

A Regency Romance

The Magic Token



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For all of us
who believe in
magical possibilities...



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Prologue



Swinbrook, Oxfordshire 1802

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

Twelve-year-old Amanda Barclay slipped silently 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 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 an 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 granddaughters. 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 reigns, 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 tucked it into his pocket. "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 step-mother could leave the child to that insufferable governess, 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 together."

Smooth talker. Marcus smiled and 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 impressed. Her reluctance almost amused him.

“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 in Spain under Wellington at Talavera, Salamanca, and Badajoz. 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 looked forward to tomorrow.

Chapter Two



Inside her brother's serviceable landau coach, Amanda fussed with the intricately embroidered cuffs on her poplin day dress. Not having any need for a fancy ball gown, this was her best dress—her *only* dress for special occasions. She had embroidered the edges of the puffed sleeves herself, using fuzzy wool thread to create a detailed, raised look.

She twisted one of the small French knots sewn near the edge. In just a few minutes she would be inside the Pritchard manor house, expected to make small talk with the Duke of Yarborough. In just a few precious minutes.

A savage throbbing pulsed through her temples. Worry. Worry was what caused her megrim. Nothing more serious than that. Chances were as soon as she left the manor house, and the duke, her headache would vanish as suddenly as it

had appeared.

“Mandy, do stop plucking at your gown! One more turn and the French knot will unravel, and then where will you be?” Lydia leaned over from the other side of the enclosed carriage and rapped Amanda on the knuckles. “You are making me nervous just watching you!”

“Yes, Amanda. Do learn to control yourself.” Francis Barclay, solemnly dressed as always, lifted his top hat to smooth his thinning hair. “You will give the duke the impression that you are a flighty chit of a girl instead of a demure, genteel lady.”

Satisfied that his bald spot had been covered, he replaced his hat.

Amanda folded her hands in her lap and sighed. *Everyone* had the fidgets. It was not every day the Barclays paid a call on a member of the nobility—a duke, no less. But why did it have to be the Duke of Yarborough? Why did it have to be... Marcus?

Marcus—the Duke of Yarborough. Goodness, yesterday had been quite a shock. Apparently, the news of his father’s death skipped by Cousin Winifred’s small village, or her brother deemed it not noteworthy enough to write her about.

A small shudder overtook Amanda’s thin frame.

“Chilled?” Lydia asked, concern evident in her voice.

“No, I am fine. Thank you.”

Who could be chilled on a hot day like today? Just like yesterday. “*Que tempo horrível!* What terrible weather!” *Dona Inês* had said. She also said, “Starting today, this token will change your fortunes!”

How true. And how strange that Amanda’s life had indeed turned upside down since receiving the gold coin, the magic token.

But it must be coincidence, nothing more.

Thinking back to the night when she first met Marcus so many years ago, she let a gentle smile drift over her face. She had been only twelve, but she fancied herself in love. After all, his image *had* appeared in the flickering waters of the Windrush. In the weeks and months that followed, she had convinced herself that he *was* to be her intended. How foolish a young girl dreams!

Time had a way of embellishing memories, but oh, her recollections were nothing compared to the actual presence of the man. Broad, masculine shoulders; a powerful, corded neck; long, muscular thighs. And everything real; nothing owing to artifice or padding. She sighed again as she pictured ebony hair curled appealingly as it just brushed his cravat. The man possessed a high, wide forehead and dazzling blue eyes sharp enough to pierce her maiden heart.

That self-same heart pounded an erratic beat.

No! She chided herself. *Curb your wayward thoughts.* He would never be interested in a

parson's near-dowerless daughter. After all, His Grace the Duke of Yarborough marrying the lowly Miss Amanda Barclay was an event bordering on the impossible. How utterly absurd.

Here she was, letting her imagination run away with her. Marcus did not recognize her, let alone want to marry her! Indeed, without meaning to, he made it clear that he preferred the vivacious Lydia, not the plain Amanda. The man needed her as a governess, nothing more. He probably did not even remember that long-ago night. Although he *had* looked at her rather oddly right before she abruptly took her leave.

She tucked an unruly curl back inside the tight chignon at the nape of her neck. The last thing she needed was to have her hair shake loose and cascade down her back as she'd worn it that Midsummer Eve.

"And now you are worrying with your hair! Amanda Barclay! What am I going to do with you?" Lydia folded her arms across her bosom and pleaded her case with her husband. "Oh, Frank! You should have heard Mandy yesterday. Gracious, she was so discourteous with the duke. Such a handsome man, too." A creasing at the bridge of Lydia's nose disturbed her smooth brow. "I was mortified by her behavior."

Francis turned his sorrowful gaze to Amanda. Since yesterday afternoon, they all had heard this particular tale of woe many times. "*If a man be*

gracious and courteous to strangers, it shows he is a citizen of the world.' That was said by one of our greatest philosophers, Francis Bacon. You would do well to live by his words, Amanda."

She gave him a mutinous stare. Were all men named Francis prosy bores? "Truly, I was not discourteous. I replied that I would think about the duke's offer, then I explained why Lydia and I had to leave. I even expressed pleasure at meeting him."

Her brother scratched at his thick, curly sideburns so at odds with the sparseness on top of his head. "Perhaps you were not aware that your lackluster response could be interpreted as a slight. You are naïve to the ways of the world." He paused momentarily. "The duke does our family a great honor by requesting you to join his household."

"Yes, indeed!" Lydia chimed in. "To think you would be governess to the sister of a duke."

Amanda could not contain her grin. "And also to his grace as well." She lifted her head to convey haughtiness. "He said, 'We are in need of a governess.' I wonder what studies he is deficient in!"

Lydia understood the playfulness of the comment and showed her appreciation by giggling.

Francis, however, sadly shook his head. "*To speak kindly does not hurt the tongue.*' That is an old proverb, Amanda."

Chastened, she contemplated the smooth white

cotton of her gloves. "Yes, Francis. I shall try to do better."

"Excellent. I am certain I do not need to tell you, my dear, that I am beholden to Squire Pritchard for my position as parson. I cannot afford to displease him or any of his patrons."

"But, Frank!" Lydia's dusky ringlets quivered from beneath her fashionable bonnet. "Duke or no, surely if Mandy comes to feel that she is uncomfortable with Lady Daphne, she has every right to refuse the situation. It is Mandy's choice. We certainly do not wish her to be forced into this."

Francis' compassionate face looked drained of blood. Obviously, the duke's request placed him in an awkward spot. A parson's personal preferences took second place to the duke's, as did Amanda's.

She had to mollify Lydia's concern. "It will be all right, Lyddie. I am excessively obliged to the duke for offering the position, so you needn't fret about it."

In her heart, Amanda knew she had no choice but to accept. She could not jeopardize Francis' standing with the squire. Also, financially, the Barclays would be better off with her housed at the manor house. Not that the growing young family was hurting for money, but Amanda *was* an additional mouth to feed.

Looking outside, she spotted the tall chimneys

of the three gabled, Tudor-style Pritchard estate in the distance. Each galloping step of the horses brought her closer to the squire... and to Marcus.

Why on God's green earth did *he* have to be the duke? She shivered again. Her one hope was that Lady Daphne would take an instant dislike to her.

Amanda straightened her shoulders. Goose! She was not a young girl of twelve anymore. She could keep her childish infatuation to herself. Most likely she would not see him much anyway. Dukes did not usually frequent nursery rooms, did they? And, chances were that as governess, she would not be invited down for dinner, so she would *rarely* see him. Besides, his visit was bound to be over before she knew it, and they would depart the area and no longer require her.

Another thought occurred to her. Marcus was the old duke's son, meaning he could be as odious as his father. In fact, since he practically ordered her to call on him today, Marcus already proved himself to be disagreeable.

That notion comforted her immensely. After all, he was nothing to her. Why should her equanimity be disturbed by a toplofty, overweening, and irritating duke?



Upon alighting from the landau, Amanda stood

quietly and admired the serene beauty of the Pritchard estate. To the right, a small indigo pond splashed alive with greenish black-headed mallards and reddish-brown topped widgeons seeking relief from the heat. Nearby, clipped yew shrubs lined the slated walkway to the manor house, and oak trees rustled softly in the hot, summer breeze.

Headache forgotten, Amanda opened her fringed parasol and twirled in delight. Sweet, fragrant scents from hidden rose bushes welcomed her. Smiling, she hugged her arms to her chest; she was so glad to be back in the Cotswolds.

She had never visited Squire Pritchard at this time of year, but every Christmas he would hold a gala party for the entire village of Swinbrook. His manor house would be ablaze with sparkling lights and joyous merrymaking. Booming, lively music always rattled the glass panes of the Tudor-style estate, vibrating beyond the distinctive stone exterior and out the three chimney tops. It was the event of the season; one she dearly missed during the five years she had been away.

How tranquil everything appeared now.

Suddenly, a loud, childish whoop pierced the indolent, humid air. "Heigho! Heigho! Hurrah!"

Arms flailing about, a young girl, about age six, came charging down the walkway as if propelled by an unseen force. She collided with Amanda and emitted a small 'oof' sound upon impact. The girl then tightly wrapped herself around Amanda's

poplin dress. "You must be Barclay. I waited and waited for you to arrive! What took you so long? I wanted you hours ago."

Amanda stared down at the profusion of brunette curls on top of the girl's head and the expensive white *crêpe lisse* of her ankle length gown. She exchanged concerned glances with both her brother and Lydia. There could be no question of the child's identity. This was Lady Daphne Hamilton, however the child's manners were less than engaging. "Goodness! That is quite an intemperate welcome."

The girl wrinkled her pert nose. Her resemblance to her brother was uncanny. "My mama says I don't have to be polite." She then buried her face in the folds of Amanda's white gown. "I'm bored! I need someone to play with. Why didn't you come sooner?" she complained.

Amanda valiantly tried to loosen the girl's hold, but was pinioned in place. She let out a discouraged sigh. Spoiled, as only a duke's daughter could be. Oh, dear. What had she gotten herself into?

Daphne showed no signs of setting Amanda free.

Amanda tried another tack. "Ah, this is not much of an introduction, child. Do let's have a good look at each other."

The child giggled in response, obviously delighted to disobey.

Still unable to move, Amanda silently pleaded with Francis to intervene. He had a winning way with children.

Crouching on his knees, he obliged her by touching Daphne's shoulder. "As the fourth Earl of Chesterfield was so fond of reminding us, little one, you must look people in the face when you speak with them. To do otherwise is not only impolite, but also implies you are guilty of something."

That remark drew an immediate response. Taking in his somber appearance, she blurted, "I didn't do it! It wasn't me, truly it wasn't. The goblet just fell off the mantle. It was an old thing, anyway. It wasn't important."

Releasing her grip, the girl turned toward him and blinked back unshed tears. Her eyes were as pale blue as her brother's. "It *wasn't* me!" She stomped her slippered foot for emphasis.

Francis' own brown eyes darkened further. "Indeed? Lying is not God's way, dear girl. An ancient Greek philosopher liked to say, '*You can best reward a liar by believing nothing of what he says.*'"

Standing, a faraway look came into his eyes, and he scratched at his sideburns. "Now what was his name? Was it Aristippus? Or perhaps...?" He wandered off into the garden beyond the sculptured yew hedges.

It would be some time before Francis left the

realm of philosophical debate to return to the real world. Amanda exchanged another worried glance with Lydia, then turned her attention to the child. "Let us forget the goblet for now and introduce ourselves, shall we? I am Miss Barclay, and this is my sister-in-law, Mrs. Barclay."

After an audible sniff, the girl turned a watery gaze to Amanda, then curtsayed. "How do you do? I am Daphne, Daphne Hamilton. *Lady* Daphne. Mama says that means you have to do whatever I say." She screwed up her face to show what she thought of her title. "I don't want to be a lady. I want to be a princess."

She vigorously shook her head, displacing a multitude of corkscrew curls. A tiny tear trickled down her pudgy cheek. "And if I can't be a princess, then I want to be a boy. Mama wanted a boy. Boys get to go fishing and play in the mud. And stay up late and—"

Amanda's heart constricted. This poor, little waif of a child. With a father like the former dishonorable Duke of Yarborough, and a mother who was cruel enough to abandon the child to an uncaring governess, no wonder the young girl felt unwanted, unloved. Daphne labored under a heavy load for any child, let alone a six-year-old. That probably contributed to her bad behavior. Like false bravado. Oddly enough, the child's manner was similar to her brother Marcus' so many years ago.

Lydia stooped to brush some dirt off the girl's ruffle-edged pantaloons. "Gracious! I am sure your mama never meant such a thing. Girls are such a comfort to their mothers."

Daphne's lower lip trembled mutinously as if to dispute Lydia's words. "Not me! Not me! I'm a terror. Mama says so."

Amanda smoothed the tear from the child's velvety soft cheek. Her opinion of the duchess just sank even lower. "I think Lady Daphne is a fine name, don't you, Lyddie? Perhaps we should continue this conversation inside. The sun seems determined to plant another freckle upon my nose!"

Lydia must have understood Amanda's attempt to distract the unhappy girl. "Oh, yes, indeed. We cannot have Miss Barclay befreckled, now can we? Then she will never find herself a suitable match."

The corner of Amanda's mouth twitched. As if freckles determined whom she would marry! Besides, at her advanced age, she was past thinking about the wedded state. But the diversion worked. Daphne took the ploy seriously and yanked her elders forward.

"I'm sorry. Truly I am. Will you stay with me, Miss Barclay? Play with me? I promise to behave."

With her free hand, Amanda fingered the scooped neckline of her dress. Was she up to the task? The child promised to be a rare handful. "Um, I cannot say, Lady Daphne. I, um, have not

talked with his grace yet.”

An impish smile lit the child’s face. “Marcus is a great gun! If I want you, he’ll say yes. I just *know* he will.”

She came to an abrupt stop and blinked her big, pale eyes at Amanda. “Don’t tell him about the goblet. It was very old—from Venice. The squire just got it. He was as pleased as punch, too.” Daphne’s eyes puddled again. “Is Venice very far? Will you take me there? Maybe I can get another one—so Marcus won’t be angry. He *mustn’t* find out.”

So she *did* break the goblet. With feigned indifference, Amanda suggested, “Perhaps it would be better if you tell the duke about the accident—to own up to it. I am certain he would be more displeased if he found out you were lying about the damage.”

Daphne lifted her dark eyebrows until they disappeared under her mass of curls. “Truly?”

Her wide-eyed innocence made Amanda smile. “Truly.”

“Yes, indeed,” Lydia chimed in. “Men do abhor bouncers, you know.”

The girl heaved a heavy sigh. “He *does* hate lies. But I don’t know. Mama says he can get angrier than a swarm of hornets.”

Reaching the massive mahogany front doors, Amanda bit back her smile. The description did have a ring of truth about it.

Even Lydia seemed impressed. “Gracious!” she commented.

Before they had a chance to knock, one of the doors swung open. “For pity sake, Lady Daphne! It’s not the thing to be running about making a cake out of yourself.”

An immaculately dressed Roderick Pritchard pulled a muslin handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his florid forehead. “What would m’father say if he had seen you?”

Ushering them inside, he stuffed his handkerchief inside his well-cut tailcoat. “Ladies, please forgive my manners. I... well, no matter.”

He shot Daphne a long suffering look, then whispered into Amanda’s ear. “You do see, Miss Barclay, the child is incorrigible. She’s a veritable hoyden. You *must* take this position—for all our sakes.”

As they stepped into the entrance hall, a cool rush of air from the dark interior of the house greeted them. Amanda refrained from commenting as her eyes adjusted to the somber atmosphere created by English walnut paneling the walls. Her options, narrow before, seemed to be further reduced.

Daphne fidgeted on the entrance hall’s granite stone slabs. Spotting Amanda’s gaze, the child mopped her forehead with an imaginary handkerchief, in imitation of her host. From his harried expression, she must have played a number of

tricks on him earlier in the day. Small wonder Mr. Pritchard appeared ready to jump out of his skin.

Amanda hid her smile. She also itched to mimic Mr. Pritchard. Perhaps she and the child were kindred spirits.

A nervous twitch distorted his lips. He signaled to a burly servant. "The butler will take your things." Glancing around, he seemed to grow more perturbed. "Where the dev—I mean, where is our worthy parson? I could have sworn I saw him alight your landau."

"Oh, we lost him outside among the yew hedges." Lydia's melodious laugh made them all smile.

"I say! Outside! A capital idea. Let's you and I go fetch him." Mr. Pritchard then winked at Amanda and lowered his voice. "This will give you time to get acquainted with your new charge, Miss Barclay."

He was insistent, wasn't he? And eager to escape. Whether she was ready for the upcoming interview or not, she handed her lace trimmed bonnet to the butler.

Mr. Pritchard nodded approvingly. "Scargill, show Lady Daphne and Miss Barclay to the main parlor. Mrs. Barclay and I shall..." With surprising swiftness, he whisked Lydia outside.

Daphne stiffened into a strict military posture. Her lower lip protruded in a pout. "Not the parlor," she hissed.

While Scargill marched ahead, down the gloomy corridor, she lagged behind, obviously not wanting to go.

Amanda leaned over so only the girl could hear. "Is the goblet in the main parlor?"

Daphne's eyes widened. "Y-yes."

"Come on then. Perhaps between the two of us, we can think of some way out of this imbroglio." Amanda extended her hand.

The girl hesitated, then tentatively joined hands. She shyly smiled up at Amanda.

After catching up with Scargill, they entered the room and waited until he left. Amanda scanned the parlor as an old friend she had not seen in a long time. She hardly recognized its stark appearance. During the Christmas holidays, it was easily the gayest place in all of Swinbrook. Now it stood dark and silent, with its heavy drapes drawn and a faint aroma of stale cigar smoke pervading the air. It reeked from disuse. The squire's extensive painting collection hung forlornly from the high paneled walls.

She tiptoed about as she might when visiting a cemetery. "Good, we are alone. Now, where is the goblet?"

Daphne pointed to the stone opening of the intricately carved oak fireplace. There, splattered on the wide-planked wooden floor were brilliant blue fragments of glass that had once been part of a beautiful, gilt and enameled goblet. Knowing

the squire's love of art, Amanda surmised that it must have been proudly displayed on the mantelpiece. No doubt warned against touching the object, the child's curiosity had gotten the better of her. There could be no hope of salvaging any part of this treasure now; it was beyond repair.

Amanda approached the fireplace and bent down to pick up the largest piece of glass—the knotted, slender stem. “This must have been worth a fortune.” Reverently, she laid the stem back on the floor.

Daphne sniffed, trying to hold back her tears. “It was so pr—pretty. I just had to take a look at it. But it sl—slipped.” Her face crumpled. “What shall I do now?”

Flinging herself into Amanda's waist, the girl indulged in a bout of weeping.

“Goodness, this will not do!” Amanda frantically searched her reticule, then handed the child a delicate ivory handkerchief. “You must dry your tears. We... we will think of something.” But what could make a shattered goblet whole again?

No sooner were the words out of her mouth, when the room's highly waxed mahogany doors opened. The Duke of Yarborough stepped inside.

“Ah, here you both are, as Pritchard said. For once, he knew what he was talking about.”

Amanda's heart dropped. Whirling around with her back to the wreckage, she prayed he would not notice. “Good afternoon, your grace.”

He looked magnificent. Beaver hat in hand, he was dressed for riding. Although not an ebony hair was out of place, his face flushed pink from a wind and sunburn. He must have just completed a bruising gallop over the rolling hills of Squire Pritchard's estate. His stockinette pantaloons hugged his muscular legs to perfection and his snug, double-breasted navy tailcoat did the same for his broad shoulders. He was a maiden's dream. *Her* erstwhile dream. But dreams never turned into reality, did they? He was a stranger with the hated Yarborough name. Like father, like son.

She focused on the enameled buttons of his coat rather than on his handsome face.

Daphne ran to him and wrapped her arms around his legs.

He beamed a smile at her and threw his hat onto a semi-circular side table. "There, there. I am happy to see you also, dear girl."

Their affection for each other was touching... and most inappropriate for a Yarborough. Amanda eyed him curiously. She did not breathe for fear of interrupting them.

The duke's deep voice recalled her attention. "I trust you are getting along with Lady Daphne, Miss Barclay. She is a good child."

His large gloved hand grazed the top of Daphne's curls and down her soft cheek. "But what is this? A tear? Turning into a watering pot on me?"

“N–no. I’m f–fine.” Her brimming eyes belied her words.

“Fine, are you? I think not.” He patted her slim shoulders. “If you must keep secrets, then please, go to your room. You know how I detest secrets.”

Seconds ticked by, but she remained mute.

He sighed. “Well, no matter. Leave us now, Daphne. Miss Barclay and I have a few matters to discuss.”

“I want to stay with—”

“Daphne.” His firm voice brooked no arguments.

With a sorrowful, backwards glance, she obeyed her brother.

After the door closed, the duke gestured toward a wide, cushioned settee, away from the fireplace. “Please, have a seat, Miss Barclay.”

Amanda gladly complied. To her dismay, he remained standing. She had a coveted, close-up view of his muscled thighs. Her heart pounded in response, but only because he towered over her; no other reason.

“What was my sister crying about?”

Her first dealing with the Duke of Yarborough and she had to lie. And he just said he hated secrets. If her father were alive, he would preach up a storm.

But she *had* to protect the child. It was important that Daphne tell the duke herself. “Um, it was nothing important, your grace.”

Convinced or not, he shrugged away the incident. "So, I am a busy man. I shall get right to the point. Do you agree to become my sister's governess? I think you will find me generous. Very generous. Indeed, I have had no complaints from any of my women acquaintances."

Amanda raised her hand to her throat. Women acquaintances? Whatever did he mean? Was he talking about... mistresses? He could not possibly mean to dishonor her. Narrowing her gaze, she regarded him warily.

He pulled off his leather gloves and slapped them against one hand. "Well, speak up. What do you say—yea or nay? Save your missish behavior for another occasion, hmmm?"

She flushed. How embarrassing that he could read her private thoughts. Far from feeling at ease, she sat at the edge of the cushion. "You do not know anything about me, your grace. How can you be certain of my competence?"

Dropping his gloves next to his hat, he turned and paced in front of her. Every step he took closer to the fireplace made her wince with apprehension. She and Daphne had been lucky—so far.

"Fishing for compliments, are you, Miss Barclay? Well then, I shall oblige you." He ticked off comments on his fingers. "One, you are the daughter of a baronet, I believe. And sister to a parson—I cannot think of more steadying influences than those. Two, you have been away

nursing relatives—this shows stamina. Three, Pritchard has spoken for you. I value his opinion.”

The duke swept his gaze over the length of her. “And four, concerning your outward appearance, suitably clothed, you do not inspire aversion.”

She gasped. His insult drummed savagely through her veins, chilling her very core. A sudden frost descended over her limbs, disabling her.

His highly polished Hessian boots came to a stop in front of her. She could only stare at the boots’ small, black tassels, jiggling to a halt.

“Ah, I have made a mull of it, haven’t I?” He reached down and carefully tugged her to her feet. “I do apologize, Miss Barclay. I am a plain speaker. At times the things I say are not suitable for the gentler sex. Six years in Wellington’s army produced that effect on me.”

She removed her hand from his. Speaking of effects, Marcus’ close proximity created a dizzying one on her. Instead of looking him in the face, she contemplated the complex folds of his cravat. Being this near to him was even worse than she imagined.

Worse? No, perhaps it was more like heaven.

“I—I had no idea you fought in the war, your grace.”

“True, it is unusual for the heir to serve king and country. However, my duty abroad suited my father as well as myself.” He shrugged, belittling his patriotic service. “The past is best forgotten.”

With one finger, he nudged her chin up. His blazing bright eyes held her captive. "I do so hope you will accept this position, Miss Barclay. My sister is greatly in need of guidance. Her mother scarce bothers with the child. Regretfully, Nanette is as flighty as they come. I sometimes believe she cares more for my father's son, Gregory, by his second wife, than she does for her own child."

Releasing his hold, the duke abruptly backed away as if disturbed. He strode over to a redwood sideboard and from a crystal decanter, poured amber fluid into two tumblers. The smell of fine, aged whiskey drifted over to her. "Enough of these delays! Have a drink and we will seal the bargain."

Bereft of his support, Amanda sank down onto the settee. She willed her suddenly rapid heartbeat to return to normal. "I do not drink, your grace."

He observed her from over the top of his glass. His eyes seemed to smolder. "Pity," he murmured.

Staring at her folded hands in her lap, she stalled for time. "How long would you be requiring me, your grace?"

He downed the drink, then poured another. "Hey? Requiring you? I—" Turning his broad back to her, he held onto the edge of the sideboard. "A fair question. In truth, Lady Daphne needs a stabilizing influence in her young life. Someone who will not pack up and leave at the first temper tantrum. And I promise you, there

will be temper tantrums.”

He spun around. “Can you stay the course, Miss Barclay?”

From under half-lidded eyes, he gazed at her. Even from across the room, his masculine presence troubled her, sending wondrous strange tingles down her spine. He was charming—a rogue and an aristocrat, all rolled into one vastly appealing man. She would find it difficult to resist him, but somehow she *had* to.

She tucked an errant lock of hair back into her chignon and made her decision—her commitment. “Yes, I believe I can, your grace. However, as I have just returned home, I am loathe to leave again. If I do accept, this position would be temporary for me. Only while Daphne is in Swinbrook. Are we in agreement?”

“Temporary? This is not what I had in mind, Miss Barclay.” Marcus frowned his displeasure. His midnight brows descended close to his eyes.

One did not disobey a duke—usually. But once she had inconvenienced his father by refusing to exchange her virtue for a bag of gold coins. And now she inconvenienced Marcus. Perhaps these society men were too used to getting their own way.

“Those are my terms.” Sitting back in the settee for the first time, she exhaled a ragged breath. Goodness, but when he was angry, he looked like the wrath of God.

A slow smile hovered on his lips. After a moment, his deep, rich laughter filled the main parlor. She watched in amazement. What could be so humorous?

He slammed his tumbler down, splashing whiskey over the sides. "You drive a hard bargain, Miss Barclay! However, I like that, especially in a woman. Tell me, are you always so determined?"

Uncertain of what to make of his change in moods, she just nodded.

He quickly covered the distance separating them, then extended his hand. "Done. I agree—for now. I will arrange to have your things transported to the manor house today."

His handshake was firm and exciting, like the rest of him. From his touch, agreeable sensations fluttered up her arm and down into her midsection. Years before she had not known what to make of those feelings. Now she was well aware of what they meant. They meant danger.

She stared at the fullness of his lips. What would it be like to kiss—

Marcus broke contact. "Since our business is finished, I will let you and Lady Daphne get better acquainted." He turned to go.

Her hand throbbed as if missing the feel of his skin. "Um, your grace?" He swung around and lifted his eyebrow. "May I ask again how long Lady Daphne will be staying here? So I can make my plans?"

“Until her mother collects her. Most likely next month—September. However, she could arrive sooner. Does *that* suit you, Miss Barclay?”

He was ribbing her, but she did not mind. Somehow, in some inexplicable way, he made everything seem alive; he made *her* feel alive. She relished his company, and once again, she found herself wishing he would not leave. “Yes, that suits me.”

His penetrating gaze was no longer on her. Crossing the room in front of her, he stood by the fireplace and stared at the jumbled pile of brightly colored blue glass. “What the devil?”

Immediately, she understood Daphne’s fear of having Marcus angry with her. After basking in the warmth of his smile, and being privileged to hear his unaffected laughter, Amanda cowered at the thought of provoking his ire.

“What happened to Squire Pritchard’s prized goblet? By God, he only purchased it a day or two ago.” Although Marcus’ words were spoken calmly, a tiny vein pulsed at his temple.

She rushed over to his side and looked down at the broken fragments. What should she do? What should she say? Without thinking, she pulled on the wool embroidery around her wrist. “Um, there was an ac—accident.”

He grasped her hand to still her actions. “So I gathered. Who is responsible?”

Her megrim, mercifully dormant for a good

fifteen minutes, now hammered inside her skull. She flinched with unexpected pain.

Marcus tightened his grip. "Answer me!"

She could not expose Daphne to her brother's fury, so she did the only thing she could think of. Meeting his icy-blue gaze, Amanda lied, "I broke it."

He dropped her hand as if she were on fire. "That goblet was almost four hundred years old. The squire recently acquired it from a foreign traveler. I do not know what will anger the squire more—the loss of this antiquity or the loss of his money. How could you have been so careless?"

The painted portraits from the squire's extensive art collection all stared at her with unseeing eyes. They accused her of telling a falsehood—another one. She swallowed an unsteady gulp. "Pl—please, could you take the money out of my wages—to repay the squire?"

Marcus' laugh had little merriment in it. "Indeed, I shall. However, I should warn you, Miss Barclay, to pay for this Venetian goblet, you can expect to remain my sister's governess until the year 1830. At the very least."

Feeling the blood drain from her face, she held on to the back of a tub-shaped chair for support.

The duke pointed an accusing finger at her. "In the future, I trust you will be more careful. After Lady Daphne attains her majority, I shall have little need of a governess. Meaning, I will no longer

finance your costly propensity to destroy *objets d'art*.”

He gave her a mock bow. “Good day, Miss Barclay. I sincerely hope you have better luck tomorrow.” After he departed, a hollow silence sliced through the room.

Amanda’s knees gave way and she fell into the convenient chair, whispering, “Tomorrow just has to be a better day than today.”

Chapter Three



After sampling a dinner fit for a king... or a prince regent, Marcus pushed his empty plate aside and reached for the decanter of port. Since no ladies were present, there was no need to postpone the after-dinner ritual of gentlemen drinking themselves under the table. While footmen removed the remains of the feast, he poured a generous amount of port into his glass, passed the decanter to his left, then studied the wine's rich, ruby-red color. Sipping the liquid, he savored its sweet, full-bodied bouquet.

"Excellent wine, is it not, your grace?" Squire Pritchard smacked his lips and patted his rotund middle with a self-satisfied air. "Fresh from Oporto, it is. The finest port in all the world, so I'm told. Dickered with an ancient Portuguese dame to get a few bottles. Crafty old woman—the same one I bought that Venetian goblet from."

"Yes, you told me, sir." His thirst vanishing, Marcus set his glass down.

He had not mentioned the broken goblet yet; perhaps because his interview with the new governess somehow troubled him. Naturally, the money was not an issue. He could repay ten thousand goblets. But Miss Barclay's hesitancy and Daphne's stubborn silence when he had first entered the parlor niggled at him. Was his sister responsible for the damage? Did Miss Barclay lie to protect Daphne?

He slid down in the high-backed chair. An inelegant position, but comfortable. Commendable of the governess to shield the child, but counter-productive. He valued honesty in dealings with his employees. Would his sister benefit from close association with someone who so readily told bouncers?

Marcus sighed. That was not the only area of anxiety he had concerning Miss Barclay. When he had gazed down into her bottomless brown eyes, an irresistible urge almost overtook him. God help him but he had wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her!

Madness! Why did she affect him so? After all, she was only a domestic, someone who should not excite his interest. Although contrary to what Miss Barclay admitted, he was positive he had seen her before. But where?

He glanced at the dining room's sturdy double doors as if he could see through them, upstairs to the nursery. Was she preparing Daphne for bed?

Was she singing his sister a sweet lullaby to soothe her to sleep?

Was Miss Barclay thinking of him?

“Not going into a brown study, are you, Yarborough?” Young Pritchard reached over and refilled their glasses. “No reason to be, as far as I can see. Lady Daphne’s adequately taken care of. No cause for concern there. We can kick up a lark and have a bang up time!”

Marcus loosened his cravat. The alcoholic effects of the wine plus the excessive warmth in the dining room made him long to kick up a lark right now, by jumping into the brisk waters of the Windrush. After thinking about the intriguing governess, he could use a cold dunking.

“Perhaps later, Pritchard. First I want to tell the squire about his gob—”

The squire held up his plump, bejeweled hand. “Forgive the impertinence, your grace, but I’ll not hear another word about bang up times. Of all the bacon-brained sentiments!” He slammed his fist on the sturdy oak table, and from the impact, set his excess jowls under his chin quivering.

Young Pritchard raised his gaze to the *fleur-de-lis* patterned, plaster ceiling. A mottled blotch of pink crept up his neck, disturbing the perfection of his immaculate attire. “M’father’s pet hobby-horse,” he muttered.

“Which is?” Marcus settled back to enjoy the familial strife between father and son. His own

father had held him in such aversion that the old duke scarce put in an appearance at dinner times to foster any type of open disagreements.

“Responsibility!” the squire blustered, pointing a heavy finger. “And this also concerns you, your grace.”

“Indeed? Do tell.”

The squire snorted. “Ach, you young sprigs! When I was your age, I was a family man through and through. Bless your dear, departed mother, Roderick, but I had six tiny mouths to feed, including yours.”

Young Pritchard shrugged. “So all my siblings got leg-shackled and left home but me. I thought I’d be a comfort to you in your old age.”

The squire glowed an alarming shade of beet-red. Standing up, he waved his arms. “Dash it, boy! I’m not in my dotage yet! As eldest son, it is your duty to tie the knot and beget me a grandchild.”

He whirled that accusing finger at Marcus. “You, too. This might be presumptuous on my part, your grace, but your title requires you to have an heir. Since your father is no longer alive, I take it upon myself to light the fire under you.”

“I am obliged to you, sir,” Marcus said wryly.

“Now, now, no sarcasm needed. I’ve known you since you were a young pup.” The squire, pacified, resumed his seat. “1818 is the year to get married. Everyone’s doing it. Just look at the royal dukes—Clarence, Kent, and Cambridge.

Tenants for life, they are. Happy as a grig about it, too.”

Pritchard passed the port around again. “For pity sake, happy? I think not. Now that her royal highness, Princess Charlotte, has gone to meet her maker, the dukes are all in a frenzy to beget a legitimate heir.”

“My point, exactly.” The squire wheezed.

“The Duke of Clarence is older than you, Father, and Kent is the same age. I think Yarborough and I have some time left to us before we have to come up to scratch.”

His son’s words seemed to cause the squire’s blood to boil. Marcus quickly spoke to deflect his host’s growing anger. “I *do* have an heir, sir. My half-brother, Gregory. He is only sixteen, but he is an admirable, strapping lad.”

“A bit surly, though, ain’t he?” Pritchard opined. “As I recall, he don’t like you much.”

His father glared at him. “Did I shell out my hard-earned guineas for you to talk like a damned chimney sweep?”

Pritchard had the grace to blush.

From behind a dinner napkin, Marcus murmured, “I warned you.”

The squire finished his glass, refreshing himself to continue battle. “Your brother, eh? That puts me in mind of your stepmother, the duchess. Fine figure of a woman, if I remember right. Few years younger than you. Why don’t you pay your

addresses to her?"

"Nanette Hamilton?" Unintentionally, Marcus coughed. There was nothing that goose of a woman would prefer more than to exchange vows with him. Which was impossible, of course. However, when the old duke died, she made her desires known to all and sundry. Needless to say, the sentiments were unmistakably one-sided.

Marcus raised a rebellious eyebrow. "With all due respect, sir, bedding Nanette is a dash smoky. And marriage to one's stepmother forbidden."

Young Pritchard's guffaws threatened to shake the chandelier down from the ceiling. Thankfully, a noise diverted the squire's attention away from his repugnant suggestion. One of the double doors cracked open, and a small sliver of a face peeped inside.

Daphne. What was the girl up to? She committed an unmentionable breach of etiquette: interrupting gentlemen consuming their after-dinner port. Unpardonable!

Marcus sucked in his cheeks to hide his amusement. She was a daring, little thing.

Spotting him, she rushed inside the dining room and flung her small arms around him. "Marcus! I just *had* to come and say goodnight. Truly I did! Please don't send me away."

The squire sputtered into his drink. "'Pon my word! Not at all the thing to have females barging in on one's solitude. Not used to it. Goes against

nature. Dash it! Even Mrs. Pritchard, bless her dear soul, treaded softly when the dining room doors remained shut!”

Marcus set the child from him. Her bare toes and wrapper-clad body were at odds with the formality of the dinner setting. “All true, Daphne. You owe our esteemed host an apology.”

The words took a few moments to pass her reluctant lips. “Sorry, sir.”

“Very prettily said, my girl,” Marcus complemented. “Now, where is your *efficient* governess, may I ask?”

Daphne focused her wide, dancing eyes on him. “I bamboozled her! Aren’t I clever?”

Marcus sighed again. Why couldn’t Nanette pay attention to her child’s upbringing?

“But you promised me a goodnight kiss, Marcus. *Every* night, you said, to make up for all those times you’ve been away.” Daphne’s lower lip protruded. “You promised.”

Try as he might, he could not summon the righteous anger he should have felt at her improper attire and behavior. “You incorrigible chit! You have a tenacious memory, don’t you?” He patted her dark, silken curls, then kissed her freshly scrubbed forehead. “Now, where is your governess?”

Miss Barclay finally made her appearance through the double doors. Her bosom heaving as if under some grand exertion, she entered the

room and approached the table. She wore the same gown as she had earlier in the day. A few smudges of dirt marred the white flounces at the bottom.

Marcus eyed the dress thoughtfully. Perhaps she had nothing else suitable to change into.

She avoided his gaze. "My apologies for disturbing you, gentlemen, but Lady Daphne assured me she was preparing for bed." Her voice held a note of reproach.

Swatting away tendrils of golden brown hair that had escaped her chignon, Miss Barclay extended her hand. "Lady Daphne, we will take our leave now and return to the nursery."

The governess' stern tone revealed her state of mind. In a word—ragged.

Young Pritchard raised his glass to her. "My sympathies, Miss Barclay. And m'father wonders why I've not married and produced a passel of whelps."

"Manners, Roderick! Mind your manners. You forget yourself," the Squire thundered. "You are of an age where I should not have to reprimand you!"

Flushed with wine, young Pritchard worked up some false courage. "Then don't!"

After Miss Barclay gasped, Marcus pushed his high-backed chair away from the table, and stood. "My apologies are in order. I fear my sister requires some lessons in proper social behavior."

“Yes, that and the back of a hairbrush!” Young Pritchard tittered.

Daphne’s eyes glittered suspiciously. She ran to the comfort of her governess and buried her face in the gown’s voluminous folds.

“She is not the only one, Pritchard,” Marcus warned. “I shall be back shortly.” Nodding at Miss Barclay to follow him, he exited the dining room.

Once out in the dim corridor, he took Daphne aside, bent down to her height and looked her directly in the eye. “You must apologize to Miss Barclay for your display of disobedience. As my sister, I expect better of you.”

The child’s face contorted with unhappiness. Sniffing, she wiped her nose on her wrapper sleeve. “S—sorry, Miss Barclay.”

Miss Barclay hurried to press a handkerchief into Daphne’s hand. “Do not despair, Lady Daphne. I am certain that with a few ground rules we can both come to an understanding.”

“Like n—no fibbing?”

The child’s sorrow-strained voice tugged at Marcus’ heart-strings.

The governess smiled reassuringly. “Exactly. No fibbing.”

An absurd longing floundered in Marcus’ breast. If only she would smile at him like that.

He shook his head, a move he immediately regretted. The Portuguese wine was more potent

than he was used to. Why the devil did he care who or what she smiled at?

Clearing his throat, he straightened. At this intimate distance, her sweet, flowery fragrance of lavender floated over to him. In response, his muscles hardened. "One of my ground rules, also, Miss Barclay. No fibbing."

What in Hades was her first name again? By Jove, with her this near, he could not concentrate. His mind went blank.

She flushed a delicate shade of pink. The coloring suited her. Did she realize he referred to the broken goblet or was their close proximity affecting her as well?

Taking a step away, he planted another chaste kiss upon his sister's forehead. "There, moppet. A double good-night kiss. Now, I suggest you allow Miss Barclay to tuck you in. Say your prayers to be on your best behavior tomorrow."

"Yes, Marcus. G'night." Her cavernous yawn distorted her young face.

She and the governess turned to go up the massive staircase.

He waited until they had reached the intermediate landing separating the floors. "Miss Barclay, when you are through with your duties, I wish to speak with you in the main parlor."

Even at this distance, he could still detect the warm blush of embarrassment decorating her cheeks. "Certainly, your grace." With a swish of

skirts, she guided his sister up the rest of the stairs.

He stroked his chin. Miss Barclay was an unusual woman. Unusual in that she did nothing to overtly attract his attention, unlike so many London misses he had the misfortune to meet. However, he was extremely cognizant of her presence. Doe-brown eyes, rosebud lips, the merest sprinkling of freckles over an adorable nose....

Marcus exhaled slowly. No more foreign wine for him tonight. The port plus the squire's earlier words about marriage had more effect on him than he cared to admit.

Walking back into the dining room, he spotted both his hosts with heightened scarlet faces. Either the wine or being at loggerheads contributed to their fiery coloring. Or both cases. Marcus took his seat and said the first innocuous thing he could think of. "So, how does your flower garden go on, sir?"

Young Pritchard rolled his eyes, but the squire leaned back in his chair and sighed. "Pon my word, those weeds will be the death of me! If only—"

Again one of the double doors opened. Surely it wasn't Daphne? Another interruption would be unthinkable. But no, it was Scargill who entered. Relief flooded through Marcus—only to be short-lived.

"Please f'give me, sir." Scargill hesitated. "I tol' her you wasn't to be disturbed but—"

“La! Of course the squire will see me now. Do you think he wants to keep the Duchess of Yarborough waiting in the parlor? You provoking creature.”

The hapless butler cringed under the earsplitting barrage of words, duty done he quickly exited the room.

Nanette.

Exchanging a quizzical glance with young Pritchard, Marcus stood. “Nanette! By all that is... wonderful, what are you doing here?”

Later he would apologize to the squire for another member of his family breaking into the inner sanctum of the gentlemen’s after-dinner ritual. It was truly unpardonable; Nanette did not have the guise of youth to excuse herself. Did the older man still think she was a fine figure of a woman?

Evidently. The squire hid a comment about breach of etiquette behind his cloth napkin, then stood in unison with his son to usher the duchess to a seat.

A small woman by nature, Nanette made up for her shortcomings by being blessed... or cursed with a loud voice. “My thanks for your kindness, sir. But you, Yarborough, why should I not take a holiday in the Cotswolds? You cannot mean that because I have been widowed these past two years, I must hide myself behind closed doors. Positively medieval!”

Marcus sighed. "Nanette, you misunderstand me. I only expressed wonder at seeing you here in Swinbrook, at this hour. Last I heard you were enjoying the sights in Brighton. Why the sudden change in plans?"

"A little birdie told me you stole Daphne from her governess and headed out this way." Nanette slowly removed the gloves from her plump arms and batted unnaturally thick lashes at him. "I just wanted to have a cozy family *tête-à-tête*."

From behind Nanette, the squire gave Marcus a broad wink, then tapped her on the shoulder. "Your grace, you must be tired from your journey. I'd be honored if you consider my home as your own and stay as long as you wish."

As she simpered her gratitude, Marcus shook his head. Nanette was an extremely foolish woman. The grand-niece of a viscount, she had jumped at the opportunity to marry a duke. Ignoring polite society's expressions of dismay, she traded her twenty-year-old youth and innocence for the privilege to be bound to a dissolute and debauched man aged beyond his fifty-two years. After one day of living with him, if not sooner, she regretted she had sold her soul.

She also had even been naïve enough to believe Marcus desired to share her bedroom. Like wayward father, like son, perhaps. She could not have been more wrong.

Poor, unhappy Nanette.

Not that she had formed a lasting passion for him. He feared the only thing which truly excited her was a person's title.

"Splendid!" The squire beamed. "Now, if you will excuse Roderick and me, we will be retiring to our rooms."

This was news to young Pritchard. "But, Father—"

The squire's murderous gaze brooked no opposition. Jerking his beefy thumb toward the door, he ordered, "Now!"

"For pity's sake, I'm going!"

Two seconds later, Marcus and Nanette were alone in the dining room. He poured her some wine, then refilled his own glass, disregarding his earlier intention to abstain. "It has been quite an age since last I set eyes on you, Nanette. Again I ask, what brings you to Swinbrook?"

Her auburn hair, now a bit faded, appeared dull in the flickering candlelight. However, her eyes contained a surfeit of sparkle. Had she also imbibed too much?

"You!"

Her answer startled him, as did her action of outlining her lips with her tongue. Good Lord, the woman was... feeling her oats.

Glad that the solid table separated them, he took out a handkerchief, then feigned a yawn into it. "Whatever do you mean?"

She blew a kiss over to him. "Why don't we

move into the parlor? Some place more... comfortable?"

The parlor. He had requested Miss Barclay to meet him in the main parlor. Circumstances demanded he terminate this *tête-à-tête*—fast. "I regret I have prior business this night. However, tomorrow we shall have a chance to talk. Daphne will be excited to see you."

Nanette pouted. "Family. That is all you ever talk about." As if to erase her amorous behavior, she straightened in her chair and primly tightened her lips. "So, Yarborough, aren't you going to ask me about your dear brother?"

The adjective "dear" was not the one that came to mind when thinking of his brother. "Is Gregory down from Eton? Does he travel with you?"

Nanette's round face brightened considerably, which never occurred when she spoke of her own daughter. "Yes to both questions, but I left him in Brighton to... watch out for my interests, so to speak. Naturally I had to come greet you post haste as soon as I found out you were back in England."

She inched her fingers across the table, probably hoping to entwine her hand in his. "I cannot imagine why you thought Daphne's governess in Bath unsatisfactory."

He thwarted her intentions by standing. "Does the term 'prime abess' mean anything to you, Nanette? I must counsel you to concern yourself

more with my sister's upbringing. As it is, I have arranged for a suitable governess." Checking his pocket watch, he tilted his head. "Indeed, I meet with her now. Would you... care to join me?"

A reluctant invitation, but one he was obliged to offer. However, he *knew* Nanette. She would not accept.

"La, Yarborough! Do you think I traveled all these miles to listen to a tedious, sanctimonious, milquetoast of a governess?" Again, her voice turned screechy. "Not bloody likely!"

Marcus raised an eyebrow at her vulgarism. He would give her the benefit of the doubt; it was the drink talking.

"As you wish. Until tomorrow, then." Leaving Nanette with her mouth agape, Marcus left her to her own entertainment.



Amanda approached the main parlor with trepidation. She was late. After seeing Daphne safely to bed, Amanda could admit to dawdling. But why did the duke wish to see her? Did he mean to rake her over the coals for allowing Daphne access to the dining room? And in her night attire?

If so, Amanda would have to take her lumps, that much was certain. The child had outwitted her; for only six years old, she was a willful little sprite.

But Daphne also showed a great desire to please. Her brother appeared to be the most important person in her young universe. With a few carefully planned lessons and by learning from example, she should be able to act in a manner acceptable to the duke and London's *beau monde*.

At least Amanda hoped so.

She smoothed back the loose hairs on the sides of her chignon to prepare herself. Opening the gleaming mahogany door, she took a fortifying breath and entered the room. Illuminated by candlelight, the main parlor seemed to regain some of its festive holiday air that she remembered so well. The heavy window drapes no longer looked forbidding; the damask material glowed with reflected vibrancy from nearby flickering flames. From the high walls, plump, pink-cheeked figures painted long ago smiled down at her, bathed in the shimmering luminosity.

Although no fire cracked from the immense oak fireplace, she did not feel slighted. The squire was not remiss as host by not lighting wooden logs inside the stone opening. The evening retained the heat of the summer's day.

A mixture of vanilla scent and tobacco wafted over to her. The aroma reminded her of her father, smoking his pipe while preparing Sunday's sermon. It was a comforting memory. "Your grace?" she inquired.

From behind a high-backed Jacobean wing armchair, the duke stood. “Ah, Miss Barclay. Good of you to join me.”

He was not being sarcastic, was he?

Gesturing with a meerschaum pipe, he indicated a similar chair in front of him. “Please, won’t you have a seat?”

She sat with her hands demurely folded in her lap and waited for him to speak.

He set his pipe down on the side table, his fingers lingering on its elaborately carved, white bowl. Inside, crisp cinders glowed orange with heat. “My special sort—a blend of East Indian tobacco with a hint of vanilla bean.”

With one leg negligently crossed over the other, he studied her. “As you know, it is not at all the thing for a gentleman to smoke in the presence of a lady. Do the fumes in the air bother you?”

“Not at all, your grace. In truth, my dear papa used to enjoy his pipe now and again. He claimed it cleared the cobwebs from his aged mind.”

The duke lifted a dark eyebrow. “Did he? As I can only claim thirty-four years to my name, my thinking is not too befuddled—yet.”

Her heart hammered out her alarm. “Pardon me! I—I did not mean to imply that you were in your... dotage, sir.”

“Indeed. My thanks for the compliment.”

Silence stretched for an eternity. Glancing around, she noticed the blue glass fragments had

been removed from the wide-planked wooden floor. The mantelpiece stood empty without the gilt and enameled goblet. Had the squire been very angry to discover its destruction? If only she *could* travel to Venice, as Daphne innocently suggested, and find a replacement.

Amanda fidgeted with the French knots on her gown. "You wanted to talk to me, your grace?"

His pale eyes warmed to turquoise blue. Leaning closer, he rested his elbow on the tight superfine material covering his thigh. "Yes, I did. Forgive me, but I seem to have forgotten your given name, Miss Barclay."

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

A lock of raven hair fell over his forehead giving him a rakish appearance. "Your name?"

She could not control the heated flush that rose up her neck. It was as if he was asking her something extremely personal. Something only a sweetheart or a special beau might ask. The temperature in the parlor suddenly soared blisteringly high.

"Um, A—Amanda," she finally responded.

No spark of recognition lighted his handsome face. But then again, all those years ago, she offered only her nickname—Mandy.

"Pretty name," he murmured. His unwinking gaze mesmerized her. His eyes darkened further and his fingers drummed an impatient beat upon the armrest. Picking up a glass filled with whiskey,

he took a generous drink. He set it down, then stared at her.

A strange thought occurred to her. Was he a trifle foxed?

“Would you care for some refreshment?” His deep voice caressed her overwrought emotions.

“No, th—thank you.” She reduced the embroidery around her wrist to separate threads. If Lydia saw the wreckage, she would take her to task. “Was that all you required, your grace?”

A knock sounded at the door. Given permission to enter, Scargill walked in, awkwardly holding a brightly colored box. With his brawny build, he looked more like a pugilist than a butler.

A scowl clouded the duke’s expression. “What is it, Scargill? Not another visitor?”

Marcus must have been talking about his sister’s intrusion into the dining room.

“No, yer grace. This here just arrived for Miss Barclay.”

“For me? Who could have sent it?” She accepted the box. It was rather light in her hands.

“Special messenger brung it, Miss. All the way from Cheltenham.” As Scargill made an obsequious bow, the gilt buttons on his uniform threatened to pop. Backing away, he exited the room.

“From an admirer, Miss Barclay?” The duke also stood. His lips slashed into a frown. For some reason, he seemed displeased.

She removed an attached sheet of paper.

“Goodness, I have no idea who....”

The spidery handwriting was hard to decipher. Straining her eyes, she finally made out: *Dona Inês Luísa da Cruz e Silva*. In her missive, among excessive words of thanks, *Dona Inês* mentioned sending a goblet.

A goblet! Amanda’s knees turned rubbery. Could it be possible? What if...? She sank into the Jacobean chair.

The duke towered over her. “Unpleasant tidings? I hope you confide in me, Miss Barclay. When I am told the truth, you will find me a staunch ally.”

And a formidable opponent when the reverse was true. He did not have to say those words. She instinctively knew that to be so.

Hand to her breast to quiet her superstitious fears, she tried to express her concerns. “I do trust you, your grace. It is not that.” She eyed the package in her lap as if it might explode at any second. “You see, just yesterday, I met this Portuguese woman. And today, she sends me, of all things, a... a goblet!”

Her voice betrayed her. Catching her breath, Amanda gnawed on her bottom lip. “What if this goblet is the very same as the Squire’s?”

“Highly unlikely. Although the squire did mention purchasing his from a Portuguese woman. How peculiar.” He extended his hand for the box. “May I?”

She nodded. Just a few minutes ago, she sat in

this selfsame chair, longing for a goblet to replace the broken one. What if *Dona Inês*' gold coin granted Amanda's wish? What if the token was truly magic? And if it was, should she be alarmed?

A shiver zigzagged down her spine.

Opening the package, the duke pawed through the inner wrappings. "My sister was responsible for the damage, was she not?"

Amanda met his hard gaze. "Um, yes, your grace. But it was an accident. Lady Daphne only wanted to examine its enameled surface. She did not mean any harm. I was hoping she would tell you herself."

He sat back in his wing armchair. "Do not lie to me again, my dear Miss Barclay. I will not have it."

Perched at the edge of her chair, she was in danger of falling off. "My dear Miss Barclay" had such a nice ring to it. But many members of the nobility were free with their golden words. Marcus Hamilton had been offhand with his "drivel" sixteen years ago. As he was today.

She straightened her shoulders. "I did not mean any harm. I only wished to protect Lady Daphne." Her gaze strayed to the box. "Tell me, what is inside? Is it...?"

He smiled. "I see no reason why you should be alarmed at the prospect of coincidences." Lifting up a blue goblet, he inspected the craftsmanship.

Amanda gasped. It *was* a duplicate of the shattered Venetian cup. She gripped the chair's

cushioned arms. Most assuredly, this “coincidence” was the work of the magic token. It *had* to be.

There is no such thing as magic. But, just to be on the safe side, as soon as she returned to her bedchamber, she would fling that disturbing coin out the window.

The duke handled the goblet almost lovingly. “Excellent composition. I detect the fine hand of fifteenth century glass-painter, Angelo Barovieri.” He paused. “It is quite valuable.”

“May I?” Amanda took the cup and cradled it in her hands. The glass gave no clue as to its maker. “How can you identify the artist?”

His smile contained little mirth. “Although I was but eighteen in 1802, my illustrious father took advantage of the lull in the fighting and sent me on the Grand Tour. He waited until he had secured a second heir, however, for even he suspected the Peace of Amiens would not hold. After my brother, Gregory, was born, I spent an extensive length of time in Rome and Venice. When the war resumed, I was stranded there for a good while.”

Sometime after Midsummer Eve in 1802, young Marcus had left British soil. No wonder she never saw him again.

Shrugging off the memory, the duke lifted the goblet from her. Contact with his warm fingers sent cool tingles down her back. “Why did the Portuguese woman give this to you?”

“I... um, performed a small service for *Dona Inês*, your grace. There was no need for her to reward me. I desired no recompense, but she insisted on giving me a gold coin. And now she has sent this goblet.” As another chill invaded her well-being, she rubbed the poplin material covering her arms. “Don’t you think it is uncanny?”

She would not mention the coin being a magic token. If, in fact, it was. But how else could she explain this strange turn of events?

“I think it... unfortunate.” He strode to the fireplace, placing the goblet in its rightful place upon the mantelpiece. “With your permission?”

“Yes, please do. I—I have no need for it.”

“In a way, I regret your benefactress’ generosity.”

“Your grace?”

“You needn’t look at me as though I were going to eat you, Miss Barclay. This replacement goblet, for which I shall reimburse you, cancels your debt. Meaning you no longer will be obliged to stay with us for an extended period. While this turn of events will, most likely, please Daphne’s mother, perhaps I can persuade you to change your mind.” His voice dropped to a confidential level. “I would like to get to know you better.”

Chest heaving, she jumped up. “No, I—I do not think that would be a good idea! And you do not need to reimburse me.” Her hands, usually so serene, seemed to take on a life of their own, fussing and fidgeting by her sides. “If you will

excuse me, your grace, I would like to retire to my room. I promised Lady Daphne an early start tomorrow.”

Although waiting for his response was just a formality, she lingered anyway.

His lips pursed, he cocked his head. A hooded expression covered his eyes. “You are an unusual female, Miss Barclay. An original, I do believe.” Picking up his discarded drink, he finished its contents. “I shan’t detain you any longer. Morpheus, the Greek god of slumber eagerly waits to hold you in his embrace.”

What an odd dismissal! Curtsying, Amanda turned and opened the door into the corridor. As she did, she thought she heard the duke say something even more curious. She thought she heard him say, “He is a lucky devil.”

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Susanne Marie Knight

Being a writer means first being a reader. My love of books started at the age of nine, when I devoured science fiction books, especially stories by Isaac Asimov. In high school, I began reading Regencies by Georgette Heyer. The tone and the language of the era fascinated me. Where else could you refer to a drunken man as someone who was “chirping-merry, three parts disguised,” or “a bit bosky”? From avid reading, I graduated to writing. I wanted to combine fantasy with my own particular kind of reality: romance writing with a twist.

The idea for *The Magic Token* came from a desire to combine a Regency with a touch of magic. I came across this sentence in a biography on Charles Darwin: “[Charles’] friends enjoyed his tall stories, he claimed to one that he owned a Roman coin.” The rest, as they say, is history!

When I’m not writing, editing newsletters, maintaining websites, or working for a fitness program shown on public television—I sleep! Oh, I also received my Master of Science degree in Natural Health, play computer games, swim, and watch Star Trek.

I love to hear from my readers. My website is www.susanneknight.com and my email address is susanne@susanneknight.com.



Susanne Marie Knight

“Gloriously Magical
and loads of fun.”

Nan Doporto
Sime-Gen Reviews

When Amanda Barclay receives a magic token as a gift from a stranger, she is more than skeptical about whether this gold coin can change her life. But then the very man who captured her heart years ago suddenly appears. Is it destiny or cruel fate? Does he even remember her? Circumstances obligate her to accept the position he offers as governess, but how can she endure being near a man so beyond her reach?

Marcus Hamilton, Duke of Yarborough, is a man burdened by family and political responsibilities. He does not have the time nor the inclination to dally with women beneath his station. But a chance meeting throws him together with Mandy, the engaging young sprite from his past, causing him to reevaluate his beliefs. For once in his life, the call of love beckons far stronger than the duties and obligations of his position.

“Ms. Knight weaves quite a tale of magic—be prepared to spend time with this story from beginning to end.”

A Romance Review