ill-fated adventure.

“Stay! I am bored.” He grabbed her wrist, and looked into her eyes. Perhaps he could read her unflattering thoughts, for then he amended, “*Please* stay.”

She felt her lower lip quiver, but instead of leaving, as she knew she should, she sat back on her heels.

He released his hold. "I do apologize, my moppet. You are but a child. I had no right to vent my spleen on you."

A haughty tone then entered his voice. "I suppose I must introduce myself. You may call me Marcus. Young Pritchard and I plan to attend Oxford together in a few months."

Amanda lifted her nose in disapproval. Two could play a game of snobbery. After all, Papa was a baronet. A penniless baronet, true, but she could hold her own with toplofty young fops.

She replied with a regal nod, "And you may call me Mandy."

"Ah, fair Mandy." He kissed her hand. "A name worthy of queens, to be sure."

Although Marcus was puffed up with conceit, Amanda's heart soared. Most likely Lydia never had *her* hand kissed before.

An eyeblink later, he rose to pace in front of Amanda, his chivalrous mood gone. "Enough of that drivel! I am tired of insincerity—I wade in it twenty-four hours a day. Tell me why you are out past midnight dressed in your nightclothes." He lifted an infuriating eyebrow. "I'll wager your mama remains ignorant of your whereabouts."

He considered his compliment drivel? Amanda's shoulders slumped. The romance of the moment evaporated as the dew on a summer's morn. "I—I had hoped to, um, meet a friend tonight."

"Your future husband perhaps? Using some form of magic? Dear girl, you cannot hope to wed *me!*"

"Of course not!" So Marcus *had* heard her. Imagine marrying him—what an overly proud dandy! Heaven forbid.

"So why are *you* out here, Marcus?" she countered. "*I'll* wager *your* mama knows naught of where *you* are."

His icy blue-eyed gaze seemed to pierce her. "I lack two years before I am twenty, chit. Why should my *stepmama* know or care about my whereabouts? Indeed, my worthy father does not."

Marcus held out his hand to help her up. "My father demands that I rusticate here in the Cotswolds whilst my *stepmama* completes her confinement. He hopes for a son—a son more pleasing to him than I." Marcus' jaw was thrust out defiantly, but pain shone from his expressive eyes.

Amanda hesitated, then reached up to smooth the tangled hair from his handsome face. It was obvious he missed having devoted parents. "I'm sorry, Marcus," she murmured softly.

His gaze hardened. "I'll not have a child's pity!"

Whether it was his brusque tone or his unhappy plight engaging her ready sympathies, she didn't know. Either way, she blinked back the sting of tears.

Marcus must have noticed. A strange, hungered expression overtook his face. "Oh, sweet Mandy, don't ever change. I can tell you are one in a million."

Clearing his throat, he handed her the basket. "You'd best be getting home, my moppet. Shall I escort you?"

"No, thank you kindly. Do you also return to bed?"

"Ah, I am doomed to wander the woods 'til sleep comes to claim me. You see,

dear Mandy, I suffer from insomnia. That is why I happen to be out at this ungodly hour.”

He took a step away from her, then bowed. “‘Tis of no import. My thanks for a diverting evening.”

An unfamiliar ache settled over her heart. She did not understand it; nor could she explain it. For some unknown reason, she did not want Marcus to leave. “Wait! I have something that might help you.”

She pulled a small pouch from her basket. “Steep this in boiling water—chamomile tea lets you sleep.”

Marcus’ grin made him appear younger than his years. “What’s this? Are you a traveling apothecary?”

“I want to heal people when I grow up,” she mumbled at her bare toes. No one ever took her ambition seriously.

He accepted the pouch, then lifted her chin. “A noble aspiration. However, I do believe you are already grown up, while I, on the other hand, have a long way to go.”

To her surprise, he brushed his warm lips against her cheek. “I will remember tonight... and your kindness forever.” He turned and walked away.

Amanda skimmed her fingertips across her cheek. Goodness, Midsummer Eve really *was* a magical night.

She glanced back in his direction, but he had disappeared into the darkness. Humming a little ditty, she skipped down the dirt path towards home. A sudden thought stopped her. What if Lydia’s spell worked? What if Amanda *did* see her future husband? After all, Marcus’ image *had* gazed up at her and he did have a certain appeal.

A broad smile stretched her face. She hoped she would meet him again.

## CHAPTER ONE

Swinbrook, Oxfordshire 1818

"Mandy? Mandy! You will never guess what I just overheard!" came an excited cry.

Amanda Barclay glanced up from her resting place under the shade of the village green's willow tree. Looking for the source of the outburst, she squinted but had no luck. The sunlight temporarily blinded her as it dappled bright beams through the tree's leafy branches. A sweetly scented breeze rustled the foliage, and she paused to inhale deeply. Goodness, but she was glad to be back home.

"Mandy!" Lydia Barclay's call came again.

Since Amanda had finished her shopping first, she chose to wait for her sister-in-law in the village green, enjoying the sights and sounds reminiscent of her childhood. She had been gone from Swinbrook five years. Five years that seemed like forever.

Flushed from the heat of the summer sun, Lydia rushed across the tall green grass, stumbled on her long walking dress, and fell into Amanda.

"Oh, I am so sorry! Pray, please forgive me."

Even as she righted herself, Amanda had to laugh. Some things never changed. Her friend was still as clumsy as ever. "Are you hurt, Lyddie?"

"No, but you must listen!" As Lydia patted her bosom to catch her breath, soft blonde tendrils of hair escaped from her wildly crooked, high crowned bonnet. "Mandy, the Duke of Yarborough is to pay the manor house a visit!"

Amanda sensibly straightened her own straw bonnet knocked askew from the force of the impact. How could Lydia lose all sense of propriety and dash about as a hoyden half her eight and twenty years of age? Especially after giving birth just two months ago. And to be excited over that lecherous, old roué's arrival? Duke or no duke, Yarborough was despicable.

"Now, Lyddie, do try to contain yourself. All this commotion is unseemly. You forget, you are not only the parson's wife, but a new mother as well." Even to Amanda's ears, her words sounded stuffy. Bother, she had been nursing invalids for far too long.

Under this rebuke, her friend's pretty face crumpled. A well of regret rose up within Amanda. She placed her arm around Lydia's waist and pulled her closer. "Dear sister, I apologize! Please smile for me. What would my brother say if we return to the cottage with you looking as grave as a judge?" Amanda intentionally deepened her voice. "You are supposed to cheer my wife, not send her into a gloomy melancholy! Is this the gratitude I get for defying Cousin Winifred and bringing you home, Amanda Barclay?"

As she hoped, her impersonation of her brother gave Lydia a fit of the giggles. "Truly, Mandy, for a moment, I thought Frank was right here, ringing a peal over your head!"

"As he usually does!" Glad the mood had lightened, Amanda stood, then brushed the grass from her well-worn, brown day dress. "Shall we leave now, Lyddie? I am certain your darling babe has awakened hungry from his nap. Your mother must be at

her wits end waiting for you.”

Amanda furtively glanced at Lydia’s well-rounded bosom. Despite the upper class inclination to hire wet-nurses, Lydia insisted on feeding the baby herself. Amanda envied her friend. To have a husband and a child! She sighed.

The warm August day had changed into a scorcher and even under the shade of her parasol, a moist sheen of perspiration dotted her forehead. Wiping it away, she stooped to pick up her wicker basket. “Ready?”

A stubborn cast settled over Lydia’s sweet features and she refused to budge. “Little Jeremy will not awaken for another hour or so. And Mama always has things well in hand.”

No use arguing. Amanda knew her friend inside and out. “Truce, sister. I yield. Let us continue on our way and you can tell me why you are fair bursting about the Duke of Yarborough’s visit. I saw him last, oh, about six years ago, and he had naught to recommend him other than his title. Have his temper and looks improved?”

Together they crossed the stone bridge over the River Windrush. Truth be told, Amanda did not care a button about the duke. Goodness, he was probably sixty years old by now. But Lydia must be humored. Her friend’s breathing appeared somewhat shallow, and an unhealthy blush crept up her neck. Too many exertions, and too soon after her confinement.

“But, Mandy, are we talking about the same duke? Many fine ladies consider him—”

A sway-backed horse pulling a small gig trotted past them, stirring up a trail of dust. Lydia stopped talking, consumed by a bout of sneezes.

Amanda gave her friend a handkerchief. “No matter what other ladies consider him, I consider him useless!” She spoke with the venom of personal experience.

“Never have been impressed with the nobility, have you?” Lydia grinned into the handkerchief.

Shrugging, Amanda crossed the street. “Not with him, at any rate. Cousin Winifred’s village was rather backwaters, but we sometimes got the latest news. When I left, the *on-dit* was that Yarborough had ten members of the Fashionable Impure dangling after him.” Imagine. At his age!

“Truly?” Lydia’s color heightened again, showing that she thrived on gossip. “I have heard— Gracious!”

“What is it?” Amanda scanned the row of quaint shops lining the river. Seated on a bench near the Swan Inn was an elderly woman fanning herself. Four young women, all dressed in black, hovered over the aged one, with expressions of anxiety plain on their faces. They stood silently, wringing their hands, obviously at a loss.

“Come!” Amanda yanked at Lydia’s hand. “We must offer help to that lady.”

As they approached the women, a multitude of melodious voices greeted them, but the words were not spoken in the King’s English.

“Foreigners,” Lydia whispered. “Must be Gypsies! Just look at their embroidered gowns and ponderous gold earrings.”

More than earrings attracted Amanda’s attention. On the old woman’s broad chest was a veritable treasure trove of gold jewelry gleaming enticingly. Loop upon loop of golden chains and coins caught beams of sunlight, casting brilliant flashes onto the cobbled walkway below. The old woman lifted her gnarled hand, causing the younger

ones to cease their clamor. She then waved to Amanda to come closer.

Amanda instinctively obeyed. The woman's lined face, now out of the shadows, commanded respect. Without thinking, Amanda made a small curtsy. "Please forgive our intrusion, ma'am, but we noticed you might be needing some help."

The woman shifted in her seat and a smile crinkled her cheeks. "Tut-tut! It is nothing." Her heavy coughing belied her words. "Come forward, *por favor*. Please. Such nice English girls, no?"

To her female entourage, she spoke some words in another language. Bowing, they stepped aside.

"*Que tempo horrível!* What terrible weather! But let me introduce myself." The woman blotted a lace handkerchief at her withered brow. "I am *Dona* Inês Luísa da Cruz e Silva. A mouthful, yes? And these are my dutiful grand-daughters, all accompanying me on my pilgrimage to your most gracious land. None but I speak your English language."

Amanda also performed introductions. "We are honored to meet you, ma'am."

*Dona* Inês' dark-eyed gaze swept over them. As she leaned closer, her jewelry jingled. "The honor is ours, my friends. We go to your famous spa at Cheltenham to drink the mineral waters. *Ora!* If they would only cure this headache of mine!"

Lydia's voice contained a note of awe. "Are you from Spain? Are you Gypsies?"

When the young women laughed, *Dona* Inês scolded them, and they hid their mouths behind their dainty, gloved hands.

The woman's wise eyes flashed proudly. "*Naõ*. No, we are *português*—from Oporto, Portugal, my fine English matron." Her eyes narrowing, she pointed at Amanda. "But you, young miss, *you've* a look of the Gypsies about you! Stormy, passionate eyes, and thick, rich hair."

Amanda touched the tight chignon of hair hiding under her straw bonnet. How had the woman known her hair was thick?

*Dona* Inês must have noticed the gesture. "Bah! Why do you English girls bind up the hair God gave you?"

Her grand-daughters all tittered, shaking their own black, loose hair cascading about their shoulders.

A spasm tightened *Dona* Inês' worn features and she gasped, "We—we are awaiting the coach bound for the spa."

Amanda reached into her basket. "Perhaps this will help your megrim." She pulled out a tiny bag and handed it to the seated woman. "This is filled with ground ivy. If you sharply inhale the bouquet, it might give you some relief."

Hesitating, she then removed a linen pouch. "I also have the herb chamomile to make tea. It will relax you."

She always carried a fresh supply of chamomile, no matter where she went. Ever since the night so many years ago when she had met that handsome man by the River Windrush. Fingering the small pouch, she smiled sadly at it. The tea preparation came in handy so many times. In a way, it was like her good luck charm—but of course, she did not believe in magic. She gave it to the old woman.

Peering up at Amanda, *Dona* Inês then bobbed her head up and down. "Yes, yes! *É verdade!* It is so. You are chosen." She reached out to hold Amanda's hand. "Why did I not see it immediately? You are the one, Miss Barclay."

Before Amanda could comment, the old woman released her hand, and pointed at the Swan Inn. She ordered, "Go, my girls, fetch me water. You go also, English *Senhora*. You must speak for them."

Lydia opened her mouth to protest, but quickly was overruled. Good natured as she always was, she shrugged, and yielded to the majority.

The sight of five females setting off to procure one glass of water was quite comical. Amanda bit her lip and turned her attention back to *Dona Inês*.

With closed eyes, the woman inhaled from the ivy bag. "Yes, I believe this ache will fade. I am much indebted to you, Miss Barclay. I have something for you as well." She patted the seat next to her, intending for Amanda to sit.

Again, she obeyed. "No, please. I cannot accept anything. It gives me pleasure knowing you will feel better." An embarrassed flush burned her cheeks.

"My child, I insist. It is my right... and my destiny."

*Dona Inês* pawed through a bulky, black bag. Finding what she sought, she then opened Amanda's hand and placed something small on her palm. Her throaty voice deepened. "This is a *magic* token. Starting today, it will change your fortunes!"

Amanda surveyed the small object in her hand. A gold coin gleamed up at her. Blinking in the bright sunlight, she read, "*République Française, 20 Francs, 1808.*" She flipped it over. There, on the face of the coin was Napoleon Bonaparte, wearing the laurel wreath denoting his emperor status.

The money burned hotly in her gloved hand. She itched to drop it. "*Dona Inês*, I... I thank you but I cannot accept this. The war has only been over a scant three years. Bonaparte caused so much pain, so many deaths. In truth, I want nothing to do with the fellow."

*Dona Inês* clucked her tongue. "My dear Amanda, if I may be permitted the familiarity. We in Portugal also suffered greatly because of that *monstro*, that Corsican. *Buonaparte*, bah! I spit on him!" She suited the action to the words.

Her knotted finger pointed at the coin. "Five years ago, it was given to me by an ancient crone. One even more ancient than I! Since that day, fortune has smiled at me. The token was originally Roman, melted down as you now see. I give it to *you*, not to honor that foul Corsican, but because it is magic."

A chill passed over Amanda, settling into her bones. This strange coldness would not be erased by the heat of the day. Flipping the coin over, she studied its raised surface. A supernatural token? One that insured good fortune? She frowned. It looked ordinary enough.

Magic. While Lydia might believe in such a thing, Amanda had her feet firmly planted on the ground. Only moonstruck females and giddy, green girls believed in magic. Not her. Still, her parents had not brought her up to be rude.

"I thank you, *Dona Inês*, for your generous gift, although I assure you it is not necessary." She hoped her benefactress would reclaim the coin, but instead, the woman just smiled.

"*De nada*, child. You are welcome. Do not mention it." *Dona Inês* stood and shook the wrinkles out of her black gown. "Ah, here are my grand-daughters. We must make haste. The carriage to Cheltenham arrives shortly."

Speaking in Portuguese, she issued instructions and at once, the young women flocked to her side. As she accepted the container of liquid, she thanked Lydia. "We



shall continue our journey with warm thoughts of your kindness.”

*Dona Inês* took a sip. “Ah! We go now.” With a swish of linen skirts, the women headed for the approaching coach.

Lydia’s gaze followed them. “Gracious! That was an experience! We could not talk, *per se*, but we communicated.”

Walking toward home, Amanda smiled. “You mean you understood each other’s giggles.”

Lydia kept in step. “How unkind of you to make fun, Amanda Barclay! But what did *Dona Inês* say to you? I am of the impression that she wanted me out of the way.”

The memory of the golden *franc* disturbed Amanda. If Lydia found out about the supposed magical qualities, then no one in the Barclay household would ever hear the end of it. And Francis would hold his sister responsible.

Snapping open her parasol, Amanda linked arms with her sister-in-law. “Nonsense, Lyddie, your imagination is running away with you. *Dona Inês* just chatted about our English weather. I have to admit, it *is* a terribly hot day.”

For the second time today, a chill crept down her spine. And now she had told a fib. Not at all the thing for a parson’s daughter to be telling a parson’s wife. She almost could hear her father’s dry voice giving her a lecture.

Amanda sighed. Never mind that, though. Whatever was she going to do with that *horrid* French coin?

\* \* \*

Astride his favorite steed, Marcus Hamilton, the fifth Duke of Yarborough, pulled on the leather reins, signaling for his horse to halt. Badajoz snorted a protest, then obeyed.

Stopped at the crossroads into Swinbrook, Marcus stroked his horse’s silky grey mane and perused the tranquil scene in front of him. Herds of freshly shorn sheep grazed dusky pathways into the green rolling slopes of the Cotswolds. Gentle puffed clouds contrasted white against magnificent azure skies. Ahead rose the sleepy village he remembered so well. Its distinctive stone houses seemed to beckon him, tugging at a long-forgotten yearning. In some inexplicable way, he felt as if he were coming home.

His lips curved into a smile. How whimsical he was becoming at the ripe age of thirty-four. While he might consider this village a safe haven from the cares and woes that daily burdened his life, in no sense was Swinbrook home to him. The last time he tread these same steps was sixteen years ago.

Although, to be accurate, he *had* just recently returned to England from Aix-la-Chapelle, Germany, attending the first Congress of the countries victorious over France.

His meticulously dressed companion, Roderick Pritchard, continued on a few paces until he noticed he was traveling alone. His florid face contorted into the picture of outrage. “I say, Yarborough, what maggot has seized your brain this time? Why, for pity sake, are you stopped dead in the middle of no place? Damme, with the sun blazing up a firestorm, this is outside of enough!”

Pritchard adjusted his top hat and guided his horse back to the crossroads. “Was there anyone more put upon than me? First, I receive your letter requesting my company at your London townhouse—in the heat of August, no less.” He sniffed. “Not to

say I wasn't glad to hear of your arrival from the land of dry-as-dust diplomats, but I had to pay the coachman nine pence for that bit of news!"

Marcus grinned and reached into a pocket on his Spanish blue tailcoat. He flicked a silver coin in his friend's direction. "Here is a shilling for your trouble."

"The blunt's not the issue and you know it." Pritchard caught the coin, but instead of returning it, he added it to the rest of his money. "So what's a fellow to do but to show up at Grosvenor Square expecting a good time?"

He grunted. "Instead of taking me out and about, you drag me over to Bath to fetch your minx of a sister."

"Ah, poor Pritchard. So maltreated. You know, your error was in expecting a good time."

"Damme, of course I did! You're a duke now, ain't you?" Pritchard's thin lips disappeared into his face.

"True, for two years." Marcus pressed his heels against Badajoz's flank, causing the horse to break into a canter.

Swearing, Pritchard held on to his hat, then followed suit.

Marcus waited until the horses were abreast. "But this damn title aside, I am also a brother, Pritchard. Being away so much, I miss Daphne. And the child needed rescuing from her latest governess—again. I fear with all these unsuitable teachers, her behavior has suffered."

Pritchard must have agreed, for his lips unpinched and he remained silent.

Marcus nodded assent. "Sweet Daphne is only six—she needs someone to protect her. I will never understand how my scatter-brained stepmother could leave the child at that boardinghouse, then depart posthaste for Brighton. After all, one resort town is much the same as another."

Slowing his horse to a trot, he entered the village and headed for the Swan Inn. "By the bye, I do not think your father sent you to Oxford to talk as a street urchin would."

Pritchard's ruddy face reddened further. "Several town dandies say 'ain't.'"

Marcus raised his eyebrow. He was well aware of Squire Pritchard's stringent views on town dandies.

Unmistakably uncomfortable, Pritchard cleared his throat. "Well, enough on that subject. Father and I are delighted to have you and Lady Daphne stay on at the manor house. You know that. But what will the duchess say when she receives your missive and learns her daughter is no longer in Bath? No sense wrapping it up in clean linen—I've heard her grace gets a bit snappish when things don't go her way."

Marcus shrugged. "Nothing unusual there, Pritchard. We all prefer events to proceed as we would like. However, if she does mind, she will let me know soon enough."

"You'd best beware, that's what I say, Yarborough. Some women were born trouble."

Ridiculous. His latest stepmother, Nanette, was only twenty-nine, five years his junior. She had been the old duke's third wife. Childbearing took the ultimate toll on the second one as well as Marcus' own mama. Evidently, producing one's progeny was hazardous to a woman's health. Small wonder he delayed falling into the parson's mousetrap. Marriage could be a death sentence—for the bride, at any rate.

Traveling down the packed dirt street, Marcus shielded his eyes from the bright sun. This heat was passing strange for England, even in August. A peculiar sensation flooded his thoughts. One of foreboding? Anticipation? In response, his heart pounded rapidly. He scanned the row of shops, but could see nothing out of the ordinary.

He shook his melancholy away. "I do admit silly Nanette shows even less sense now than when she married my father. Although I cannot see why she would take exception to Daphne being in my company."

With his right hand, Pritchard pulled on the silk ends of his cravat, damaging its Oriental style. His action declared his unease as loudly as if he spoke the words.

Marcus narrowed his gaze. "Tell me, does our staying for a month abuse your hospitality? If so, I shall gladly arrange to transport my sister to one of my northern properties."

"No, no! I'm as pleased as anything to have her here. And, to be sure, m'father's honored by your visit. You being a demmed duke and everything."

Marcus echoed Badajoz's snort. Demmed duke—an accurate description. Although his father had hated him and had wanted his second son, Gregory, to inherit, in the end Marcus filled the old duke's shoes. And being a duke increased society's toadeating tenfold. That was one of the reasons he enjoyed Pritchard's company. The squire's son did not care a fig what Marcus' title was. They were friends, that was all that mattered.

Friends. An image of an elfin girl with thick, flowing hair rose up in his memory. How odd to remember that night now befogged by the mists of time. Evidently, the magic in the girl's innocent smile was destined to stay with him forever.

He frowned. But what the devil had been her name?

However, those reflections did not solve the mystery of his friend's nervousness. "What is troubling you, Roderick?"

Pritchard slammed his kid-gloved hand against his heart. "Begad! The man calls me by my first name. I am honored!"

Marcus waited. He could be patient.

Again, Pritchard cleared his throat. "You see, it's like this. M'father is concerned about properly seeing to a duke's sister. Lady Daphne should have the finest attendants." He shifted position on his saddle. "We are country-bred here. No fancy airs or polished ways. M'father feels we'll be doing your sister, and you, a disservice."

Marcus slashed the air with his hand. "Nonsense! There must be any number of gently bred young women about that would make perfect governesses as befitting Daphne's station."

He stared out in front of him. The glare from the sun caused swells of heat to shimmer up from the street, distorting the view. Squinting, he discerned two figures wavering up ahead. "Indeed, what about those two of the softer sex approaching now?"

As they neared, he dismissed the woman in the mud-colored dress. Obviously, with her straw bonnet in near tatters and her pale nondescript face, she was down on her luck. But the other woman captured his attention. Wisps of blonde hair escaped from her high crowned bonnet. Rosy cheeks and a bright, sunny smile presented her as the picture of health.

Marcus raked his gaze over her. The woman's fashionable walking dress tightly caressed her amble bosom, causing him to inhale sharply. Yes, she would do nicely,

very nicely, indeed.

"I'll be bound! Yarborough, you've hit upon the very solution! Miss Barclay has only just returned from nursing one of her relatives out in the Yorkshires, I believe. She's the old parson's daughter, and sister to our new one. She would be ideal to look after Lady Daphne."

"Ideal, yes," Marcus murmured. "Why don't you introduce me?"

In his enthusiasm, Pritchard dug his heels into his horse's ribs and the horse leaped forward. As eager as Marcus was to meet this diminutive Venus, he had to wince. One did not mistreat good horseflesh.

Signaling Badajoz to speed up, Marcus followed his friend.

Pritchard dismounted first. He gallantly doffed his hat to the ladies. "Mrs. Barclay, Miss Barclay. It has been an age since I've seen you both together."

Smooth talker. Marcus smiled and also dismounted.

The fair one dimpled prettily and held out her small, gloved hand. "Always a pleasure seeing you, Mr. Pritchard."

Pritchard was not immune to her charms. The tips of his ears pinkened. "Ah, just so. May I have your permission to introduce my friend? Yes? Mrs. Barclay, Miss Barclay, may I present the Duke of Yarborough."

As Marcus extended his hand, he heard the other lady, Mrs. Barclay, gasp. The announcement of his rank usually did not produce *that* response. Intrigued, he turned toward her.

She gasped again. Her eyes—dark pools of liquid brown—grew extremely large and her face, pale before, whitened further. She must have loosened her hold on her parasol, for it clattered to the ground. For some odd reason, she seemed to be terrified of him.

He fetched her parasol and returned it to her.

"H—how stupid of me! I th—thank you, your gr—grace."

By her expression, she obviously wanted to be someplace else. Marcus scratched his chin. She was certainly a strange little thing. "Think nothing of it, Mrs. Barclay."

Pritchard coughed nervously. "No, no, old fellow. This is *Miss* Barclay."

"Oh, yes!" the blonde *Mrs.* Barclay concurred. "Amanda is my sister-in-law."

"Indeed?" Marcus made a polite bow. "A thousand pardons." Fate dealt him an unexpected blow. The voluptuous Mrs. Barclay married to a dried-up parson. What a loss for mankind.

Sighing, he returned his gaze to the trembling Amanda Barclay. As a parson's daughter, she *would* be a suitable companion for Daphne, and she did have a musical voice. But why did she appear ready to sprint off to the hills?

He felt a nudge at his side. Pritchard hissed, "Well, aren't you going to ask her?"

For the first time in his life, Marcus wished his friend would observe the social niceties usually accorded dukes. He shrugged. Couldn't have it both ways. "Miss Barclay, I have a proposition for you."

Dear Lord, the poor woman looked as if she would faint dead away. "Er, what I mean to say is at present, I am staying at the manor house with my six-year-old sister. We are in need of a governess. Would you consider taking the position?"

The delectable Mrs. Barclay clapped her hands together. "How wonderful, your

grace! What a stroke of luck this is!"

Unmistakably, Miss Barclay did not share her sister-in-law's enthusiasm. Her posture stiffened, showing the stance of a fighter's. Gentleman Jackson, the boxer, would have been proud of her. Her reluctance was almost amusing.

"I shall think it over, your grace," she said with such finality, she might as well have said, "Not in my lifetime."

Again, Marcus studied her. Defiantly, she met his gaze. Her eyes reflected back the darkness of the night.

The tiny hairs on the back of his neck rose up. She reminded him of someone. "Do I know—"

"We must be getting back to the house, Lydia. By this time your baby has surely awakened." Amanda Barclay took an impatient step forward. "Please excuse us. A pleasure, your grace, Mr. Pritchard."

With regret in her voice, Mrs. Barclay also said her good-byes.

Marcus was not ready to concede defeat. During the war, he fought under Wellington at Talavera, Salamanca, and Badajoz, all cities in Spain. He had faced fiercer opponents than this drab slip of a woman. Perversely, he decided not to take no for an answer. "Miss Barclay, you *will* do me the honor of paying the manor house a visit tomorrow, won't you? Shall we say about two o'clock? I am certain my sister, Lady Daphne, will be delighted to meet you."

The woman had no recourse but to agree. She knew it and so did he. Refusing to meet his gaze this time, she nodded her assent.

Satisfied, Marcus tipped his hat and remounted his horse. He was beginning to look forward to tomorrow.

