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Tangled Reins

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TANGLED REINS

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CHAPTER ONE

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'Mmmm.' Dorothea closed her eyes, savouring the taste of sun-warmed wild blackberry. Surely the most delicious of summer's delights. She surveyed the huge bush. Burgeoning with ripe fruit, stretched across one side of the small clearing.

More than enough to fill tonight's pie, with plenty left over to make jam. She settled her basket on the ground and set to. Working methodically over the bush, she selected the best berries and dropped them into the basket in a fluid stream. While her hands laboured, her mind went tripping. How childlike her sister still was, for all her sixteen years. It was at her suggestion Dorothea was here, deep in the woods of the neighbouring estate. Cecily craved blackberries for supper. So, brown eyes sparkling, golden ringlets dancing, she had begged her elder sister, about to depart for a ramble to gather herbs, to make a detour to the blackberry bush.

Her elder sister sighed. Would London erase that dazzling spontaneity? More importantly, would the projected trip to the capital free Cecily of this humdrum existence? Six months had passed since the mother, Cynthia, Lady Darent, had succumbed to a chill, leaving her two daughters to the guardianship of their cousin, Herbert, Lord Darent. Five interminable months spent at Darent Hall in Northamptonshire while the lawyers picked over the will had convinced Dorothea that no help and much hindrance could be expected from that quarter. Herbert, not to put too fine a point on it, was an indefatigable bore. And Marjorie, his wife, prim, prosy and hopelessly inelegant in every way, was worse than useless. If their grandmother had not appeared, exactly like the proverbial fairy godmother, goodness only knew what they would have done.

Suddenly unable to move, she paused to gaze, unperturbed, at a bramble hooked about the hem of her dress. Just as well it was her old dimity! Despite Aunt Agnes's bleats about mourning clothes, she had insisted on her practice of wearing the outmoded green dress for her foraging expeditions. The square-cut neckline and bodice fitted to the waist belonged to another time; the full skirts, without the support of the voluminous petticoats they were intended to cover, clung to her willowy figure. She examined the tiny tears the briar thorns had left in the material.

As she straightened, the warmth of the clearing, hemmed in by undergrowth and trees and lit by the sun slanting through the high branches, struck her anew.

On impulse, her hands went to her hair, hanging heavy in a bun on her neck. With the restricting pin removed, it fell in a cascade of rich mahogany brown to her waist. Cooler, she resumed her picking.

At least she was confident of what lay in store for herself in London. No amount of effort from her grandmother would be sufficient to win *her* a husband! Green flashes ran like emeralds through her huge eyes. Her eyes, of course, were her major, and only, asset. All her other points, innocuous in themselves, were disastrously unfashionable. Her hair was dark, not the favoured blonde; her face pale as alabaster and not peaches and cream like Cecily's. Her nose was well enough but her mouth was too large and her lips too full. Rosebud lips were the craze. And she was too tall and her figure slightly

against the prevailing trend to voluptuous curves. To cap it all, she was twenty-two, with a strong streak of independence to boot! Hardly the type of female to attract the attention of the fashionable male. With a deep chuckle she popped another ripe berry between her too full lips.

Her relegation to the ranks of the old maids disturbed her not at all. She had enough to live comfortably for the rest of her days and looked forward to years of country pursuits at the Grange with equanimity. She had received considerable attention from the local gentlemen, yet no man had awoken in her the slightest desire to trade her independent existence for the respectable state of matrimony.

While her peers plotted and schemed to get that all-important ring on their finger, she saw no reason to follow their lead. Only love, that strange and compelling emotion that, she freely admitted, had yet to touch her heart would, she suspected, be strong enough to tempt her from her comfortable ways. In truth, she had difficulty envisaging the gentleman whose attraction would prove sufficient to seduce her from her established life. For too long now she had been her own mistress. Free to do as she wished, busy and secure—she was content. Cecily was a different matter.

Bright as a button, Cecily yearned for a more glittering lifestyle. Although so young, she had a burning interest in people, and the horizons of the Grange were far too limited for her satisfaction. Sweet, young and fashionably beautiful, she would surely find some elegant and personable young man to give her all her heart desired. Which was the primary reason they were going to London.

Dorothea had been absently regarding a particularly large berry, almost out of her reach. With a sudden smile she stretched one white hand high to the tempting fruit. Her smile dissolved into stunned surprise as a strong arm slipped around her waist. The fact barely registered before a deft movement delivered her into a crushing embrace. She caught a glimpse of a dark face. The next instant she was being ruthlessly, expertly and very comprehensively kissed.

For one long moment her mind remained blank. Then consciousness flooded back. She was not inexperienced. Lack of response would see her released faster than any action. Prosaic and practical, she willed herself to frigidity.

She had seriously misjudged the threat. Despite perfectly clear instructions, her body refused to comply. Horrified, she felt a sudden warmth rush through her, followed by an almost overwhelming urge to lean into that embrace, clearly poised to become even more passionate if she succumbed. No country admirer had dared kiss her like this! The desire to respond to the demanding lips crushing her own grew second by second, beyond her control. Thoroughly unnerved, she tried to break free. Long fingers slid into her hair, holding her head still, and the arm around her waist tightened ruthlessly. The strength of the body she was now crashed against confirmed her helplessness. From a disjointed jumble of thoughts, rapidly becoming less coherent, emerged the conclusion that her captor was neither gypsy nor vagabond. He was certainly no local! That first fleeting glimpse had left a strong impression of negligent elegance. As she was drawn inexorably beyond thought, senses reeling, a strange turbulence threatened to engulf her. Then, abruptly, as if a door were slammed shut, the kiss was skilfully brought to an end.

Her mind awl, senses scorched, she looked up into a dark-browed face. Hazel eyes, distinctly amused, gazed into her own green orbs. Sheer fury erupted within her. She aimed a stinging slap at the

laughing face. It never landed. Although the action was not betrayed by a flicker of an eyelid, her hand was caught in mid-air in a firm grip and gently drawn down to her side.

Her assailant smiled provokingly, thoroughly appreciative of her beautifully outraged countenance. 'No, I don't think I will let you hit me. How was I to know you weren't the blacksmith's daughter?'

The voice was light and gentle, definitely that of an educated man. Recollecting how she must look in her old green dimity with her hair about her shoulders, she bit her lip, feeling ridiculously young, the betraying flush rose to her cheeks.

'So,' continued the soft voice, 'if not the blacksmith's daughter, who, then?'

At the gently mocking tone, she raised her chin defiantly. 'I'm Dorothea Darent.

Now will you please release me?'

The arm around her moved not one whit. A slight frown creased her captor's brow. 'Ah...Darent. Of the Grange?'

A slight nod was all she could manage. Conversation was a major effort while held so closely against him. Who on earth was he?

'I'm Hazelmere.'

A blunt statement of fact. For a moment she thought she had not heard aright.

But that face, arrogant amusement deeply etched in the lines about the strong mouth, surely belonged to no one else?

She had heard the rumours. Their old friend, Lady Moreton, whose estate encompassed these woods had died while they were at Darent Hall. Her great-nephew, the Marquis of Hazelmere, had reputedly inherited Moreton Park.

The news had set the district abuzz. In a small county backwater the possibility that one of the acknowledged leaders of the ton might be the new owner of a major local estate was, in any circumstances, likely to generate a certain amount of curiosity. When the person in question was the Marquis of Hazelmere the curiosity was frankly rampant.

The rector's wife had primmed up her mouth in a most disparaging way. 'My dear! Nothing on earth would induce me to acknowledge such a man! Such a shocking reputation! So notorious!' When Dorothea had, not unnaturally, asked how this reputation had been gained, Mrs Matthews had suddenly recalled to whom she was speaking and rapidly excused herself on the pretext of passing around the scones. At Mrs Mannerim's she had heard such charges as gambling, womanising and general licentiousness laid at the Marquis's door. Although she was inexperienced in wider society, common sense was her forte. As Lord Hazelmere continued to grace the ton presumably the gossip, as usual, was exaggerated. Besides, she could not imagine the eminently respectable Lady Moreton having a licentious great-nephew.

Dragging her mind from contemplation of his mesmeric hazel eyes and long sculpted lips, she rapidly revised her opinion of the Marquis of Hazelmere. Put simply, the man was even more dangerous than his reputation indicated.

Her thoughts had flowed across her face, a clear procession from initial bewilderment, through dawning realisation, to awed and scandalised comprehension. The hazel eyes glinted. To a palate jaded by an unremitting diet of society's beauties, on whose simpering faces no trace of genuine emotion was ever permitted, the beautiful and expressive countenance was infinitely attractive.

'Precisely.' He said it to see if she would blush so delightfully again and was amply rewarded.

Dorothea indignantly transferred her gaze to contemplation of his left shoulder.

She was hardly short, but her topmost curls barely reached his chin. Which left his chest, very close, eye-level. Nothing in her limited experience had taught her how to deal with a situation like this. She had never felt so helpless in her life!

With her attention elsewhere, she missed the deepening curve of the severe lips which had so recently claimed hers. 'And precisely what is Miss Dorothea Darent doing, trespassing in my woods?'

The proprietorial tone brought her head up again, as he had known it would.

'Oh! You *have* inherited the Park from Lady Moreton!'

He nodded, reluctantly releasing her and almost imperceptibly moving aside.

The hazel eyes did not leave her face.

Relieved of the distracting intimacy, she paused to gather her wits. In a manner as imperious as she could muster she replied, 'Lady Moreton always gave her permission for us to gather whatever we wished from her woods. However, now that *you* own the Park—'

'You will, of course,' Hazelmere interposed smoothly, 'continue to gather whatever you wish whenever you wish.' He smiled. 'I will even undertake not to mistake you for the blacksmith's daughter next time.'

Dorothea swept him a contemptuous curtsy, green eyes flashing. 'Thank you, Lord Hazelmere! I'll be sure to warn Hetty.'

The comment stumped him, as she had intended. She turned to pick up her basket. Still mentally adrift from the aftereffects of that kiss, she hastily concluded that in this instance retreat was the better part of valour. She had reckoned without Lord Hazelmere. 'And who, exactly, is Hetty?'

Arrested in the act of ignominious flight, she gathered together the shreds of her composure to reply acidly, 'Why, the blacksmith's daughter, of course!'

Under her fascinated gaze the striking, almost harsh-featured face relaxed, the satirical amusement

replaced by genuine delight. Laughing openly, he put out a hand to grasp the basket, preventing her from leaving. 'I think we're quits, Miss Darent, so don't run away. Your basket is only half full and there are plenty of berries left on this bush.' The hazel eyes were quizzing her, his smile disarming.

Sensing her hesitation, he continued, 'Yes, I know you can't reach them, but I can. If you'll just stand there, and hold your basket so, we'll soon have it full.'

It dawned on Dorothea that her qualifications to deal with the gentleman before her were inadequate. Unwise in the ways of the world, she had no idea what she should do. On the one hand, the rector's wife would expect her to withdraw immediately; on the other, curiosity urged her to remain. And even if she did make up her mind to go, it was doubtful whether this masterful creature would allow her to leave. Besides, as he had positioned her here with the basket in her hands and was even now filling it with the choicest berries from the top of the bush, it would hardly be polite to walk away. Thus reasoning, she remained where she was, taking the opportunity to more closely inspect her tormentor.

Her initial impression of quiet elegance owed much, she decided, to the excellent cut of his shooting jacket. Honesty then forced her to acknowledge that broad shoulders set atop a lean and muscular frame significantly contributed to the overall effect of masculine power only superficially cloaked. His black hair was cut short in the prevailing mode and curled gently over his brow. The hazel eyes, so appropriate, she thought, in the Marquis of Hazelmere, were disconcertingly direct.

The decidedly patrician nose and firm mouth and chin declared that here was a man used to dominating his world. But she had seen both eyes and mouth soften with humour, making him appear much more approachable. In fact, she decided, his smile would be utterly devastating to young ladies more impressionable than herself. Then, too, there was that subtly attractive aura, which fell into the category of subjects no well-bred lady ever discussed. Remembering his reputation, she could find no trace of dissipation. His actions, however, left little doubt of the existence of the fire that had given rise to the smoke.

Correctly guessing most of the jumble of thoughts going through her head, Hazelmere surreptitiously watched her face from the corner of his eyes. What a jewel she was! The classically moulded face framed by luxuriant dark hair was arresting in itself. But those eyes! Like enormous twin emeralds, clear and bright, they mirrored her thoughts in a thoroughly beguiling way. Her lips he had already sampled—soft and yielding, deliciously sensual—and he could readily imagine developing a fascination for them. The rest of the package was equally enticing.

Nevertheless, if he was to further their acquaintance he would have to go carefully.

Removing the loaded basket from her hands, he retrieved his hunting rifle from the opposite side of the clearing. Correctly interpreting the question clearly written on her uncertain face, he said, 'I'm not going to escort you home, Miss Darent'

Inwardly grinning at the mutinous expression that greeted this calm pronouncement, he continued before she could speak. 'No! Don't argue. In the social circle to which I belong, no young lady would ever be found out of doors alone.'

The pious tone made Dorothea's eyes blaze. Lord Hazelmere's tactics were proving extremely difficult to combat. ~~As she could find no ready answer nor see any way of altering his resolve, she reluctantly~~ fell into step beside him as he started down the path.

'Incidentally,' he continued conversationally, pursuing a subject guaranteed to keep her on the defensive, 'satisfy my curiosity. Just why *are* you wandering alone in the woods, without the presence of even a nitwit maid?'

She had suspected this question might come, precisely because she had no good answer. The reprehensible creature was undoubtedly teasing her! Swallowing her irritation, she calmly replied, 'I'm well known in this neighbourhood, and at my age can hardly be considered a young miss in need of constant chaperoning.' Even to her ears it sounded lame.

The reprehensible creature chuckled. 'My dear child, you're not *that* old! And quite clearly you do need the protection of an attendant.'

As he had just proved the truth of that, she could hardly argue the point. But, her temper flying and caution disappearing with it, her unruly tongue marched ahead unheeding. 'In future, Lord Hazelmere, whenever I'm tempted to walk *your* woods I'll most certainly take an attendant!'

'Very wise,' he murmured, voice low.

Unattuned to the nuance of his tone, she did not stop to think before pointing out, in her most reasonable voice, 'But I really can't see the necessity. You said you would not mistake me for a village girl next time.'

'Which merely means,' he said in tones provocative enough to send a tingling shiver down her spine, 'that next time I'll know whose lips I'm kissing.'

'Oh!' She gasped and stopped to look up at him, outrage in every line.

Halting beside her, Hazelmere laughed and gently touched her cheek with one long finger, further increasing her ire. 'I repeat, Miss Darent—you need an attendant. Don't risk walking in my woods anywhere else without one. In case the country beaux haven't told you, you're by far too lovely to wander alone, *despite* your advancing years.'

The amused hazel eyes held hers throughout this speech. Dorothea, seeing something behind the laughter which made her feel distinctly odd, could find nothing to say in reply. Irritated, furious and light-headed all at once, she turned abruptly and continued along the path, skirts swishing angrily.

Glancing at the troubled face beside him, Hazelmere's smile deepened. He sought for a suitable innocuous topic from the tangle of information poured into his ears by his great-aunt before her death. 'I understand you have recently lost your mother, Miss Darent. I believe my great-aunt told me you were staying with relatives in the north.'

This promising sally fell wide. Dorothea turned her wide green eyes on him and, ignoring the dictum that ladies should not answer a gentleman's question with another question, asked breathlessly, 'D'

you see her, then, before she died?'

The marked degree of disbelief, for some reason, stung him. 'Believe it or not, Miss Darent, frequently visited my great-aunt, of whom I was very fond. However, as I rarely stayed longer than a day, it's hardly surprising that neither you, nor in all probability the rest of the county, were aware of that fact. I was with her for the three days prior to her death and, as I was her heir, she endeavoured to instruct me in the families of the area.'

This speech, not unnaturally, brought the colour to her cheeks, but instead of turning away in confusion, as he expected, she met his eyes unflinchingly. 'You see, we were such good friends that it was most unhappy not to have seen her again.'

The hazel eyes held hers for a pregnant second. Then he relented. 'The end was quite painless. She died in her sleep and, considering the pain she'd been in over the past years, that can only be viewed as a relief.'

She nodded, eyes downcast

In an attempt to lighten the mood he tried again. 'Do you and your sister plan to remain at the Grange indefinitely?'

This time he had more success. Her face cleared. 'Oh, no! We're to go to our grandmother, Lady Merion, early next year.'

Hermione, Lady Merion, previously the Dowager Lady Darent, had swept through the chilly corridors of Darent Hall like a summer breeze, warm from the glamour of London. And had taken undisputed charge. The sisters, together with Aunt Agnes, the elderly spinster who acted as their nominal chaperon, had been dispatched home to the Grange, buried deep in Hampshire, there to wait out the year of mourning. They were to present themselves to her ladyship in Cavendish Square in February six months from now. And what was to happen from that point on was, they all had been given to understand, very definitely in her ladyship's competent hands. Reminiscing, Dorothea grinned. 'She intends to present us.'

Noticing the sudden lift of the dark brows, she continued defensively, 'Cecily is considered very beautiful and, I believe, should make a good match.'

'And yourself?'

Suddenly inexplicably sensitive on this point, she believed she detected a derisive note in the smooth voice. She answered more categorically than she intended. 'I am hardly wretched for the marriage market. I intend to enjoy my days in London seeing all the sights, and, if truth be known, watching those about me.'

She glanced up and was surprised by the intensity of the hazel gaze fixed unswervingly on her face. Then he smiled in such an enigmatic way that she was unsure whether it was intended for her or was purely introspective. A thought occurred. 'Do you know Lady Merion?'

The smile deepened. 'I should think all fashionable London knows Lady Merion.'

However, in my case, she's a particularly close friend of my mother's.'

'Please, tell me what she's like?' It was his turn to be surprised. Seeing it, she rushed on, 'You see, I've not met her since I was a child, except for the one night she spent at Darent Hall earlier this year when she came to tell us we were to come to London.'

Hazelmere, reflecting that this conversation was undoubtedly the strangest he had ever conducted with a personable young lady, helped her over the stile and into the lane, then fell to considering Lady Merion. 'Well, your grandmother has always been a leader of fashion, and is well connected with all the old tabbies who matter in London. She's thick as thieves with Lady Jersey and Princess Esterhazy. Both are patronesses of Almack's, to which you must gain entry if you wish to belong to the ton. In your case, that hurdle will not be a problem. Lady Merion is independently wealthy and lives in a mansion on Cavendish Square, left her by her second husband, George, Lord Merion. She married him some years after your grandfather's death and he died about five years ago, I think. She's something of a tartar, and a high stickler, so I would advise you not to attempt to wander London unattended! On the other hand, she has an excellent sense of humour and is known as being kind and generous to her friends. She's in some ways eccentric and rarely leaves London except to visit friends in the country. All in all, I doubt you could find a lady more capable of launching you and your sister successfully into the ton.'

Dorothea pondered this potted biography, finally remarking in a pensive tone,

'She did seem very fashionable.'

'She is certainly that,' he agreed.

They had reached a gate in the high stone wall that had bordered the lane for the last hundred yards. Dorothea stopped and reached for the basket. "These are the gardens of the Grange."

"Then I'll leave you here," Hazelmere promptly replied. He had escorted her home purely to prolong his time in her company but had no wish to be seen with her. He knew too well the gossip and speculation which would inevitably spring from such a sighting. Expertly capturing her hand, he carried it to his lips, enjoying the spark of anger that flared in the green eyes and the blush that rose in response to his understanding smile. 'But remember my warning! If you wish to keep in your grandmama's good graces, don't go about London unattended. Young ladies who venture the London streets alone won't remain alone for long. Farewell, Miss Darent.'

Released, Dorothea opened the gate and made good her escape.

She hurried through the garden, for once unconscious of the heady scents rising from the riotous flowers. The long shadows cast by the ancient roof of the Grange fell across the path, heralding the end of the day. She stopped in the garden hall; the coolness of the dim, stone-flagged room brought relief to her burning cheeks.

The clattering steps of the housemaid sounded in the passageway. Moving to the door, she called her

in.

'Take these berries to Cook, please, Doris. And after that you can lay out the meadowsweet on the drying racks.' With a wave of her hand she indicated the wooden frames covered with tightly stretched muslin lying on the bench along one side of the room.

As an afterthought, she added, 'And please tell my aunt I've gone to lie on my bed until dinner. I think I must have a touch of the sun.' More accurately, a touch of the Marquis of Hazelmere! she thought furiously. Successfully negotiating the passageway and stairs undetected, she closed her bedchamber door and sank on to the window-seat.

Gazing over the now deeply shadowed garden, she struggled to bring some order to a mind still seething. Ridiculous! She had left the Grange a serenely confident twenty-two-year-old, entirely secure in her independent world. Yet here she was, a scant hour later, feeling, she suspected, as Cecilia might if the Squire's son had made eyes at her! It was not as if she had never been kissed before. It shouldn't make the slightest difference who was doing the kissing. The fact that it had made a great deal of difference exacerbated a temper already tried by a pair of hazel eyes.

A pair of all too perceptive hazel eyes. She spent the next ten minutes reading herself a determined lecture on the inadvisability of forming an attachment for a rake.

Fortified, she forced herself to consider the matter in a more reasoning light.

Undoubtedly she should feel outraged, ready to decry the Marquis as a licentious scoundrel. Yet despite her irritation, she was too honest not to admit that her inappropriate attire was partly to blame. Moreover, she suspected that the response of a young lady on finding herself in the arms of the Marquis of Hazelmere should have been quite different from the way she had behaved. In her defence she felt it should be noted that had she swooned in his arms he would have had little choice but to wait with her until she recovered. Then the situation would have been, if anything, worse. By following the train of thought, she convinced herself there had been nothing particularly reprehensible about the proceedings after Lord Hazelmere had released her. In fact, he had proved a valuable informant on the subject of her grandmother.

What continued to bother her were the events preceding her release from that far too familiar embrace. Her fingers strayed to her lips, which, despite his expertise, were slightly bruised. The memory of his hard body against hers was still a physical sensation. The clock on the landing struck the quarter-hour. She determinedly put her thoughts on the afternoon's events aside, resolutely consigning the Marquis and all his works to the remotest corner of her mind.

Nothing was more certain than that *he* would forget all about *her* by tomorrow.

Changing out of her old gown and into the freshly pressed sprigged muslin laid out for the war of the evening, she gauged her chances of unwittingly running into him again. Well versed in the ways of the local gentry, she knew it would be all but impossible for him to meet her socially in the country. And by his own admission, he was not in the habit of remaining over-long at Moreton Park. She thought herself she was relieved. To make doubly sure her relief remained undisturbed, she resolved that,

future, she would ensure that her reluctant sister joined her on her rambles.

Picking up a brush, she attacked her long tresses vigorously before winding them up in a simple knot. She glanced quickly at her reflection in the mirror perched on her tallboy. Satisfied she had dealt sufficiently with the potential ramifications of the advent of the Marquis of Hazelmere into her life, she went downstairs to her dinner.

A fortnight later, returning to Hazelmere House, his mansion in Cavendish Square, situated almost directly opposite Merion House, the Marquis found a large pile of letters and invitations awaiting him. Sorting through them, he strolled into his library. Extracting an envelope of a particularly virulent shade of purple from the bundle, he held it at arm's length to escape the cloying perfume emanating from it and groped for his quizzing glass. Recognising the flowery script of his latest mistress, a dazzling creature abundantly well endowed for her station in life, his black brows drew together. He opened the letter and scanned the few lines within.

The black brows rose. A smile of a kind Dorothea Darent would not have recognised twisted through mobile lips. Throwing both letter and envelope into the fire, he turned to his desk.

The footman who answered the summons of the library bell ten minutes later found his master fixing his seal to a letter. Glancing up as the door opened, Hazelmere waved the envelope to cool the wax, then held it out. 'Deliver this by hand immediately.'

'Yes, m'lord.'

Watching the retreating back of the footman, Hazelmere considered the probable reception of his politely savage missive. Thus ended yet another *affaire*.

Stretching his long legs to the fire, he fell to considering the constantly changing parade of his high-flying mistresses. While providing the ton with a stream of *on-dits*, he felt that the inevitability of the game was beginning to bore him. After more than ten years on the town, there were few fashionable vices he had not sampled and the pattern of his activities was becoming wearily predictable.

Thinking again of the discarded Cerise, he compared her ripe beauty with that of the green-eyed girl whose face had proved disturbingly haunting. His dissatisfaction with his present lot stemmed in large part from that encounter in Moreton Park woods. Entirely his own fault, of course.

Marc St John Ralton Henry, at thirty-one years of age the fifth Marquis of Hazelmere and one of the wealthiest peers of the realm, let his mind wander back to the first time he had heard Miss Darent's name, during a conversation he had had with his great-aunt the night before she died. A remarkably forthright old lady, she had fixed him with a steely look and embarked on an inquisition as to his marital intentions. This had been prefaced by the remark, 'I know your mother won't mention this, so I'm takin' advantage of the fact that, as I'm dying, you can't very well tell me to go to the devil!'

Appreciative of the ploy and having admitted he had no present plans in the matter, he had settled down to listen with good grace to the subsequent dissertation, something he would not have done had it been anyone else.

'Can't say I blame you for not wanting to marry any of these namby-pamby misses presented every year,' she'd snorted derisively. 'Can't abide such ninny-hammers myself! But why not look to wider fields? There's plenty of suitable chits who for one reason or another have never made it to London.'

Catching sight of his sceptical face, she had continued, 'Oh, you needn't think that just because they're country misses they couldn't handle life in the ton. There's Dorothea Darent, for one. Young, beautiful, well dowered and as well born as yourself. The only reason *she* hasn't been presented is that she's spent the last six years running her widowed mother's household. Cynthia Darent should be *kicked* for not bringing her out years ago!' Here Great-Aunt Etta had paused, musing on the sins of the late Lady Darent. 'Well, it's too late for that now, 'cause she's dead.'

'Who? The beautiful Dorothea?' had asked Hazelmere, all at sea.

'No, fool! Cynthia! She died a few months ago and the girls have gone to Darent Hall for a while. Pity I should have liked to see Dorothea again. No namby-pamby miss, that one!'

'How is it that, despite never having been presented, this paragon is not yet wed?

Surely the country gentlemen are not such slowtops?'

Great-Aunt Etta had chuckled. 'I rather suspect that's because no gentleman has yet shown her any good reason to marry! Look at it from her point of view. She's got position enough, wealth enough and her independence to boot. Why get married?'

He had grinned back, responding to the laughter in the old lady's eyes. 'I dare say I could make a few suggestions.'

'Yes, I dare say *you* could! But that's neither here nor there, for you're not likely to meet her. Unless Hermione Merion takes an interest I've written to her, so she may do. There's Cecily too. The youngest sister, and another beauty, though of a different style. She'll have to be brought out, too. But Cecily would try the patience of a saint.

And, as you definitely ain't one, she won't do for you. But enough of the Darent sisters. I merely give them as examples.' And so the conversation had moved on.

The idea that Great-Aunt Etta had, in fact, been trying to make him look at Dorothea Darent as a potential wife had occurred to him shortly after he met that remarkable young lady.

Over the past ten years he had steadfastly refused to seriously consider any of the flighty young females paraded for his approval at Almack's and the ton parties.

This had caused considerable consternation among other family members, notably his two oldest sisters, Maria and Susan, who were constantly pushing one or other of their favoured aspirants in his way. His stance had been fully supported by his mother and Great-Aunt Etta, both of whom seemed to understand the almost suffocating boredom he felt within minutes of attempting to converse with the latest simpering and apparently witless offerings. He knew his mother longed for him to marry but had reputedly told an acquaintance that unless they changed the prevailing fashion in *débutantes* she never

expected to see it. As for Great-Aunt Etta, she had never said a word to him on the subject until the night.

Given that Great-Aunt Etta had known him every bit as well as his mother, it was perfectly possible that she had intended to draw his attention to Miss Darent.

She would never have been so gauche as to approach the matter directly, knowing that the most likely outcome by that route was polite and chilly refusal to have anything to do with the chit. Instead she had introduced her name in a roundabout fashion, merely telling him that the girl was in every way suitable, but leaving him to make his own ground. *Very* like Great-Aunt Etta! Well, Great-Aunt Etta he mused with a smile, I've met your Dorothea, and in a more effective way than I think even you would have dreamt of!

CHAPTER TWO

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A low moan brought Dorothea's head around sharply to peer through the dim light at her sister, curled in the opposite corner of the carriage. Cecily's eyes were shut but the line between her fair brows showed clearly that she was far from sleep. She moved her head restlessly on the squabs. The coach lurched into a rut as the horses' hoofs skidded on the icy road. Dorothea caught the swinging strap to stop herself from being thrown. As the coach ponderously righted itself and resumed its steady progress she saw that Cecily had drawn herself up into a tight ball and wedged herself firmly into the corner, her face turned away.

Dorothea returned her attention to the dreary landscape, glimpsed fitfully through the bare branches of the trees and hedges lining the road. The grey February afternoon was closing in. The patter of drizzle on the coach windows punctuated the stillness within. Then, rising like a castle through the gathering gloom, standing on a crest surrounded by the dark shadows of its windbreaks, loomed the Three Feathers Inn. As it was just over halfway to London from the Grange, situated on the Bath Road, she had chosen it as their overnight stop. If it had been only herself travelling to London she would have made the journey in a single day. But Cecily was a poor traveller. With luck, their slow pace broken by a night's rest would allow her to arrive in Cavendish Square in a fit state to greet their grandmother.

The only other occupant of the carriage was their middle-aged maid, Betsy, who had tended them from the cradle. She dozed lightly, enveloped in woollen shawls on the seat facing Dorothea. After much consideration, Aunt Agnes had been left behind. There had been nothing specific in Lady Merion's letter summoning them to London, but the discussions at Darent Hall had clearly been on the unspoken understanding that Aunt Agnes would continue to do her duty and escort her charges to Cavendish Square. However, Aunt Agnes's rheumatism was legendary, and Dorothea had no wish to saddle herself with the querulous, though much loved old lady, either on the road to London or once they were arrived, supposedly to enjoy themselves. Furthermore, Aunt Agnes's opinions on men, on whatever station, were dampening in the extreme. Dorothea thought it unlikely that her presence would aid in the push to find Cecily a husband. Nevertheless, her polite note to Lady Merion informing her of their expected date of arrival, had made no reference whatever to Aunt Agnes.

The coach lumbered on through the steadily thickening mists. It had been overcast all day, but for the most part the rain had held off, much to the relief of their coachman, Lang. The journey to London with the roads only just cleared was always a risky business. Wrapped in his thick frieze coat, he was deeply relieved to turn his team in under the arch of the inn. It was a large establishment, one of the busiest posting houses in the district. The main yard was devoted primarily to travellers changing horses or temporarily halting. The large travelling carriage rumbled through and on under another archway into the coachyard. Ostlers ran to free the steaming horses, and the landlord came forward to assist the sisters into the inn.

Here, however, a problem lay waiting.

While they warmed themselves before the roaring fire in a snug, low-ceilinged parlour Mr Simm

apologised profusely. 'There's a prize-fight on in the village, miss. We're booked out. I've kept a bedchamber for you, but I'm afraid there's no hope of a private parlour.' The rubicund landlord, middle-aged, with daughters of his own, eyed the young ladies anxiously.

Dorothea drew a deep breath. After travelling at a snail's pace all day she did not really care what was going forward in the neighbourhood, as long as she and Cecily were adequately housed for the night. She automatically appraised the neat and spotlessly clean room. At least there would be no danger of damp sheets or poorly cooked food in this house. There was no point in being overly distressed by the lack of a parlour. Drawing herself to her full height, she nodded to the clearly worried Simms. 'Very well. I see it can't be helped. Will you please show us to our bedchamber?'

Mr Simms had correctly guessed the Darent sisters' station from Dorothea's letter requesting two bedchambers and parlour. While he rarely criticised the ways of his clients, he thought it a crying shame that two such pretty young ladies were travelling escorted only by servants. He led them up to the bedchamber he had had prepared for them. Experience of the goings-on likely to occur within his house before the night was through had led him to house them in the large bedchamber on the north side of the inn. This was the oldest part of the rambling building, isolated from the rest, and reached only by a separate stairway close to his private domain.

Arriving, puffing, on the landing, he threw open a stout door. 'I've put you in this bedchamber here, miss, because it's out of the way, like. The inn will soon be fair to burstin' with all the young gentlemen been to see the fight. My missus says to tell ye to stay put in your chamber and lock the door and she'll see to it that only she and my daughter come up with your meals and suchlike. Through the road, we'll all like as not avoid any unpleasantness. I'll have your bags brought up in a jiffy, miss. With these words Simms bowed and retreated, leaving Dorothea, brows flying, and Cecily pathetically pale, staring at each other in consternation.

'Oh, my!' said Betsy, sinking down on one of the chairs by the fire, eyes round with dismay. 'Maybe we should travel on, Miss Dorothea. I'm sure your grandma wouldn't like you staying at an inn with all these rowdy, boisterous, ramshackle lads, miss!'

'I don't believe there's any other inn near, Betsy. And after all, as the landlord says, if we keep the door locked and stay in our room, surely we'll come to no harm?' Dorothea spoke in her normal calm tone, drawing off her gloves and dropping her travelling cloak over a chair. After her momentary dismay, undoubtedly due to tiredness, she was inclined to dismiss the situation.

'Well, if it's all the same to you, Thea, I would much rather stay here than try to go on,' said Cecily.

The thin, reedy voice clearly conveyed to Dorothea just how unwell her sister was feeling. She walked briskly to the bed and turned down the coverlet. The sheets were dry and clean. She plumped up the pillows invitingly. 'And so we shall, my love! Why not curl up on the bed until dinner arrives? I must confess, I'm not convinced that removing from here wouldn't land us in a worse pickle than the one we're in at present.'

A tentative knock came at the door. 'Who is it?' said Betsy, rising.

'It's only me, ma'am. Hannah, the landlord's daughter.'

Betsy opened the door to reveal a stout damsel with a mob-cap perched above a comely face. 'My mum will have the dinner ready shortly, but she was wanting to know if you needed anything else, ma'am?' Hannah hefted the sisters' bags into the room and stood looking enquiringly at Dorothea.

'Why, yes! We'd like some warm water, and could a truckle-bed be put up in here for our maid? I'd rather she spent the night with us.'

The girl nodded. 'I'll be back in two shakes, ma'am.'

Five minutes later Hannah was back with a jug of steaming water and a truckle-bed in bits. While she and Betsy struggled with this contraption Dorothea and Cecily washed the dust of the road from their faces and felt considerably better. Finally conquering the recalcitrant truckle-bed, Hannah wiped her hands on her apron and addressed Dorothea. 'I'll be back in half'n hour with your dinner, miss. Be you sure to lock the door after me.'

Dorothea murmured her thanks as the bolts slid to behind the helpful Hannah.

Cecily, drowsy, curled up on the bed. Betsy sat by the fire, working on some sewing she had brought with her to while away the time.

Now that her immediate needs were satisfied, Dorothea prowled the room, restless and cramped. After a day spent in the carriage, she longed to get just one breath of fresh air before a night spent within the airless cocoon of the bedchamber. Suddenly she remembered Lang. With Cecily as passenger, the carriage would normally leave mid-morning. However, her limited knowledge of prize-fights and the aftermath suggested that an early departure might be preferable. She looked out of the window, but this faced the back of the inn. She could hear no noise or ruckus to suggest that the audience from the fight had arrived.

Quickly she crossed to Betsy's side. 'I'm just going down to see Lang. We should make an early start tomorrow to avoid the crush.' She had lowered her voice. 'You stay here and watch over Cecily. I'll only be a moment.'

Before Betsy could protest she picked up her old travelling cloak and whisked herself out of the door. She paused on the landing to fasten the cloak. Sounds of ribald laughter came, muted, from where she supposed the taproom to be. She made her way quietly down the stairs and along the corridor in the opposite direction, eventually reaching the door giving on to the coaching yard. Here she found a mêlée of ostlers and horses. Pausing in the shadows, she scanned the area, trying to locate Lang. He was nowhere to be seen. Remembering that private grooms often helped the ostlers at times like these she ventured to the archway and peeked into the main stableyard.

'My, my! What have we here? A pretty young thing, come to help us celebrate!'

She gasped. The sensation of an arm slipping around her waist made her heart stand still, but instead of hazel eyes lazily regarding her she found herself looking into a vacuous face with cherubic blue eyes that seemed to have trouble focusing.

The man holding her had been drinking but he was not altogether drunk.

He dragged her, struggling furiously, around the corner to fetch up within a riotous group of several semi-drunk gentlemen, intent on a night of carousing, having watched their favourite win the fight. Dorothea realised her mistake too late. The main yard of the inn was full to overflowing. One of the men reached out and flicked her hood back, and the light from the inn's main door fell full on her face. She tried desperately to pull free, but the young man had a good grip on her arm. She winced as it tightened.

Immediately a drawling voice cut through the clamour. 'Do let the lady go, Tremlow. She is known to me and I really cannot let you embarrass her further.'

Recognising the voice, Dorothea wished the ground would open up and swallow her.

The effect of the statement was instantaneous. The hold on her arm was immediately withdrawn as the dark shadow of the Marquis of Hazelmere materialised at the edge of the group.

'Oh! Sorry, Hazelmere! No idea she was a lady.'

This last sentence, uttered *sotto voce*, made Dorothea's cheeks burn. She pulled up her hood as the men in the group peered to see which lady could thus claim Hazelmere's protection.

The Marquis, unhurriedly strolling across the group to her side, largely obscured her from view. Arriving beside her, he turned to the group and continued in the same languid tone, 'I feel sure you would all like to offer your apologies for any embarrassment you have, however unwittingly, caused the lady.'

A chorus of, 'Oh, yes! Definitely! Apologies, ma'am! No offence intended, y'know!' greeted this bald statement.

Simms, having noticed the problem rather late in the day, now hung on the fringe of the group, waiting to render any assistance at all to one of his most valued customers. The Marquis's eye alighted on him. 'Ah, Simms! A round of ale for these gentlemen after this slight misunderstanding, don't you think?'

Simms took the hint. 'Yes, m'lord! Certainly! If you gentlemen would like to come this way I've a hogshead of a new brew I'd much appreciate your comments on.'

With this treat on offer, he had little difficulty in herding the group towards the taproom.

As they moved away Anthony, Lord Fanshawe appeared at his friend's side, a questioning lift to his brows. One moment he had been walking across the stableyard beside Hazelmere, heading towards the hot dinner, when Marc had suddenly stopped, uttered one furious oath and then plunged through the crowd towards a small group of revellers near the coachyard. Although nearly as tall as his friend, with Marc ahead of him, he had had no chance to see what had attracted his attention. As he drew closer he heard Marc at his most languid. He assumed there was a lady in it somewhere, but it was only when Hazelmere turned to address some remark behind him that he realised he was effectively protecting her from the eyes of the stableyard.

Hazelmere turned to him. 'Check they're all in, will you, Tony? I'll join you in the parlour in a few minutes.'

Fanshawe nodded and without a word turned back towards the inn. The languid tones had disappeared entirely, replaced by Hazelmere's normal speech with the consonants somewhat clipped. That single glimpse of his childhood friend's face had confirmed his suspicion. The Marquis of Hazelmere was in a towering rage.

As he had reached her side Hazelmere had unobtrusively taken Dorothea's arm, initially holding her beside him. When the group had made their apologies and moved away he drew her back so that she was shielded by his height and the voluminous driving cloak which hung in many tiers of capes from his broad shoulders. Conscious only of a desperate need to quit the scene, she tried to retreat into the coachyard. He turned but did not release her. With the light behind him, his face was unreadable. 'One moment and I'll escort you indoors. I'd like a word with you.'

Even to Dorothea, unwise in the ways of the Marquis, the words had an ominous ring. She was furious with herself for falling into this scrape and mortified that, of all men, it should be Hazelmere who had rescued her from it. *And* in such a way!

He turned back to speak briefly with another tall man who came up. Then, much to her relief, as his legs felt strangely weak, he ushered her into the coachyard.

Once in the comparative privacy of the rapidly clearing inner yard, he stopped and drew her around to face him. She almost gasped as the light from the inn door lit his face. The hazel eyes were hard and reflected the light from the inn; his lips were set in an uncompromising line. It was obvious to the meanest intelligence that he was furious, and equally obvious that she was the object of his wrath. 'And what, may I ask, were you attempting to accomplish out there?' The sarcastic tones stung like a whip.

Far from being cowed, Dorothea immediately took umbrage. She flung up her head and her eyes snapped back. 'I was seeking my coachman, if you must know, to tell him I wish to leave this inn very early tomorrow, to avoid precisely the sort of attention that I was most regrettably unable to avoid tonight!' She was slightly breathless by the end of this speech, but continued to give the odious Marquis back look for look.

His eyes narrowed. After a slight pause he continued in less harsh tones, 'It seems very remiss of Simms not to have warned you to keep to your chamber with your door locked.'

She had to swallow before she was able to answer, but she managed to return his hard gaze. 'He did tell me.'

The expression on his face became even stonier. 'I can only marvel at your lack of care for your own reputation. I've already warned you that your hoydenish ways will not do in wider society.' He had grasped both her arms just above the elbow in a far from gentle grip. For one appalled moment she thought he was going to shake her. Instead, after a pause heavy with tension, he spoke again, his tone a study in suppressed fury. 'I can only repeat what I've said before: under no circumstances *whatever*

should you venture outside unattended! And add a rider to the effect that if I *ever* find you alone like that again I will personally ensure that you won't sit down for a sennight!

She gasped, green eyes wide in utter disbelief, whereupon he continued, his tone savage, 'Oh, yes! I'm quite capable of doing so.'

Looking up into the implacable face, the hazel eyes almost black, she realised that the threat was no bluff. But by now she was every bit as angry as he was. By what right did this imperious man order her around and threaten her? Imperious, arrogant and totally *insufferable*! Normally the most collected of women, she struggled to shackle her anger and direct it specifically towards its source.

But Hazelmere gave her no time to vent her fury. Becoming aware that he was still holding her in full view of the coachyard, thankfully almost deserted, he abruptly turned her towards the inn and, on his left hand hard at her elbow, swept her indoors. 'Which chamber has Simms put you in?'

Unable as yet to command her tongue, Dorothea indicated the door at the top of the small stairway.

'Very wise! That's probably the safest chamber in the inn tonight. You may not have a peaceful night but with luck it should be free of unwelcome interruptions.'

Glancing at her furious white face and over-bright eyes, Hazelmere drew her on to the stairs. On the second step she swung around, thinking to give him a piece of her mind while he was on the lower steps and not towering over her. But, correctly guessing her intention, he had slipped past her and continued to draw her upwards on to the small landing.

The landlord suddenly appeared in the corridor, heading for the back of the inn.

'Simms!'

'Yes, m'lord?'

'A glass of your best brandy. At once.'

'Yes, m'lord!'

Dorothea thought the request extremely odd, but dismissed it as yet another example of his lordship's vagaries. She was more concerned with giving voice to her frustrations. Turning to face him across the small landing, she was disturbingly aware of his presence so close, and disliked having to look up such a long way to meet his eyes.

'Lord Hazelmere! I must tell you that I find your manner of addressing me quite unacceptable! I do not at all accept your strictures on my conduct. Indeed, I do not know by what right you make them. Tonight was an unfortunate accident, that's all. I'm quite capable of looking after myself—'

'Would you really rather I had left you in the hands of Tremlow and company?'

'You wouldn't have found it entertaining, I assure you.' Hazelmere, deciding that she could not b

allowed to talk herself into hysterics, broke in smoothly over her diatribe. His words, uttered in a stonily bored tone, acted like a cold douche, effectively stopping her in mid-sentence.

He was again afforded a view of her thoughts as they passed clearly over her face. He watched the realisation that it was, in fact, due to him that she was not at this moment in quite desperate straits finally sink in. He had not thought it possible, but she paled even further. Watching her closely, he saw Simms approaching. He took the proffered glass, dismissing the landlord with a curt nod and the words, 'I'll want to speak to you in a few minutes, Simms.' Turning, he held out the glass to her. 'Drink it.'

'No. I don't drink brandy.'

'There is always a first time.'

When she continued to look rebelliously at him he sighed and explained.

'Whether you know it or not, you're exhibiting all the symptoms of shock. You're white as a sheet and your eyes look like green diamonds. Soon you'll start to shake, and feel faint and very cold. The brandy will help. So be a good girl and drink it. If you won't, you know perfectly well I'm quite capable of forcing you to.'

The glittering green eyes widened slightly. There had been no change in his tone and she felt no dire menace, as she had before. Then, looking into his eyes, she gave up the unequal struggle. She took the glass and, shivering slightly, raised it to her lips and sipped. Hazelmere waited patiently until she drained the glass, then removed it from her hands and dropped it into one of his cloak pockets.

As she looked up he remembered her unfinished errand. 'I take it you're travelling to London?'

She nodded. His face had softened, the harshly arrogant lines of ten minutes before had receded leaving the charmingly polite mask she suspected he showed the world. She felt as if he had, in some subtle way, withdrawn from her.

'What's the name of your coachman?'

'Lang. I'd thought to leave at eight.'

'Very sensible. I'll see he gets the message. I suggest you enter your chamber, lock the door and don't open it to anyone other than the landlord's people.' The tone was calm, with no hint of any emotion whatever.

'Yes. Very well.' She was completely bemused. Her head was whirling—shock, fury, brandy and the Marquis of Hazelmere combining to make her distinctly befuddled. She pressed the fingers of one hand to her temple, forcing her mind to concentrate on what he was saying.

'Good! Try to get some sleep. And one more thing: tell Lady Merion I'll call on her the day after tomorrow.'

She nodded and moved to the door, then turned back. Still angry, she knew she was beholden to him and pride forbade her to leave without thanking him, however little inclined she was to do so. She drew a deep breath and, head held high, began. 'My lord, I must thank you for your help in releasing me from those gentlemen.' Lifting her eyes to his, she found that this bland statement had brought the most devastatingly attractive smile to his face.

Wholly appreciative of the effort the words had cost, he replied, his voice light,

'Yes, you must, I'm afraid. But never mind. Once you're in London, I'm sure you'll find opportunities aplenty to make me sorry for my subsequent odiously overbearing behaviour.' One dark brow rose at the end of this outrageous speech, the hazel eyes, gently and not unkindly, quizzing her. The answering blaze of green fire made him laugh. Hearing voices below, he reached out a finger to caress her cheek gently, saying more pointedly, 'Goodnight, Miss Darent!'

Speechless, she whirled away from him and knocked on the door. 'Betsy, it's me.

Dorothea.'

Hazelmere, lips curving in a smile that, had she seen it, would have reduced Dorothea to a state of quivering uncertainty, drew back into the shadows as the door opened with an alacrity which spoke louder than words of the fears of those inside.

'Heavens, miss! Come you in quick; you look white as a sheet, you do!' Dorothea was drawn into the room and the door shut.

Hazelmere waited until he heard the bolts shot home, then made his way, pensively, downstairs. At the back door, he encountered Simms.

'Simms, I have a problem.'

'M'lord?'

'I want to make sure those ladies are not disturbed tonight. You don't perchance have a large burly cousin lying about, who could take up sentry duty on that stair?'

Simms grinned as he saw the gold sovereign in his lordship's long fingers. 'Well, as it happens, m'lord, my oldest boy has the most dreadful toothache. He's been mooning about in the kitchen all day. I'm sure he could do sentry duty, seeing as you ask.'

'Excellent.' The coin changed hands. 'And Simms?'

'Yes, m'lord?'

'I'd like to be sure those ladies get the very best of treatment.'

'Of course, m'lord. My wife's about to take their supper up to them now.'

Hazelmere nodded and wandered out to the middle of the coachyard, looking up at the stars, twinkling

now that the clouds had cleared. He paused, apparently lost in thought. Jim Hitchin, his groom, stood a few yards away, waiting until his master acknowledged him. He had been Hazelmere's personal groom ever since the young Lord had required one. Well acquainted with his employer's foibles, he waited patiently. Hazelmere stretched and turned. 'Jim?'

'M'lord?'

'I want you to find a coachman staying here, name of Lang, coachman to the Misses Darent. Miss Darent wishes to leave at eight tomorrow, to avoid the inevitable action around here. She obviously cannot deliver the message in person.'

'Yes, m'lord.'

'And Jim?'

'Yes, m'lord?'

'Tomorrow morning the Darent party is to leave here by eight. If there's any difficulty in achieving that departure I want you to see I'm summoned. Is that clear?'

'Yes, m'lord.'

'Wonderful. Goodnight, Jim.'

Jim departed, not the least averse to an early morning if it led to a clear sight of this Miss Darent. He had witnessed, distantly, the exchange in the coachyard. To his mind, his lordship was not behaving in his usual manner. Losing his temper with young ladies was definitely not his style. Jim was burning to see what the lady who could throw his master off balance looked like.

Hazelmere, fortunately oblivious to the speculations of his underling, strolled back through the main entrance of the inn and paused outside the open taproom door. Noise, like a cloud, rolled out over the threshold to greet him. Through a bluish haze of tobacco smoke he saw the group of young blades from whom he had rescued Dorothea standing at the end of the bar. It took him longer to locate the last of their number, seated at a small table in the corner, deep in conversation with Sir Barnabé Ruscombe. After considering the scene for a moment, he walked on to the private parlour he always had when staying at the Feathers. Entering, he saw Fanshawe, feet up on the table, carefully peeling an apple.

Fanshawe looked up with a grin. 'Ho! So there you are! I was wondering whether it'd be prudent to come and rescue you.'

A ghost of a smile greeted this sally. 'I had a few errands to attend to after returning Miss Darent to her room.' Hazelmere removed his driving cloak, remembering to extract the glass from the pocket before he threw it on a chair. He moved to the sideboard and poured himself a glass of wine.

'And who the hell is this mysterious Miss Darent?'

The Marquis raised his black brows. 'No mystery. She lives at the Grange, which borders Moreton Park. She and her sister are travelling to London to stay with their grandmother, Lady Merion.'

'I see. How is it, I ask myself, that I've never heard of the girl, much less set eyes on her?'

'Simple. She's lived all her life in the country and hasn't moved in the circles we frequent.'

Fanshawe finished his apple and swung his feet down from the table as the door opened to admit Simms, bearing trays loaded with food. 'At last!' he cried. 'I'm famished.'

Simms placed the platters on the table and, checking that all was in order, turned to Hazelmere.

'Everything's taken care of, m'lord, as you requested.'

Hazelmere nodded his thanks, and Simms retired. Fanshawe looked up from heaping his plate, but saw nothing.

The friends took their meal in companionable silence. They had quite literally grown up together, being born on neighbouring estates within a month of each other, and had shared their schooldays at Eton and, later, Oxford. During their past ten years on the town the bond between the Lords Hazelmere and Fanshawe had become almost a byword. Over the years there had been few secrets between them, yet, for reasons he did not care to examine, Hazelmere had omitted to mention his acquaintance with Dorothea Darent to his closest friend.

Once the platters were cleared and they had pushed their chairs back from the table, savouring the special claret brought up from the depths of Simms's cellar, Fanshawe, dishevelled brown locks falling picturesquely over his brow, returned to the offensive. 'It's all too smoky by half.'

Resigned to the inevitable, Hazelmere nevertheless countered with an innocent,

'What's too smoky by half?'

'You and this Miss Darent.'

'But why?' The clear hazel eyes, apparently guileless, were opened wide, but the thin lips twitched.

Fanshawe frowned direfully but agreed to play the game. 'Well, for a start, as she doesn't move in the circles we frequent, tell me how *you* met her.'

'We met only once, informally.'

'When?'

'Some time last August, when I was at Moreton Park.'

The brown eyes narrowed. 'But I visited you at Moreton Park last August, and I distinctly remember you telling me such game was very scarce.'

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